

# *Truth Be Told*

*The Effects of Sexual Orientation on the Lives  
of Lesbian Educators*

*Susan McKay*

Mount Saint Vincent University

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Education  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters of Arts in Educational Foundations

August, 2006

Copyright 2006 by Susan McKay

## **Dedication**

To my parents, Gail and Fisher, who struggled to raise a troubled teenager. I know I stretched your patience to the limit, but I never questioned your love.

To my partner, Nancy. Thank you for sticking with me. In the face of tremendous odds, we stood up and demanded our right to equal treatment under the law. There isn't anyone I'd rather spend my life with.

To our children, Cali and Tyler. You are the family I always hoped I'd have. I can't begin to put into words how I feel about you. I love you to the moon and back.

This book is also dedicated to the memory of Mimmie Syms, who was not my mother, but was a well loved friend and mother to many.

## **Abstract**

This work investigates the lives and experiences of lesbian educational leaders in a variety of settings in an effort to gain insight and understanding into the ways in which they balance their personal and professional lives, the ways in which their experiences of providing leadership are affected, negotiated, and/or regulated by their sexual orientation, and the coping strategies they use to manage the complexities associated with being a lesbian educator.

This work is the result of a qualitative research study using participant interviews to gather data, and is informed by a critical theoretical perspective. Patterns of recurring ideas, common themes and critical incidents that emerged among the participant interviews were identified and then included in a fiction that weaves the stories of the participants into the lives and stories of several composite characters.

The story follows the life of Toni Morgan from the discovery of her sexual orientation as a teenager, through her struggles with regard to coming out, finding self-acceptance, beginning a teaching career and eventually becoming a school administrator. The story explores many issues and difficulties related to being a lesbian in a public school system.

This work also includes a preface that provides a rationale for presenting research in the form of a fiction, as well as an overview of the research methods used. An appendix includes a review of the literature as it pertains to gay and lesbian students and educators.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to offer my deepest thanks to the women I interviewed for their candor and their courage. They invited me into their lives and shared very personal, moving, and sometimes painful stories, despite the fact that in the year 2006, we still live in a world where sharing such stories could have potentially serious personal and professional implications. I feel honored and humbled to have been allowed an intimate glimpse into each of these women's lives.

I would like to thank my partner, Nancy Colwell for her on-going support and encouragement during what felt like a daunting project. Nancy read many drafts of this work, offering comments, personal feedback, criticisms, and suggestions. On more than one occasion I wondered if I had bitten off more than I could chew, but Nancy's support and patience kept me going.

I'd also like to thank the others who also read drafts of this work: Fisher McKay, Gail McKay, and Pat Kid. Your comments, suggestions for improvement, and encouragement were greatly appreciated and helped to improve the quality of the final product.

I'd like to thank my first thesis advisor, Lorri Neilsen, whose Qualitative Research course opened my eyes to alternative, arts-based methods of reporting research results. I'm grateful to Lorri for nurturing and encouraging my ideas, and for having confidence in my ability to take on such a daunting endeavor. Without Lorri's support and encouragement this project would never have gotten off the ground.

## Acknowledgements vi

I'd like to thank the members of my thesis committee, Dr. Ann Vibert and Barbara Morton-Winters, who stuck with me through this long process, including a year-long extension, and whose comments, support and encouragement were invaluable.

Thank you for believing in me.

And finally, I'd like to thank Susan Walsh who took over the supervision of my thesis mid-way through. Sue provided much needed deadlines, valuable suggestions that greatly improved the quality of my work, and an endless supply of encouragement.

Thank you for helping to finally bring this project to a close.

Thanks so much to everyone who helped make this endeavor a reality.

# Contents

<b>Dedication</b>	iii
<b>Abstract</b>	iv
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	v
<b>Introductory Comments</b>	1
<b>1</b> The Fight	11
<b>2</b> Toni and Shane	21
<b>3</b> Session 1: June & Claire	27
<b>4</b> The Ballfield	41
<b>5</b> Session 2: Queen Arthur	50
<b>6</b> Sleeping Out	59
<b>7</b> Session 3: Harassment	70
<b>8</b> The Day After	80
<b>9</b> Session 4: “Are you a lesbian?”	92
<b>10</b> On the Phone	101
<b>11</b> Session 5: Administration	108
<b>12</b> Exams	114
<b>13</b> Beginning Vice-principal	124
<b>14</b> Getting Ready for the Prom	130
<b>15</b> Raymond	143
<b>16</b> Prom Night	148
<b>17</b> Advice	162
<b>18</b> At the Prom	166
<b>19</b> Mary Reminisces	181
<b>20</b> The Letter	190
<b>21</b> Accepts Principalship	201
<b>22</b> Coming Out	209
<b>23</b> Chad	219
<b>24</b> Toni Leaves Home	230
<b>25</b> Session 6: Moving Out	239

26	The Night of the Fight	248
27	Session 7: Mom Comes Around	259
28	The Keddy Family	269
29	Session 8: Meeting Mel	276
30	The Brown Family	283
31	Session 9: Dealing with Bigots	294
32	Toni Reflects	303
33	Session 10: The Reunion Part 1	312
34	Canoe Trip	321
35	Session 10: The Reunion Part 2	333
36	Forgiveness	349
37	The Final Assembly	359
	<b>References</b>	367
	<b>Appendix A: Literature Review</b>	373
	<b>Appendix B: Letter of Information and Invitation</b>	385
	<b>Appendix C: Interview Consent Form</b>	387
	<b>Appendix D: Proposed Interview Questions</b>	389
	<b>Appendix E: Additional “Prompt” Questions</b>	391

## Introductory Comments

This work grew out of my reluctance to invest a great deal of hard work, time and energy into writing a thesis just to have it sit on a shelf; I wanted people to read it. A proposal began to germinate as I played with the notion of writing my thesis in the form of a novel, but I lacked confidence in my skill as a writer, and in my ability to sustain a story of that length. I didn't really consider the idea seriously until I took a qualitative research course that opened my eyes to alternative, arts-based methods of reporting research results. More and more I began to feel that perhaps writing a novel really was a possibility, and I began to believe that I could.

This story is the result of a qualitative research study using participant interviews to gather data. It is informed by a critical theoretical perspective, of which I understand a basic tenet to be the identification of ideologies that maintain the status quo by preventing marginalized groups from gaining awareness and knowledge about the social and power inequities that restrict or oppress them (Usher, 1996). However, Habermas argues that critical theory must go beyond consciousness-raising to include actions that will change existing power structures and create greater justice and equity in people's lives (cited in Usher, 1996).

Perhaps this is a lofty goal, but one of the greatest motivators for me to pursue this work was the hope that the story might touch readers on a personal and emotional level (Norum, 2001), and that readers would be moved to reflect on their assumptions about gay and lesbian people. It is hard to be homophobic when you care about and empathize with someone who is gay (Grace & Bensen, 2000). By participating in this

story, readers have an opportunity to get to know and care about a lesbian through a vicarious relationship, to share in some of her experiences, to empathize with her struggles, and hopefully begin to challenge the homophobia and heterosexism that continue to exist in the world.

A list of lesbian educational leaders who might be willing participants was generated by word of mouth, using the “snowball sampling” approach (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Because of the risks associated with the disclosure of one’s homosexuality, it can be difficult to locate willing participants and therefore, this is a common method of working within gay and lesbian communities. I approached five individuals in order to determine their willingness to be involved in this project and invited them to be interviewed. I continued to approach individuals and invite them to participate until I found five who were willing.

Interviews were conducted on an individual basis, and were arranged during personal time that was convenient to the participant. In addition, interviews were not conducted at any place of employment, but at a location that was convenient for each participant—in each case, the participant’s home. Efforts were made to hear the participants’ stories how and where they choose to tell them. As Shulamitz Reinhartz says,

By dealing in voices, we are affecting power relations. To listen to people is to empower them. But if you want to hear it, you have to go hear it, in their space, or in a safe space. Before you can expect to hear anything worth hearing, you have to examine the power dynamics of the space and the social actors.

Second, you have to be the person someone else can talk to, and you have to be able to create the context where the person can speak and you can listen. That means we have to study who we are and who we are in relation to those we study.

Third, you have to be willing to hear what someone is saying, even when it violates your expectations or threatens your interests. In other words, if you want someone to tell it like it is, you have to hear it like it is (cited in Fine, 1994, p.20).

Each participant was interviewed once, with interviews lasting between 90 minutes and 3 hours. I tape recorded and transcribed the interviews. No one else heard the tapes or read the transcripts, and they were stored in a locked drawer. Participants were asked if they would like to choose a pseudonym, and their names were changed in the transcripts accordingly. Each participant received a copy of the transcript so she could check for accuracy and make any clarifying comments, additions or deletions that she felt were necessary. A final copy of the transcript was sent to those who requested it. Upon completion of this project, the cassette tapes on which the interviews were recorded were returned to the participant or destroyed.

Once the transcripts were complete, they were read carefully in order to identify similarities and differences among the participants. Using data analysis methods of coding for qualitative research described by Glesne (1999) and Bogdan & Biklen (1998), patterns of recurring ideas, common themes and critical incidents that emerged among the participant interviews were identified, and loosely organized into a chronological outline (growing up, teaching experiences, administrative experiences). I physically divided the transcripts into three sections that corresponded with the chronology and dealt with only one section at a time.

Ideas for several composite characters based on the stories of these women were developed. A second outline was organized around a story structure (trigger incident, rising action, climax, and conclusion), and incidents arising from the interviews were

inserted as scenes into places where they fit appropriately. In cases where several participants described similar incidents, their stories were combined to create one scene. I then used this second outline to write a fiction that wove the stories of the participants into the lives and stories of the composite characters.

There were many days that I struggled with overwhelming and unwieldy amounts of data and wondered what I'd gotten into. As I wrote, I assigned rudimentary titles and page numbers to scenes in order to help navigate and locate information. I went back to the transcripts again and again until I felt that the tone of the story was authentic and "true" to the stories I had been told. My worries about not being able to write enough were soon replaced with concerns about how to pare down the many pages I was surprised to discover I'd written. After finishing my first complete draft, I saved the original and made changes to a second copy, and then a third and so on. In this way, I was free to move things around and experiment, knowing that I could always go back to my most recent previous draft.

## **The Power of Fiction**

Few would argue that there is much to be gained by reading about the experiences of others (Brown, 1999; Dunlop, 1999; Mathison, 2002; Neilsen, 2002; Norum, 1998; Plummer, 2001; Widdershoven, 1993); yet the lives, experiences and stories of lesbians are often invisible (Fisher, 1999; Hansman, 2004; Harbeck & Uribe, 1992; Hetrick & Martin, 1998; Jennings, 1994; Kissen, 1996; Lenskyj, 1991), making it difficult to support and learn from one another.

In a world that frequently vilifies those who are homosexual, creating a fictional account of real experiences provides a measure of safety for those who choose to tell their stories (Brown, 1999; Dunlop, 1999). Gay and lesbian people are frequently rendered invisible by the heterosexism<sup>1</sup> that is so common in our society, and they are further silenced by the fear of prejudice and/or discrimination that they will likely encounter if their sexual orientation is disclosed. Participating in the creation of a fiction provides an opportunity for individuals to share stories that might otherwise never be told (Dunlop, 2002; Eisner, cited in Saks, 1996, Kissen, 1996; Norum, 1998).

Connelly & Clandinin (1990) point out that, “[h]umans are storytelling organisms who individually and socially, lead storied lives” (cited in Norum, 1998, para. 5). We tell stories to illustrate points, to pass on bits of wisdom, to learn about history, to connect with others, to understand ourselves, and to make sense of life (de Freitas, 2004; Dunlop, 2002; Norum, 1998; Plummer, 2001; Widdershoven, 1993); however, we seldom hear the stories of gay or lesbian educators, a fact which contributes to the isolation so many experience. A fictional account of these stories is a means of interrupting this silence.

Constructing and telling stories is one way that individuals make meaning of their lives and experiences (de Freitas, 2004; Dunlop, 2002; Norum, 1998; Plummer, 2001; Widdershoven, 1993), and stories can offer a great deal of insight into social behavior and patterns. As Clandinin (cited in *Seeing the Rainbow*) says,

In attending narratively we honor the lives of people who are in the process of composing their lives. It is important that we pay close attention to the kinds of

---

<sup>1</sup> Heterosexism: the assumption that all people are heterosexual; the assumption that heterosexuality is normal or better; institutionalized practices that enforce these assumptions (Wikipedia, 2006).

spaces that we, as teachers, researchers, policy makers and others, create in these storied landscapes (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2002, p. 69).

What better way to explore and share the richness of our lived experiences than through the process of constructing and writing stories? Keen and Valley-Fox (1973) remind us that “[b]y telling stories, we remember our past, invent our present, revision our future, discover compassion and create community with kindred souls” (cited in Norum, 1998, para. 7). Fiction has the power to touch people’s emotions, to nudge the reader toward greater understanding and certainty, to create compassion and engender empathy (Keen,2006), to move people in ways that academic writing struggles to do (de Freitas, 2004). As Eisner says, “sometimes the function of a novel is to tell it like it is, to make us feel uncomfortable, to give us an insight that we never had before” (cited in Saks, 1996, p. 424).

Herbert Marcuse (1978) said that the arts do not change the world, but they can change the living beings who might change the world, and I suppose I do have that in mind when I ponder how to move people by questioning, how to awaken them, how to free them to respond not only to the human condition which we all share but to the injustices and the undeserved suffering and the violence and the violations-to respond and endeavor to repair (Greene, 2001, p.129).

In the words of Cole and Knowles (2001),

‘Good’ arts-informed research has both a clear intellectual purpose and moral purpose. Intentions of life history researchers, for instance, are twofold: to advance understanding about the complex interaction between individuals’ lives and the institutional and societal contexts within which they are lived; and, through consciousness raising and associated action, to contribute to the creation of more just and dignified explorations and renderings of the human condition under which lives are lived. Ultimately, the research must stand for something. Arts-informed research representations, then, are not intended as titillations but as opportunities for transformation, revelation, or some other intellectual or moral shift. They must be more than good stories (p.215)

Becoming empathetically engaged in a story and connecting with the characters can evoke feelings of authenticity and certainty among the readers (de Freitas, 2004), possibly leading to discussion around a topic that has been rife with difficulties. An artistic representation may inspire individuals to consider new possibilities, another point of view-to take action and to create change (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Dunlop, 2002; Marcuse, cited in Greene, 2001). The result of this rendezvous with the characters and the author is an opportunity for readers to integrate into their own, a broader range of experience and understanding. In addition, an arts based form of representation, specifically a fiction, may have a broader appeal and be more accessible (Norum, 2001; Plummer, 2001) than a more traditional form, therefore encompassing the potential to impact practice, policy and public opinion (Zeller, cited in Norum, 1998).

### **Fiction as Research**

There has been a good deal of debate about whether fiction should be accepted as a form of knowledge production. However, this begs the questions, “What counts as knowledge?” and “Who decides?” It has long been understood that knowledge is socially constructed in a particular time and place, and is understood through the lens of the subjective and collective experiences of the learner (Donmoyer, cited in Saks, 1996; Fine, 1994; Grace & Benson, 2000; Gitlin & Russell, 1994; Plummer, 2001).

Every researcher, regardless of his or her approach, selects and interprets data, and chooses what to say about what was learned. This results in academic writing that is formatted differently than fiction, but which is nevertheless, selective and interpretive (Abram, 1996; Dunlop, 2002; Stacey, cited in Plummer, 2001). This orientation is

evident in the work of Heidegger who argues that all description is always already interpretive” (van Manen, 2004, para. 1). As Neilsen (2002) points out, “...knowledge, like fiction, is contextual, read differently by different people” (p.208).

In response to concerns that fiction is not scientific or scholarly enough, and that there are no established criteria to assess its quality, Eisner says:

The test of a novel as a contribution to knowledge requires that we relinquish the notion that scientific disciplines are the sole forms through which human understanding is advanced. Ultimately whether knowledge, what I prefer to call understanding, is advanced through a particular novel resides with the judgment of a critical community-as it does now in science (cited in Saks, 1996, p. 413).

Nelson Goodman adds,

The arts must be taken no less seriously than the sciences as modes of discovery, creation and the enlargement of knowledge in the broad sense of advancing human understanding (cited in Saks, 1996, p. 425).

The writing of fiction is an extremely rigorous act that requires the author to create a persuasive argument that is authentic, engaging and which allows for the construction of a variety of meaningful interpretations by others (de Freitas, 2004; Dunlop, 2002). The stories people tell “help to provide markers and guidelines to that culture’s moral life” (Plummer, 2001, p. 404). In telling the stories of those who are frequently silenced, it is possible to evoke an empathetic response that nudges the reader to question hegemonic social values and inequitable practices, and perhaps persuade the reader to work toward positive social change (Sharkey, 2004). In the words of Lorri Neilsen (1998),

Good qualitative research, like good writing, illuminates, inspires, provokes, startles, enchants, and incites. Good research releases the imagination, opens new worlds. It is meant to turn pages, and it means to turn lives (p. 280).

## **The Subjective Nature of Knowing**

The collected stories included in this novel are understood and interpreted through the lens of my own personal experiences, assumptions and subjectivities (Filax, 2006), which necessarily positions the story and creates a point of view. Thus, this work should not be generalized in such a way as to infer universal truths that can be applied to a wide range of individuals and circumstances. Although the experiences described in this work may resonate with some, the writing is my interpretation of the data and is not intended to represent the experiences of *all* lesbian educators, or even of *the* lesbian educators I interviewed. This work is intended to provide a *fictional* look into the life of one woman and her experience of being a lesbian administrator in a public school system.

In an effort to help put this work into context, I believe it is helpful to attempt to illuminate some of the ways in which I am socially positioned in relation to this work.

I was raised in a loving, middle class family. My father was a school administrator, and my mother a nurse who chose to stay home for many years to raise a family. I am the oldest of five children, two of whom were adopted, one of those with multiple special needs. In addition, my parents collected many people along the way who, for one reason or another, needed a place to call home. Some of those people stayed for a day or two, and others for as long as a couple of years. I was fortunate to grow up in a family where social justice and equity issues were modeled and discussed; my parents taught me to stand up for what is right.

I am a lesbian. I'm Caucasian. I would locate myself among the middle class. I am well-educated. I'm an educator and a student. I've been a partner in a long term relationship for more than 18 years. I am a spouse, and a mother of two children. My partner and I challenged the Nova Scotia government adoption laws and won. I am a champion of equal rights. This is my story, too.

It is my hope that this work will help disrupt some of the persistent silence that continues to exist around the lives and experiences of lesbian educators, and will give voice to those who have historically been silenced. I hope the stories will encourage dialogue around issues such as marginality, inequity, education, leadership, safety, and the experiences of lesbians working in the public school system. And finally, I hope that the reader will become absorbed in the story, connect with the feelings of the character, perhaps examine his or her own values, and be moved to take some small steps toward greater equity for all people.

# 1

The crowd throbbed with energy. It pressed forward, a hungry predator inching closer to its prey, eager for blood. The crowd moved, breathed and chanted as one. “Fight, fight, fight.” In the jaws of this great beast, two boys circled each other.

“Come on, you fucking fag! You want a piece of me? Well, I’m going to give you something you’ll never forget.” Eyes hard with hate, he swung and missed.

“Leave me alone, you fucking asshole!” Desperation crept into his voice as the crowd pressed on, suffocating and trapping him. Backing away from his attacker, his eyes frantically searched the crowd for an escape, but there was no place to run. His heart pounded in his ears, drowning out the roar of the crowd. Panic rose in his throat and perspiration rose on his lip. His attacker lunged again, landing a blow to the face. Blood spilled from his nose. The red stain grew as it spread across his shirt and covered his hands. A second blow to his stomach caused him to gasp for air as he doubled over

and fell to the floor. The tile felt cool against his bloodied cheek, and somewhere, far off in the distance, he was vaguely aware of the crowd.

“Fight, fight, fight!”

His attacker pounced, landing squarely on his chest, further restricting the air he was able to draw into his strangled lungs. As he struggled against the weight that pinned him to the floor he remembered the knife in his pocket. He had tried to ignore the sneers and insults that he endured every day, but after receiving a number of threats, he had taken to carrying the knife. He knew he wasn't allowed to have a knife at school, and he had no intention of using it, but having the knife in his pocket made him feel a little more brave. Now, as he struggled for air, he reached into his jacket pocket, felt the smooth ivory of the handle and felt for the button to release the blade.

“Ms Morgan, come quick!” Toni recognized the frantic voice of the duty teacher, as it crackled through the walkie-talkie that lay on her desk. “There's a fight in the back corridor!”

“Not again,” Toni muttered, “just what I need on a Friday afternoon.” She grabbed the walkie-talkie and ran out of her office, annoyed that the things on her lengthy “To Do List” would once again have to go on hold. However, as she hurried down the hall she couldn't ignore the sense of dread rising in her throat. Toni had been the principal of Farnham Falls High for five years, and although fights were not uncommon in high school, each one filled her heart with fear. There had been a lot of tension in the building this year, and no matter what she did to try and resolve it, it continued to grow. There had already been several fights between the popular, athletic kids and those she affectionately thought of as the “fringe kids,” the ones who

challenged the status quo and tried to assert their individuality. However, what concerned her most was the unbridled hate being directed toward those students who didn't fit the stereotypical gender roles, those who were taunted with labels like "fag" and "queer."

Human rights legislation offered some protection against blatant discrimination, and gay and lesbian people had won some important legal battles in the past few years, such as same-sex health benefits, the right to adopt children and the right to marry. In the wake of these developments, Toni felt cautiously optimistic. Perhaps society was becoming more tolerant and accepting. In fact, her school board had implemented program and curricula changes in an attempt to help support gay and lesbian youth, and the school climate had definitely improved since the time when she was a student. However, much to Toni's dismay, homophobic insults were the ones most frequently overheard in the hallways of her school, and the ones most often ignored by staff.

There had been something brewing between two boys in her school, one of whom she knew was gay. Bailey Brown had come to see her several weeks ago, no longer able to endure the harassment he had been suffering all year. As he sat in her office, frightened, ashamed and crying, her heart ached. If only she could have told him how much she understood his pain. Somehow, as she hurried down the hallway, her stomach churning and wrenching itself into terrible knots, she knew that this situation had now come to a head. With fear and adrenalin coursing through her veins, she rounded the corner and saw the pulsating, hovering crowd.

The blade snapped open with a click, and in one swift, seamless motion, he thrust the knife at his attacker. Warm blood trickled over his fingers and crept down his arm

toward his elbow, as he realized with mounting horror what he had done. His attacker grabbed his side as blood seeped through his fingers, eyes wide with fear and disbelief, and then fell over beside him onto the cold tile floor. The sights and sounds around him seemed distorted, the menacing crowd now hushed. It felt as if they were all alone. Their eyes met, both of them covered in blood. In that moment they were forever bound to each other by profound regret. Looking at the bloody knife he held tightly in his fist, he slipped into unconsciousness.

“Okay folks, break it up. Let me through. Come on now, get out of my way!” Toni shoved her way through a strangely quiet crowd of students, her sense of foreboding becoming more and more persistent as the hairs prickled along her neck. She tried to shake it off. “You people should be in class. Get moving, you’re all late; there’s nothing here for you to see.” She had dealt with fights before, and this one would be no different. There’d be a black eye, maybe a bloodied nose, both students would be suspended, and she’d probably have to deal with angry parents. Toni had a reputation for being firm, but fair. The “no fighting rule” applied to everyone. She truly believed that there were better ways to solve problems. She tried to tell herself that this fight would be no different, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that this was something serious. As Toni broke through the crowd she saw the two bloodied boys lying on the floor and fear clutched her heart. A growing pool of blood spread out around them, and for one desperate moment Toni was paralyzed. Then, remembering the walkie-talkie she had stuffed into her pocket, she screamed into the speaker, “Call 911!” Kneeling between the boys, she covered the oozing wound in Sean Keddy’s abdomen with her hand as she struggled to remain calm. She turned her head to look at the other boy and gasped as

she recognized him to be the one who had sought her help only a few weeks before. Hot tears stung her cheeks. She couldn't help but feel that she had let him down.

\* \* \*

Toni's head ached as she slumped into her chair in the semi-darkness of early evening. She had spent the afternoon at the hospital, but still had no news. She left a jumbled message for her family about a crisis at school, explaining that she would be home late, and then returned to her office to finish the incident reports required by the school board and the police. She wanted to be prepared for Monday morning when the halls would be filled with anxious, worried students. She planned to hold an assembly to address the students' questions and concerns, but now she couldn't think of where to begin or what to say.

As she sat at her desk trying to prepare some notes, her mind was preoccupied and she had a hard time focusing. She remembered the day only a few weeks ago that Bailey had come to her office.

*Toni looked up from her desk at the knock on the door. She smiled at the thin, timid boy standing in the doorway and set her glasses down on the desk. "Come on in, Bailey." She moved a stack of books from the chair to the floor. "There you go, have a seat. How are you today?"*

*"Fine." He studied his hands.*

*"Well, what can I do for you? Or are you just coming by to chat?" Toni smiled as she held out a bowl. "Would you like some grapes?"*

*“No, thanks, Ms. Morgan, but there is something I have to talk to you about.”*

*He squirmed in his seat. “My parents said that if I didn’t talk to someone at school, they would.”*

*Suddenly concerned, Toni scooted her chair a little closer. “What is it Bailey?”*

*“I probably should have gone to the guidance counselor, but you’re always so nice to me in the hallways, and you did say that I should let you know if there was anything you could do for me.” Bailey’s eyes began to fill with tears.*

*Toni stood up and stuck her head into the main office. “Anna? Can you hold my calls please, and unless there is an emergency, I would prefer not to be interrupted. Thanks.” Leaving the door slightly ajar, she passed Bailey a tissue. “I’m glad that you felt you could come to me, Bailey.” She sat down and scooted her chair closer still as she reached out and patted his knee. “Now, what’s bothering you? I’m sure it’s nothing that we can’t solve together.” She smiled at him and waited.*

*Several moments passed while Bailey twisted the tissue. Toni waited. Bailey finally lifted his head and looked at her through tear-filled eyes. “I don’t know how to begin.”*

*Toni smiled at him. “It’s okay, Bailey, whatever it is. We’ll work it out.”*

*“I’m gay,” he blurted, as a fresh stream of tears spilled down his cheeks.*

*“That’s okay, Bailey. Lots of people are gay, there’s nothing wrong with that. You do know that our school has a Gay-Straight Alliance, don’t you?”*

*“Yes, but that’s not the problem.”*

*“Oh. Well, what is the problem?”*

*“I’ve known that I’m gay for a while, but I didn’t tell anyone until this year, and then I told this guy that I thought was my friend, and he told everyone. Some of the guys*

*have been bugging me ever since.” Bailey looked down at the shredded tissue in his hands as he struggled to maintain his composure.*

*“Toni’s heart ached for him. “How long has this been going on, Bailey?”*

*“All year.” Tears welled up in his eyes.*

*“Oh no, Bailey, you should have come to me sooner.”*

*“I thought if I ignored them, they would eventually get tired of it and leave me alone, but they haven’t; it’s just gotten worse.”*

*“What kinds of things are they doing?”*

*“They call me names, they write things on my locker, they make obscene phone calls to my home, and gym class is a nightmare.” He wiped his nose. “Lately a few guys have been pushing me around, saying that they’re going to toughen me up.”*

*Toni felt herself getting angry. “Well, that’s not going to happen! You did the right thing by coming to me. I don’t know if you are aware of this or not, but what they are doing is against human rights legislation. Also, our school board has very clear policies in place to protect you against homophobia and discrimination. Their behavior is completely unacceptable and I want you to know that we don’t tolerate that kind of behavior here at Farnham Falls High.” Toni reached for a pad of paper and a pen.*

*“Now, what are the names of the boys who are harassing you?”*

*Fresh tears welled up in Bailey’s eyes. “I can’t tell you, Ms. Morgan; that’ll just make things worse. Besides, there’s a lot of them.”*

*Toni took a deep breath and set down her pen and paper. She realized that he was probably right, and she had no business offering guarantees of protection. She sighed and handed him another tissue. “Okay, Bailey, you’re probably right about that. What would you like me to do?”*

*“I don’t know.” He looked miserable.*

*Toni understood his pain, and she wanted desperately to fix it, but she wasn’t sure what to do. She swallowed hard and blinked back her own tears. “Is there a ring-leader?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“You have to tell me who it is, Bailey. Together we will find a solution that you feel comfortable with, and that won’t make things worse. You have to trust me.” She lifted his chin. “I want to help you, but I need you to trust me.”*

*“It’s Sean Keddy, he’s the worst.”*

*Toni leaned back in her chair and thought for several moments. “Okay, Bailey, here’s what I’m thinking. I’d like to talk to our guidance counselor, Ms. Campbell, because I don’t know the best way to go about dealing with this. Is that okay with you?”*

*“Yeah.”*

*“And is it okay if I speak to the gym teachers as well, so they can be more watchful during gym class?”*

*“I guess so.”*

*“I won’t say anything to Sean, but I will try to be in the hallways as much as I can, watching and listening, and if I see or hear anything myself then I will deal with that. Also, I will alert all teachers to be particularly watchful of any bullying or homophobic comments, without bringing up any names, and ask them to document any instances they see or hear and report them to the office. Is that okay with you for now until we come up with a better plan?”*

*“Yes, that sounds fine.”*

*“Okay, Bailey. I want you to avoid places where anyone could find you alone, and I want you to come down here to use the washroom right outside the office. I also want you to let me know about any other instances of harassment, and I will get back to you as soon as we come up with something better. How does that sound?”*

*“That’s good.” Bailey smiled.*

*“Do you feel a little better?”*

*“Uh-huh.”*

*“Well, I’m really glad that you came to see me, Bailey, and I’m honored that you trusted me enough to talk to me about this. I want you to know that I am on your side.” She smiled at him. “Are you sure you wouldn’t like some grapes?” She held out her bowl.*

*“No thanks, Ms Morgan.” Bailey’s smile grew. “I’m glad I came, too. Thanks for listening.”*

*“Any time, Bailey.” She watched him walk away, and then hurried off to find Ruth. They absolutely had to come up with a way to put an end to Bailey’s torture.*

Toni’s eyes filled with tears. She had been trying to address Bailey’s concerns quietly, without making things worse for him; clearly she had failed. What would happen to him now? And what about Sean? She had failed them both.

As the daylight faded, she realized that she should get up, turn on the light and get to work on her notes, but her limbs felt like lead. She had become a school principal because she believed she had something to offer, she felt she could make a difference. She was a natural leader, well-liked and respected by most, but today she felt fragile, defeated, and unsure of herself. Although she usually appeared confident and

composed, she didn't always feel that way, and today her handle on self-control felt downright tenuous.

Very few people knew the wild story of Toni's past, filled with struggles and difficulties of her own, and she wanted it to stay that way. Despite her friendly and outgoing nature, she was deeply private and protective of her personal life. She had worked hard to bury her secrets, but every now and then they rumbled dangerously close to the surface, threatening to undermine everything she had worked so hard to achieve.

Toni got up, but she didn't turn on the light. Instead, she walked to the window and looked out at the sign on the edge of the parking lot. Besides important school events and dates, Toni liked to post a thoughtful quote on the sign. Just this morning she'd had a student change the message. It read: *You must be the change you wish to see in the world. ~ Gandhi.* Toni wondered if it was time for her to come out of hiding. Dropping her face into her hands, she sobbed.

## 2

Shane Cooper pulled his t-shirt over his head and lay on his back as he looked up at the stars. It was a hot, humid night, and the cool grass felt good against his skin. The streetlight in the back corner of the ball field had been burned out for as long as he could remember, making it a great place to watch the stars and a perfect make-out spot for the local high school kids. Propped up on one elbow he looked down into the face of his first serious girlfriend and thought that he was probably in love. He hadn't told any of his buddies, but he and Toni had even talked about getting married and he secretly dreamed about moving away from Farnham Falls.

Even though he was a high school senior, he still hadn't had sex, and now it seemed that was all he could think about. He slid his hand under Toni's shirt and felt the smooth soft skin of her stomach. His fingertips tingled as electricity coursed through his body. He leaned over and kissed her tenderly. Toni's fingers ran through his hair

and over the bare skin of his back. Everywhere she touched him made him quiver with excitement. As his hand moved over her soft skin toward her breast, the quiet of the night was shattered by the sound of laughter drifting across the field. Toni squirmed beneath Shane's weight and tried to sit up.

“Move Shane, people are coming.”

“It's probably just Tom and Joey. I'll tell them to get lost.” He leaned over and tried to kiss her again, but she pushed him away.

“Get off me, Shane!” Toni sat up and straightened her shirt.

Shane lay back in the grass, cursing his friends. He wondered if he was the only boy in twelfth grade who still hadn't had sex.

Toni looked at her watch. “I have to go anyway. Lindsay's babysitting her little brother and she asked me to come over and keep her company.”

“You've got to be kidding! This is the first time we've been alone together for days! You're not going, are you?” Shane already knew the answer. He was angry about the sudden tears that sprung to his eyes and grateful for the darkness as he struggled to hold them back.

“She asked me yesterday, Shane, and I already said I would, but you can come with me.”

“No fucking way!” Anger helped keep the tears at bay. “I can't believe you're going! Do you want a boyfriend or a girlfriend? It's obvious that you care more about her than you care about me!”

“That's not true, Shane. I already promised.” Toni leaned over and kissed his cheek. “Don't be mad. I can't not go, she's expecting me, but I want you to come with me. Please?”

“If you have to go, then go, but I’m staying here.” Shane felt like he had already lost. He knew that she would go. Why did he feel like he was always competing with Lindsay? Toni tried to kiss him, but he turned away. She stood there in the darkness for a moment, looking at him, and then she turned and walked across the field. As Shane watched her go, the angry tears that he fought so hard to control spilled over onto his bare chest.

\* \* \*

“Toni, wait up!” Shane pushed his way through a hallway swarming with students on their way to lunch. He was sure he’d seen her glance his way. “Toni!” He called her name again as she disappeared around the corner. He was certain that she had heard him. Maybe he was just being paranoid, but he got the feeling that she was avoiding him. He scanned the sea of faces in the cafeteria until he found her near the back of the room, laughing with Lindsay Jones. Lindsay had transferred into Farnham Falls High a few months ago from a school in the city. Shane wasn’t sure why, but he didn’t like her much. She was friendly enough and well-liked by everyone else at school, especially Toni. Maybe that was why he didn’t like her. Toni and Lindsay had become fast friends soon after they met, and they went everywhere together. He and Toni hardly ever got a minute alone together anymore, and even when they did, somehow Lindsay always seemed to ruin it. He had been searching for Toni all morning so that he could apologize for last night. He wasn’t really angry; he was hurt and afraid more than anything. He didn’t know what he was doing wrong, and he didn’t know how to fix it, but he knew he had to try.

“Toni, can I talk to you for a minute?” He looked from one girl to the other, feeling awkward and uncomfortable. He wished Lindsay would clue in and give them a minute of privacy. “Alone?”

Toni looked at Lindsay and rolled her eyes. “I’ll be right back.” Toni and Shane moved to a table in the corner and sat across from each other.

Shane’s heart pounded and his palms were sweaty. He desperately searched his mind for the words he had rehearsed a hundred times over since he’d gotten out of bed.

“Well, what do you want, Shane?” Toni sounded impatient.

“I’m sorry about last night,” he began, “it’s just that...well...we haven’t seen much of each other... I guess I was just really disappointed...” He looked at his hands. “I’m sorry for being a jerk.”

“You have to stop smothering me, Shane. You know I need time for my friends, too. You’re not my entire universe, you know.” Toni felt a twinge of regret as she caught a fleeting glimpse of the pain her words had caused. She really did care for him, maybe even love him, but since Lindsay had come along, her feelings were a jumbled mess. She felt confused and torn. She didn’t understand what was happening to her, yet she had never felt more alive than when she and Lindsay were together. Lindsay was everything that Toni felt she wasn’t, beautiful, confident, and athletic, and Toni wanted more than anything to be near her. She was struggling to make sense of her feelings, and Shane wasn’t helping. She didn’t want to hurt him, but she knew that she was.

“Fuck you!” Shane got up. Her words had hit him hard; his mind was reeling. She was *his* entire universe. He thought she felt the same way. Struggling again with angry tears, he left the cafeteria, wondering how things had gone so wrong. His heart ached.

\* \* \*

Shane tried to focus on the textbook in front of him. He had a year-end Chemistry exam in two days and he needed to do well if he had any hopes of getting a scholarship to the Jackson School of Engineering. However, his mind kept drifting back to the argument he'd had with Toni earlier that day. They'd been dating for almost a year and even though they hadn't had sex yet, he let his buddies think they had. She said that she wanted it to be special and that she just didn't feel ready, but he was beginning to wonder if it was him. Maybe she didn't love him as much as she claimed.

He stared at the page in front of him and tried to read the words, but nothing was sinking in. Hoping to help to clear his mind, he got up from his seat behind the counter and stepped outside into the cool night air. Leaning his head against the glass door, he looked up at the stars. Besides masturbating, all he really knew about sex was what he had read in the magazines that his father hid behind the tool box in the service bay. He wondered how long he could keep up the charade before his buddies figured out that he was still a virgin.

Shane gave his head a shake and headed back inside. He had worked hard all through high school, and he couldn't throw all that away now. He hated working at the garage, and he had promised himself that he was not going to get trapped in the same dead-end job as his father. He picked up his book and began to read, but he barely made it to the end of the page before his thoughts were interrupted by the ding of the service bell.

“Shit!” Shane got up and headed out to the yard to pump gas.

“Hey, buddy! I thought you were coming cruising with us tonight. The girls are hanging out over at the ball field, and Joey’s got a bottle.”

“I can’t. Mom and Dad went out, and I have to mind the garage,” he lied, “I’ll catch up with you tomorrow.” He didn’t want to admit that he was studying on a Friday night and had asked for the extra shift. Besides, Toni’s words still stung and he didn’t want to see her.

Shane was a top-notch student and a natural athlete. He had been selected as his basketball team’s Most Valuable Player for two years in a row, and with his athletic ability and easy smile, he had always been part of the cool crowd. However, he worked hard to downplay his academic abilities and he kept his engineering dreams to himself. Everyone assumed that he would take over his father’s business and run the only service station in Farnham Falls, but that was the last thing he wanted to do. His buddies knew he was smart, and he had helped every one of them with their homework at one time or another, but they had no idea that he was in the running to receive several large scholarships. Winning a scholarship was his only ticket out of this dead-end town and a lifetime of pumping gas, and he wasn’t going to let anything get in the way of his dreams. Shane ran a hand through his hair, took a deep breath and tried again to read, but his mind kept drifting back to Toni. Although she insisted that she loved him, and he wanted to believe her more than anything, somewhere deep inside he knew that something was really wrong.

### 3

Toni had never been to see a counselor before, and she was feeling a little nervous; she wondered what she would say. She had been teaching for almost 12 years, and in that time she had also finished a Master's degree and started another one, met her partner, settled down, and had a baby. She had been under a fair amount of stress at work lately, and she did have a lot on the go, but she didn't need a therapist to tell her that she had too many balls in the air; she knew that. There just wasn't anything that she could drop. Besides, she thought she was managing okay.

Toni looked at her watch. It was ten minutes past her scheduled appointment time and although she completely understood that these things happen, as a classroom teacher, she had little time to waste. She had a mountain of essays to grade, and she wished she had brought some of them with her. She loved teaching, but she was

beginning to resent the time that marking took out of her personal life, especially now that she had a family.

She picked up a magazine from the small table beside her chair and flipped through the pages. She really didn't think she needed to speak to anyone, but her friend June thought otherwise and had been pretty persistent, so Toni finally made an appointment with the counselor that was provided through the teachers' union. She checked her watch again, wondering if it was too late to leave. Tossing the magazine back on the table, she stood up just as the door opened and two women emerged.

"Damn," Toni thought, "too late now."

A sniffling woman hurried by and left the office, as a second woman walked toward Toni, smiling warmly. "I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting." Her face was kind and welcoming, her manner genuine. Toni liked her right away.

"That's okay, sometimes it can't be helped." Toni returned her smile.

"My name is Pam," the woman extended her hand, "and you must be Toni."

"I am." Pam's handshake was warm and firm; and she hung on a little longer than most. Toni noticed the deep dimple in her cheek, and how her eyes crinkled around the edges when she smiled. Maybe seeing a counselor wouldn't be so bad after all.

Pam stretched her hand toward her office. "Please, go on in. Can I get you something to drink? Coffee? Water?"

"Thank you. A glass of water would be nice." Toni went into the office and looked around. Except for a desk off in the corner, it didn't really look like an office. There was a small, puffy sofa and two big arm chairs arranged around a coffee table. A small tray of sand and several utensils for tracing designs in the sand sat on the table. There were many plants around the room and several nicely framed botanical prints

hung on the walls. Several small lamps cast a soft glow, creating an intimate atmosphere. It was a comfortable, welcoming space.

Toni wondered where she should sit. There was a folder on the coffee table in front of one of the arm chairs, so she sat on the small sofa. Picking up a small rake, she began to trace designs in the sand, wondering how she should begin.

“Here you go.” Pam handed Toni a tall glass of water then sat down in the chair closest to the sofa.

“Thank you.” Toni took a drink and set the glass on the table.

“So, what brings you here today?” Pam’s friendly smile was inviting, and Toni decided to be up front about her misgivings.

“Well, actually, I came at the urging of a good friend. I really don’t think I need to see a counselor, but she’s been pretty persistent. I probably shouldn’t even be here, and I’m sorry to be wasting your time.”

“No worries. This is a scheduled appointment, so you aren’t wasting my time at all.” Pam picked up her coffee and leaned back into the arm chair. “It sounds like your friend is concerned about you, though.”

“Well, she is, but I think I’m doing fine. I agreed to come in order to set her mind at ease more than anything.” Toni picked up her glass. Lately, there had been a few days that she knew she was running on fumes, but she had gotten through. Besides, the Christmas break was only a few weeks away. Toni took a drink. “I have been busy, and things have been stressful at work, but I’m managing.”

Pam smiled. “What kinds of things are stressful at work?”

Toni’s heart rate began to quicken. “Well, there’s something I have to tell you first.” She felt comfortable with Pam, and she knew that anything she said to her was

completely confidential. “It’s just that…” She felt slightly breathless. No matter how many times she had done it before, that initial disclosure of her sexuality always made her nervous. “...well...I’m a lesbian.” She was annoyed at how hard it still was to say those words out loud.

Pam smiled warmly and her eyes crinkled. “I’m sure that creates some stress for you at work.”

Toni sighed. “Now there’s an understatement.” She pulled her feet up on the sofa and made herself comfortable. “I guess the best place to start is all the way back at the very beginning.” She grinned at Pam. “My introduction to teaching was a little rough…” Toni thought about the day that she was called to the office. She remembered it like it was yesterday.

*“Toni?” The vice-principal’s voice crackled over the classroom speaker.*

*“Yes?”*

*“Can you come to the office?”*

*“Sure, I’ll just finish these papers and then I’ll be right there.”*

*“I think you better come right now.”*

*The sense of urgency in Claire’s voice was obvious, and a twinge of anxiety prickled along Toni’s spine. Something was wrong. She was sure of it. As she hurried along the empty corridors, she wracked her brain, wondering what it could be. Had she done something wrong? As she entered the office, the look of worry and concern on Claire’s face was apparent. Toni’s heart skipped a beat. “What’s wrong?” she asked, afraid of what the answer might be.*

*“You’d better come in here.” Claire sounded tired as she pushed the partly closed door aside and motioned for Toni to enter the inner office that she and the principal shared. Toni scanned Claire’s face for a clue, but her furrowed brow and the concern in her eyes, only caused Toni to feel more alarm. Toni’s heart began to pound; she knew that there was something seriously wrong. She walked through the door into the office and was surprised to realize that the principal, June Forrest, was there as well. Toni’s anxiety mounted. What could be so wrong that she had been summoned to the office and would be addressed by both administrators?*

*June sat at her desk, leaning slightly forward, with her back to the door. As Toni entered the room, June turned around slowly and lifted her moist, blood-shot eyes to meet Toni’s questioning gaze. Toni and June had become very good friends over the past few years that they had worked together as colleagues, but they had been acquainted for more than fifteen years. June had been her high school teacher, her practicum supervisor, her mentor, and now her friend and confidante. June was one of the reasons that Toni wanted to become a teacher and it was because of June that Toni now had a teaching job, although she still didn’t have a permanent contract. June had nurtured, encouraged, nudged and occasionally pushed Toni along the way.*

*It looked as if June had been crying for quite some time, and Toni felt the pounding of her heart quicken against her chest. She hurried to June’s side and wrapped her arms around June’s quivering shoulders. “What’s wrong? Are you okay? Has someone been hurt?” In response, June’s shoulders shuddered even more as Toni tried to make sense of the scene that was unfolding before her.*

*She felt a hand touch her shoulder and heard Claire say, “Toni, you better sit down.” Toni slowly rose to her feet, torn between wanting to comfort June and her own need to find out what was going on.*

*She sat down on the chair that Claire offered and turned to June, “Please, tell me what’s going on!” She struggled to control the mounting panic that she felt rising from the pit of her stomach.*

*“I’m so sorry, Toni,” June managed to say in a voice choked with emotion, “I didn’t mean for things to happen this way.” Her voice trailed off and was lost again in muffled sobs. Frightened, Toni wheeled around to look at Claire, who finally began to explain.*

*“A student in your class has been saying things about you on the playground.”*

*“Is that all?” A great wave of relief washed over her as she realized that nobody she cared about had been injured. “You know as well as I do that this wouldn’t be the first time the students have said things about me, Claire. What are they saying this time? That I’m a cleverly disguised witch?”*

*“They’re saying that you’re a lesbian.”*

*Toni considered Claire’s words. She realized that this could be a problem, but it wasn’t nearly as bad as the things she had been imagining only moments before. Claire and June knew that she was a lesbian, but it was not public knowledge. Toni didn’t have a permanent teaching contract and she was well aware of the homophobic attitudes still frightfully prevalent among many well-educated and otherwise intelligent people. She worried briefly about the implications if her secret got out into the community, but then her thoughts were interrupted by Claire’s voice.*

*“June didn’t want you to know about this; she didn’t want you to be hurt. We thought we could deal with it quietly and you would never have to know, but we were wrong. The situation has escalated out of control.*

*The student told her mother that you announced to the whole class that you’re a lesbian, and asked her mother if that was true. Her mother told her that it was common knowledge. As you can imagine, she was all too eager to share this tidbit of ‘truth’ with the other students in your class. We tried to contain it, but it has already spread into the community, and someone has called the school board.”*

*Toni’s momentary relief began to slip away. She had made no such announcement to her grade six students; however, she didn’t shy away from the discussion of gay and lesbian issues in the classroom either. She insisted that everyone be treated with dignity and respect. She didn’t allow put-downs or name-calling of any kind, and she always challenged racist, sexist and homophobic comments. Was that enough to implicate her?*

*The student’s mother was a Program Assistant in the school, and was considered a staff member among the students; her confirmation of Toni’s sexuality would carry some weight with the kids. Toni could feel her stomach begin to knot and her heart felt too small to contain the furious pounding, as she began to realize the magnitude of what had happened. She began to feel trapped.*

*What would happen if she acknowledged her sexuality? Would she be harassed? Could she lose her job? Could she side step the problem with out confirming the rumors one way or the other? Would she have to strangle another small piece of her soul and deny her identity? How long could she continue to hide?*

*Hot tears stung Toni's cheeks and dropped silently onto her hands. How could she possibly emerge from this mess unharmed? All of her choices seemed to have enormous and possibly devastating consequences. She suddenly felt exposed and vulnerable, and she was afraid.*

Toni finished telling the story and looked up at Pam, her cheeks stained with tears. "I can't believe that's still so hard to talk about." She reached for a tissue. "I think that was one of the most difficult days of my teaching career, partly because I felt very vulnerable and afraid, but also because I knew how difficult it was for June and Claire. They were trying to protect me. Things just spiraled out of control...and they didn't get any easier, either.

A couple of parents got together and started to campaign against me. They went door to door to tell the parents of the students in my class that I was a lesbian, and they contacted the school board. The school board pandered to the parents, and when I contacted the union lawyer for support, his response was that it would be best not to open that can of worms. I was shocked that the union wasn't going to support me, and I didn't know what to do. Thank God that June and Claire were on my side."

"That must have been very difficult and painful for you, especially as a new teacher without a permanent contract."

"It was extremely difficult, and I was frequently on the verge of tears, especially when people were nice to me. Many of the staff sensed that something big was going on, and some of them would stop me in the halls to ask if I was okay. Those were the moments when it was most difficult to hold myself together."

"Did the staff ever find out what was going on?"

“When things began to snowball, we decided we should tell the staff because it would eventually make its way back to them from the community anyway. June, Claire and I sat together at a staff meeting while I tearfully came out to the entire staff and explained what was going on. I can’t tell you how brutal that was.”

“I can’t imagine, Toni. That’s just dreadful. How did the staff respond?”

“Well, they were supportive at the time. I think they felt badly for me, and they were kind enough to my face; I can only assume they were sincere. They didn’t really do anything though, like insist that the union for which I pay close to \$600 a year, stand up and support me. If it hadn’t been for June and Claire, I would have felt utterly alone and absolutely scared stiff. I was very fortunate to have some people who cared for and supported me.”

“So what happened?”

“Well, neither the school board nor my union was very helpful. The people who actually had the power to put a stop to it, clearly didn’t want to deal with the situation; they just wanted it to go away. Ironically, I felt best supported by the offending program assistant’s union, which took a very strong stand against her behavior. She was disciplined by her own union and then transferred to another school.”

“And was that the end of it?”

“Oh no, things dragged on and on, and in June’s efforts to support and defend me, she came under attack as well. After the death of her husband, June fell in love with a woman herself, and although she didn’t make any public announcements about her sexuality, she didn’t hide it either. The rumors began to fly. Not long after I came out to the staff, June received a call from John Smith at the school board. He had received an anonymous call from a parent in the community to say June had been stealing money

from the school and that she was not to be trusted alone with children. The caller actually accused June of molesting children! Of course none of it was true, but it was the beginning of six months of sheer hell.

June knew who was responsible for the call even though John wouldn't tell her, and this woman made June's life miserable. She joined forces with the program assistant that had caused so much trouble for me, and launched a full blown personal vendetta against June for the rest of the year under the guise of 'supporting another parent.' She sent letters, made complaints and phone calls to the board, organized petitions from parents, and she always did it on a Friday so that June could have no peace on the weekends.

The people at the school board absolutely refused to believe that the attack against June had anything to do with her sexuality, but June wasn't convinced. She felt pretty certain that this woman would not have come after her if she had been a married woman...or a man...or if she had not incorrectly perceived June to be vulnerable about having her sexuality exposed."

"Was that something June was concerned about?"

"No. In fact, a parent came right out and told her that one of the rumors going around claimed that she was a lesbian. June didn't deny it. Having realized that she was attracted to women much later in life, June felt very comfortable with her sexuality. She also has a very strong sense of her rights, and she is confident about her claim to equality. That's not to say that she doesn't sometimes feel afraid or vulnerable, but she is not one to be ruled by fear. A lot of people underestimate June. They think she's all about being a peacemaker, which is in fact, always her first choice. She would turn herself inside out to find harmony, but when it becomes apparent that there will be no

harmony, or if she feels backed into a corner, she has no difficulty fighting.” Toni looked at Pam and grinned. “They picked the wrong person to mess with.” Toni had a lot of respect and admiration for June’s chutzpah, and she wished she could be more like her in that regard.

“So, what happened to June?”

“Well, she felt deeply hurt and betrayed by a lot of people, especially the staff at our school. She truly expected that when she told them about the accusations they would be furious, that they would be on her side and come to her defense, but not one of them was in any way truly helpful. Nobody stood up to say that what was going on was outrageous, or to ask what they could do. They just sat there looking at their toes.

Things dragged on for months. June hired her own lawyer and made sure that everyone involved knew she was prepared to fight. The board wanted to bring the situation between June and this other woman to mediation, but June refused. She said mediation required both parties to compromise and that she was not prepared in any way to sit down with this woman who owed her an apology that she could never give, and pretend that they were ever going to be civil again.

She eventually did agree to a meeting under very specific conditions. A registered letter was sent outlining those conditions, with a copy to the board and the superintendent of schools. June never heard back from the woman, but she withdrew her children from the school that day. It was a dreadfully painful time, and although June is a strong woman, the whole situation took a terrible toll on her. She left the school at the end of that year.”

“And what about you?”

“I was really sad that June left, but I understood that she had to go. Things settled down a bit, and I stayed at the school for a couple more years.”

“That was definitely a rough way to begin a new career. I hope things have improved since then.”

“Well, they did in some ways, but not in others. One good thing that happened is that I was much more comfortable and relaxed with my colleagues about my sexual orientation. I vowed that I would never go back in the closet.

On the other hand, I was also considerably more nervous after June left. I knew she loved and supported me, and believed in the work I did in my classroom. I wasn't so sure about the kind of support I would receive from the new principal, although it wasn't long before I found out.”

“Oh, don't tell me there were more problems?”

Toni leaned back into the sofa and sighed. “It felt like there was always one problem right after another. One time a parent called the school board to report that I was teaching kids about being gay or lesbian. Someone from the school board called the principal, and then she came to my classroom door while I was teaching to ask me if that was true. I was so shocked that she would seriously ask me such a question and stand there waiting for me to reply, that I laughed right out loud.”

“You mean she wanted to discuss it in the hallway while your students waited for you in the classroom?”

“Yes! I assured her that it was not true, that we were learning about prejudice against many groups of marginalized people, and that gay and lesbian people were included as one of many groups who were often victims of discrimination. I couldn't believe she would interrupt my class to ask me that.

Problems came up all the time. Parents would kick up a stink about having their kid in my class and insist they be switched, or the students would come up with names for me like ‘Ms. More-gay.’ It didn’t stop me from taking up issues of privilege and marginalization in the classroom, but I did feel more nervous and self-conscious about doing it since my sexual orientation had become ‘common knowledge.’

One of the good things about being part of the majority and *not* being on the margins is that you can afford to be passionate about something, and nobody is going to write you off and say that you’re just one of those angry lesbians. I felt like I was under closer scrutiny than I had been in the past, and I worked hard to be an impeccable teacher as a result. I volunteered on lots of different committees, I did lots of professional development, and I took on a variety of leadership roles within the school. I put a lot of pressure on myself, but that was how I coped with the ever present threat that someone might come after me because of my sexual orientation. I wasn’t going to make it easy for anyone to find fault with my work.”

“Do you think that contributes to your hard work ethic?”

“Absolutely! I think I’d be a hard-worker anyway, but I have no doubt that it contributes to some of the stress I feel. I work my butt off, at least partly because I know there are people who would love to see me slip up, and I’m not going to give them that satisfaction, so I’m very good at what I do.”

“I can see how that creates a bit of a dilemma for you. Other people are able to coast a little now and again, but it sounds like you never let up. It isn’t good for you to go full-tilt all the time; you need to be able to relax now and again. Do you think that your perception of the climate is accurate? Do you really think there are people just waiting for you to make a mistake?”

“I don’t know. It sounds kind of paranoid when you say it, but I do feel pressure to make sure that my work is beyond reproach. Nobody could say that I don’t work hard.”

“Do you think anyone would even notice if you coasted a bit now and again?”

“Probably not, but I’m not sure that I can.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t like to let people down; they depend on me.”

“Couldn’t they depend on someone else?”

“I suppose...”

Pam looked at her watch. “I can’t believe how quickly the hour has passed. Why don’t you make another appointment with Shawna on your way out and next time we can pick up where you left off?”

Toni smiled. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt.” She stood up and extended her hand. “I guess I’ll see you in a couple of weeks, then.”

Pam shook her hand warmly and smiled. “I’ll look forward to it.”

## 4

Toni scowled as she threw her balled up shirt at her reflection in the mirror. She plunked down on the edge of her bed and looked at the roll that stuck out over the waistband of her shorts. Tears welled in her eyes. She wasn't fat... her father told her she was nicely rounded... but she felt fat, and nothing she put on seemed to fit. She looked at the pile of clothes on the floor and wished she was thin and beautiful like Lindsay. Just then the doorbell rang and her mother called up the stairs.

“Lindsay’s here.”

Toni grabbed a tank top from the floor. It was snug on the top but loose enough around her waist to hide the offending roll. She glanced at herself in the mirror as she wiped away the tears and fixed her smudged mascara.

“That’s not so bad,” she said to herself as she promised to work harder at losing weight, “besides, it’ll be dark at the ball field.” She grabbed her jacket and headed downstairs, eager to go out with her friends.

Lindsay stood in the doorway chatting with Toni’s mother, but looked up and smiled when she heard Toni coming down the stairs. Lindsay had the nicest smile of anybody she ever knew. Toni smiled back. “Hi Lindsay. Just leave your bag on the bench in the hallway. We’ll take it upstairs when we get back.” Lindsay’s parents had taken her little brother and gone to the city, and she was spending the weekend at Toni’s. The girls headed for the door.

“Be home by 11:00.”

“Yes, Mom.” Toni rolled her eyes behind her mother’s back as she shut the front door. They were going to hang out at the ball field, like they did every Friday night, but tonight Toni was feeling a little anxious. She hadn’t seen Shane since lunchtime in the cafeteria. She knew he’d be at the field with his buddies, and she didn’t feel like fighting with him again. She had hurt his feelings and she felt badly about that, but she really just wanted to spend some time with Lindsay and that wouldn’t happen if Shane showed up. Toni glanced at Lindsay in the glow of the streetlight. She was so glad they had met. Lindsay was only a few months older than Toni, but having come from the city, Toni thought she seemed much older and more experienced. Lindsay was the best friend she’d ever had.

Lindsay nudged her arm. “So, what do you think?”

“About what?”

“You didn’t hear a word I said, did you?”

“Well...you were talking about Tom...”

“I said, do you think I should ask him to the prom? I’ll be old and gray if I wait for him to work up the courage.”

“Well then ask him. It is the 20<sup>th</sup> century, you know. You can do whatever you want.” Toni knew that Lindsay wasn’t really interested in Tom; she was just looking for a date to the dance. Toni would attend the prom with Shane, and even though she realized that Lindsay might not go without a date, she secretly hoped that Tom would say no. Maybe she could convince Lindsay to go alone. After all, it *was* the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The girls neared the end of the quiet street and cut across the church yard to the ball field. Nobody else had arrived so they headed over to the bleachers to wait. Lindsay sat on the bottom seat, and Toni plunked herself in the grass near Lindsay’s feet.

“Look at all the stars out tonight.”

Toni leaned her head back against the worn wood to look up, and her head rested against Lindsay’s thigh. It was a clear night and there did seem to be more stars out than usual.

“I sure am glad I met you, Toni. I really didn’t want to move to Farnham Falls, but now I’m glad we did.” Lindsay gathered Toni’s long hair in her hands and began to braid.

Toni’s heart jumped as Lindsay’s fingertips gently grazed the soft skin of her neck. She closed her eyes, drinking in the sensations as her mind whirled. She would have sat there all night letting Lindsay play with her hair, but it wasn’t long before they heard the boys coming across the field.

Lindsay let go of her hair and waved. “Hey, guys, we’re over here.”

Toni reluctantly opened her eyes, annoyed that the boys had arrived. She looked up at Lindsay sitting on the bench. “I wonder if Shane’s still mad.”

“He’ll get over it, he always does. He loves you more than anything, you know, and he never stays mad for long.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“Hey, Tom, is that a new jacket? Let me try it on.” Tom eagerly shrugged off his new basketball jacket and held it out as Lindsay slipped it on. “Oooh, this is really nice, Tom. It’s so soft. Can I keep it?” Lindsay was clearly flirting.

“No, but you can wear it whenever you like.” Tom sat down on the bench next to Lindsay, and Toni saw her scoot a little closer.

Toni climbed to the top of the bleachers and looked toward where the rest of the boys were still coming across the field but didn’t see Shane. She wasn’t sure if she was worried or relieved. “Where’s Shane?”

“We went by to pick him up, but he had to mind the garage. He said his parents went to a movie.” There was only one movie theatre in town, and Toni knew his parents had gone to the theatre last weekend. She was pretty sure they hadn’t gone to see the same movie twice. So where was Shane? It wasn’t like him not to come out on a Friday night.

“Is he still mad at me?” Tom was Shane’s best friend.

“I don’t know. Did you guys have a fight?”

“Well, yeah, sort of... I guess.”

“Really? He didn’t say...” Tom turned his attention back to Lindsay who was still making a big deal about his jacket. The other guys were sitting under the bleachers passing around a bottle that Joey brought and none of the other girls had shown up.

Sitting alone at the back of the bleachers, Toni thought about Shane. Would he forgive her? Did she care? As she watched Lindsay fawn over Tom, she suddenly felt like she might cry. Toni wanted to leave.

“Let’s go home, Lindsay.”

“It’s only 10:15. Your mother said we didn’t have to be back until 11:00.”

“I know, but I’m not feeling very well.”

“Really?” The disappointment was evident in Lindsay’s voice, but Toni didn’t care, she needed to get out of there and she knew Lindsay would understand once she explained. Lindsay slid out of Tom’s jacket and then leaned over and kissed him on the lips.

Toni turned away.

The girls walked through the darkness in silence for a few minutes. “What’s wrong, Toni? You’re not really sick.”

“I don’t know.”

“Is it about Shane?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, what is it?”

“I don’t know.” She really didn’t. The girls walked the rest of the way home in silence as Toni tried to figure out what was causing her to feel so mixed up.

“Last one into bed is a dirty rotten egg,” Lindsay called over her shoulder as she left the kitchen after their midnight snack. Toni chased her up the stairs and down the hall, catching up just in time to tackle her onto the bed. The two girls fell into a giggling, squirming heap.

“Shhh, you’ll wake up my parents.” Lindsay rolled over onto her side as she tried to stifle her laughter. She closed her eyes and took several deep breaths as she worked hard to suppress the giggles that erupted every few seconds. Finally successful, she drew a deep breath in through her nose and exhaled slowly. As her breathing returned to normal, Toni reached over and jabbed her in the ribs, causing a brand new explosion of irrepressible giggles.

Finally the girls settled down, and in the stillness of the night, the beating of Toni’s heart seemed deafening. She wondered if Lindsay could hear it. Afraid to move, Toni was acutely aware of the places where their bodies touched. She wondered if Lindsay felt it, too.

“So, what are you and Shane fighting about?” Lost in her own thoughts, Toni didn’t answer right away. Lindsay rolled over on her side and propped herself up on one elbow as she leaned in close and peered into Toni’s face. “Are you asleep?” Toni’s heart raced.

“No, I was just thinking.”

“About Shane?”

“Yeah,” she lied.

“So, what are you two fighting about?” Tears sprang to Toni’s eyes, and before she knew it, one had escaped and slid down her cheek. She tried to brush it away before Lindsay noticed, but it was too late. “Oh, Toni, its okay, you and Shane will patch things up.” Lindsay gathered Toni into her arms and held her close as sobs shook Toni’s body. She wasn’t sure why she was crying, and she didn’t know how to explain the turmoil that she felt inside, so she said nothing. She lay in Lindsay’s arms, and Lindsay stroked her hair and held her until the sobs subsided.

“Lindsay?” Toni began. There was no response. In the darkness, Toni listened to Lindsay’s rhythmic breathing and realized she had fallen asleep. She closed her own eyes and tried to sleep, but her mind wouldn’t settle. She lay very still for a long while, afraid that if she moved Lindsay might roll over and stop holding her. Finally, she gently kissed Lindsay’s cheek and closed her eyes as sleep seemed to find her.

\* \* \*

Toni craned her neck to see the clock on the bedside table. It was 8:15 am. She had always been an early riser, and even on the weekends she rarely slept past 8:00. Toni loved everything about the morning, especially those still, quiet moments just before the sun came up when the night turned into day. She often sat at the window and wrote in her journal as she listened to the birds outside her window declare the dawn. Toni thought about getting up, but then laid her head back down on the pillow and watched Lindsay sleep. She gently touched the dark silky hair that spilled across the yellow sheet, and wondered if she’d be able to tell Lindsay what was on her mind. Lost in thought, Toni didn’t notice her bedroom door open until her younger sister was already in the room.

“Jesus, Moe, you scared the crap out of me,” Toni hissed as she instinctively pulled her hand away from Lindsay’s hair. “Why can’t you learn to knock? What do you want?” Toni felt her face begin to flush. “How long have you been standing there?”

“Not long. I just wanted to know what you’re doing.” She looked from Toni to Lindsay and back again. Maureen was her given name, but nobody ever called her that.

She was only a year younger than Toni and they usually got along well. In fact, they often hung around together, but like most younger sisters, she sometimes got on Toni's nerves.

"We weren't doing anything. Now get the hell out of my room!"

"I meant what are you doing today? I want to come with you."

"No! Now, get out before I tell Mom that you were drinking beer under the bleachers with Joey Peters last weekend." Toni fired a pillow at her as she left. She knew Moe's best friend was away for the weekend and she had no one to hang out with, but she didn't care. She didn't want her little sister tagging along today.

Lindsay groaned and stretched her body like a lazy cat. She rolled over, pulling the sheet off in the process, then lay still except for the rhythmic rise and fall of her ribs. Toni admired Lindsay's athletic build and resisted a powerful urge to run her hand over the curve of Lindsay's back.

"Damn Moe, for barging in like that," she thought. Moe was always barging into her room without knocking, and she'd had enough. It was time to ask her father to put a lock on the door. Being careful not to wake Lindsay, Toni crawled out of bed, picked up her journal from her desk and went to the window.

*Saturday, June 15*

*Dear Journal,*

*I'm so confused! I was so sure that Shane and I would be together forever, but now I don't know. He's really getting on my nerves lately and I don't even know*

why. He's so good to me, and I know he loves me. How do I know if I really love him? What is love anyway? What's wrong with me? I'm so confused.

Lindsay has been such a good friend and she is so good to talk to. Maybe she can help me figure things out. I feel so comfortable around her, like I can really be myself. I think she's the best friend I've ever had. I'm so glad she moved here. I wish I was more like her. She is *so* beautiful!

Toni

"Hey, you." Lindsay yawned and stretched. "How long have you been up?"

"Not long." Toni closed her journal and slipped it under the cushion. "Moe came in and woke me up," she lied, "and I couldn't get back to sleep. I didn't want to wake you."

"Well, what are you doing over there?"

"Nothing." Toni lied again. Her journal was very personal and she wanted to keep it that way. "I was just listening to the birds and thinking about Shane."

"Oh, yeah. Guys can be such a pain." Lindsay stood up, reaching her arms way above her head and arching her back as she let out a long groan. Toni gazed at Lindsay's body pushing against the taut fabric of her t-shirt as she stretched in the morning sunlight and thought she was exquisite.

## 5

Toni looked at the clock on the wall; she was a few minutes early, so she sat down in the small waiting area. She couldn't believe how quickly two weeks had gone by, and here she was again. June was pleased that she had made a second appointment, and encouraged her to make it a regular thing. 'Emotional maintenance' she called it. Toni wasn't sure she wanted to see a counselor regularly, although she really liked Pam and was looking forward to the visit. She picked up a magazine and absently thumbed through the pages.

"Toni!" The door to the inner office opened and Pam approached with a warm smile. "I'm so glad to see you again. Please go in and have a seat. I'm going to get myself a cup of coffee. Can I get you one, too?"

“Sure. Just milk, no sugar.” Toni sat down on the sofa and waited. She picked up the small rake and traced a design in the tray of sand. There was something calming about making designs in the sand; she would have to get one these for herself.

“Here you go.” Pam handed her a mug. “It seems like just the other day when you were here. How have you been?”

“Fine.” Toni smiled. “Things are still very busy, but I’m managing.” She took a sip of her coffee.

“I got the sense from our last visit that you have a lot on your plate, and I’ve been wondering if there might be something you could eliminate?”

“I don’t know what... but I guess I could try.” Toni was skeptical.

“I think that would be good, even if it’s only something small.” Pam smiled. “Do you mind if I ask you about something you said last time?”

“No, I don’t mind.” Toni wondered how she managed to keep everyone’s stories straight.

“The last time you were here you talked about your rocky introduction to teaching. You mentioned that you only stayed at that school for a couple of years after that; did something happen that caused you to leave?”

“No, I just got tired of being under a microscope in that community. Besides, I thought it might be a little easier to be a lesbian in a larger junior high rather than a small elementary. I transferred out.”

“Were things any better?”

“They were definitely better in some ways, but I was really anxious about moving to a new school where I didn’t know anyone. As difficult as things had been at my old school, the staff knew about my sexual orientation and I felt like they accepted

me. That was very liberating. I didn't have to put a lot of energy into hiding; I could just be myself. I vowed that I would never again stuff myself into a closet, and I wasn't sure how to 'come out' at my new school. I was very worried about that." Toni took a deep breath. "In some ways, the devil you know is better than the one you don't. I had no idea if the staff at the junior high would be welcoming or not."

"And were they?"

"Mostly."

"So how did you make the transition?"

Toni grinned. "Well, to begin with, I put a rainbow bumper sticker on my car, and beyond that I just talked about my life as normally as I could. I didn't change or omit pronouns when I spoke about my partner, and when people still assumed that I was heterosexual, I corrected them right away. It was hard in the beginning..." Toni looked out the window. "When you're getting to know new people, there are lots of questions about whether or not you're married, what your husband does, if you have children, and things of that nature. My heart would pound every time I had to say that my partner was a woman. In some ways the big disclosure at my old school was better because it was over and done with all at once."

"The rainbow bumper sticker would have been a dead give away."

"You would think, but after a whole year I discovered that my teaching partner had no idea that the rainbow is an international symbol of gay pride. I learned to be more attentive to my own assumptions."

"So did you end up feeling accepted by the staff?"

“You learn to ferret out and identify those who are like-minded individuals and you build yourself a support system. There were many wonderful people on that staff, and for all the worrying I did, in the end I felt very comfortable about just being myself.”

“Were there staff members who were not supportive?”

“There are always a few, but they are generally less vocal about their views these days because the climate has changed. It’s no longer politically correct to be homophobic, plus there is legislation that protects us from harassment and discrimination. In some ways that’s good because it keeps homophobic people quiet, but it also makes them harder to identify. In general though, I think people are much more tolerant and accepting of difference than they were when I was in high school.”

Toni took a sip of her coffee and thought about Arthur. “There was this guy in my high school who was openly gay, and he was endlessly harassed. It must have been sheer torture for him to come to school every day; I’m amazed that he didn’t drop out. He was a nice guy, but his mannerisms and gestures were a little effeminate, and the way he dressed was sometimes flamboyant. As a result, he was harassed every day, even by the teachers. His life must have been a living hell. I admired the courage he had to be himself, but I never spoke up in his defense or offered him support. I’ve always felt badly about that. He must have felt so alone.

One day as I was on my way to my next class, I saw Arthur just ahead of me in the crowd. The vice-principal and the school athletic director were standing in the hallway watching the river of students stream by when one of them nudged the other and commented loudly, ‘There goes Queen Arthur,’ and then they shared a good guffaw. A teacher who was passing by also heard the comment and turned around, but when she saw who had made the comment she kept going. I saw Arthur cringe as a group of

students broke into gales of laughter and continued to call him Queen Arthur all the way down the hall. Arthur held his head up and kept walking, but no one spoke up on his behalf. ‘Queen Arthur’ became his name for the rest of his high school career. I don’t know how he did it, but he stuck it out and graduated.”

“That’s a terrible story! Thank God that legislation has made schools somewhat safer for gay and lesbian youth and teachers.”

“Legislation certainly helps, but it doesn’t stop people from making your life miserable if they really want to. You can’t force people to change their attitudes, but legislation does change behavior, and I think if you change behavior, then over time, attitudes begin to change as well. Legislation offers an important measure of protection, because it creates a procedure for dealing with harassment, although calling that legislation into effect is not an easy process. I admire the young woman who is taking the school board to task for what she claims was discrimination rooted in homophobia. It takes a lot of courage to be the public face of that battle, and it hasn’t been easy on her.”

“Yes, having the essence of who you are hammered in the media, and details of your personal life reported in the news has got to be hard. She must be a very strong and brave young woman.” Pam took a sip from her mug. “So, you were open about your sexuality with the staff; what about your students?”

“I’m not officially out to my students, but every year they seem to make assumptions. I’m not sure why they always seem to identify me as gay...maybe it’s because I challenge homophobic comments when I hear them. Or maybe it’s because I include education about gay and lesbian issues and social justice into the work I do in

the classroom. They are quickly able to determine how I feel about issues of equity and social justice.” Toni grinned. “Or maybe it’s just because I never wear a dress.”

“Maybe it’s the rainbow sticker on your car.” Pam grinned.

“It could be that, too.”

“So were things better at the junior high?”

“Yes, but it wasn’t without its problems.”

“Were they problems related to your sexual orientation?”

“But of course.” Toni sighed. “One day as I was coming in to the building, a boy yelled at me from an upstairs bathroom window, ‘Hey, ya big lezzie.’ He tried to disguise his voice, but I recognized him as one of my students. My heart leapt into my throat. I was frightened. And then I felt angry that this 14 year old boy had the power to intimidate me with his words, and he knew it.”

“What happened?”

“I went to the principal. I told her that I had a pretty good idea who it was, but no real proof. I wasn’t looking for her to do anything about it at that point, but I wanted her to be aware of what happened, and I wanted her to know that if it happened again I would expect something to be done.”

“Was she supportive?”

“In a back-handed sort of way. She said, ‘I walk down the hall every day, Toni, and kids call me a bitch. You can’t take that stuff personally.’ My response was, ‘Yes, but I *am* a lesbian, and you’re not a bitch.’ She got my point and assured me that I had her full support if it became an issue.” Toni sighed. “Being a lesbian educator is never easy. Sometimes it’s all about safety and survival, and how hard you’re prepared for that struggle to be. I desperately wanted the whole thing to just quietly fade away...”

She looked out the window. “I really didn’t want to have to nail some kid to a cross for harassing a teacher.”

“Did it go away?”

“Yeah, it never became a bigger issue, although it seemed like it was always there, just below the surface. I had a challenging class that year, and there were always a few students, mostly boys it seemed, who sat at the back of the room exchanging comments under their breath whenever sexuality topics were discussed in health class, and trying to use their power to intimidate me. I couldn’t hear their comments, but you have a pretty good idea when someone’s talking about you. I tried not to let it get to me. There were also kids who made a point to let me know that they thought I was a good teacher, so the boys at the back didn’t bother me too much.”

“Did you ever confront the boys at the back?”

“No, I mostly just ignored them unless they were disrupting the class. They did intimidate me, but I didn’t want them to know that. Besides, adolescence can be a really hard time for kids, and I find that kids who are mean often have their own issues and struggles. That doesn’t excuse their bad behavior, but it does help to try and understand it sometimes. I hope they won’t always be mean. Most of them grow up and mature.”

Toni raked lines in the sand.

“I also try to remember what it was like to hate going to school, to hate being in a building every day with people that I felt didn’t understand me, and I try to remember that kids come from many different places and circumstances. I think one of the most important things that teachers can do for kids is show them that being human means being compassionate and respectful, and I really try to be that person every minute that I’m with kids.”

“That’s a tall order, especially if you’re feeling targeted.”

“Yeah, sometimes it is really hard, but I truly believe that the best way to educate people is just to be who I am, and to be the best role model I can be in the way I live my life. A lot of kids are hung up on the stereotypes that are out there about gay and lesbian people. Just by being who I am, I can be an example of another way to be. The issues become more personal and concrete when you get to know someone who is gay; that can be a powerful vehicle for change.”

“So are you out to your students then?”

“Well, not exactly, but they seem to know.”

“Does that bother you?”

“No, not really. I don’t care if they *assume* I’m a lesbian. Confirming their assumptions makes me nervous, though, so I often feel like I’m being somewhat dishonest.”

“How do you figure that?”

“I feel like I’m frequently vague and evasive. I’m careful about what I say with regard to my personal life, and I’m vigilant about the pronouns that I use. I don’t share much with my students...”

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“But I would prefer just to relax and be myself. I want to be a positive role model for kids so they can see a decent, hard-working, contributing member of society who also happens to be gay. Unfortunately, I’m afraid to do that in my job.”

“That doesn’t make you dishonest, it makes you cautious...and with good reason.”

“But if no one is willing to be the one to stand up and demand change, to challenge the status quo, to claim our right to equality, nothing will ever change. Why shouldn't that person be me? I *do* feel like I'm dishonest. I'm guilty of lies of omission.”

“Toni, you're much too hard on yourself. You must balance your desire to make the world a better place, with your need for personal safety. You're no good to anyone if you're out of commission because you didn't take care of yourself.”

“I know.” Toni hung her head as her eyes filled up with tears. “I just can't seem to find a balance.”

## 6

“Do you guys need some help? I could help you, you know. I know how this tent works. This long pole...”

“Get lost, Moe! We’re doing just fine.”

“Let her stay, Toni, maybe she could help us.”

“Fine, but then you have to buzz off.” Toni shot a threatening scowl in Moe’s direction as she bopped around rearranging poles. The tent was up in no time.

“See, nothing to it.” Moe dusted off her hands and smiled broadly, pleased to have been helpful.

Lindsay crawled into the tent as Toni turned to her younger sister, “Big whoop, you can put up a tent, now take off!”

Lindsay stuck her head out. “Come on, you two.”

Moe smirked at Toni then quickly scrambled into the tent before her sister could say another word. Fuming, Toni followed as she listened to Moe chatter. “So, what do you want to talk about? Do you want to talk about guys? I’ve got a crush on Kenny Power. Do you think he likes me? He sits behind me in Chemistry class, and he’s always bugging me for stuff. Jean thinks he likes me. Do you think he likes me? Do you think I should ask him out?” Toni rolled her eyes and smiled at Lindsay as Moe rambled on. She wasn’t such a bad sister, maybe she could stay for a while. “I think I’ll ask him out. How far have you gone with a guy, Toni?”

“That’s none of your damn business, Moe!”

“Oh come on, Toni, how far have you gone?” Lindsay jumped in.

“Well, how far have you gone?” Toni shot back.

“I went all the way once.”

“You did not!”

“I did, with Danny Slaunwhite back in the city.”

“How did it happen, Lindsay? What was it like? Did you like it? Where did you do it? Were you afraid of getting caught? Tell us all the details.” Moe didn’t have a shy bone in her body.

“God, Moe, shut up! That stuff is really personal. Stop being so friggin nosy!” Toni could feel her face getting hot. Moe was so outspoken. In some ways, Toni admired that about her younger sister. She wanted to know the details, too, but she would never have asked the questions.

“That’s okay, Toni, I don’t mind telling, but then you guys have to tell, too. And we all have to promise that nothing we say will ever leave this tent.”

“We promise, don’t we Toni?” Moe could barely conceal her excitement.

“Okay then!” Lindsay leaned forward and motioned for the girls to move in a little closer as she began to tell the story. “It was just last Christmas, and school was out for the holidays. Danny’s mother was crazy about Bingo! She went every Tuesday night, and she’d be gone for the whole evening. My parents were out visiting, and I was home alone. Danny called and convinced me to go over to his place, so I left a note for my parents to say I had gone to the mall to do some last minute Christmas shopping. At first we were just sitting on the sofa, watching a made for TV Christmas movie, but Danny wasn’t really interested in the movie. He had his arm around me, and he kept brushing his hand against my breast. Then we started to kiss. Pretty soon we were lying on the sofa, and he had his hands up my shirt.”

“Did you like it? Were you worried that his mother might come home?”

“Yeah! I was really worried about that, and there we were right in the middle of the living room. Danny tried to convince me that his mother wouldn’t be home for at least another two hours, but he said we could go to his bedroom if that would make me feel better.”

“You did it in his bed?!”

“Yep.”

“Well, don’t stop there, tell us the rest!”

“We went down the hall to his room and lay on his bed. He kissed me a few times, and then he stuck his hand down my pants and rubbed around a bit. That felt really good. Then he undid my pants and pulled them off, and before I knew it, he had his own pants off. So, we were lying on his bed touching each other when he reached over to the bedside table and pulled out a condom. ‘Do you want to?’ he asked me.”

“Did you? Did you really want to? Did you feel, you know, horny?” Moe giggled.

“Well yeah, I kind of wanted to, but I was nervous, too. Danny said it would be fine and I’d really like it, so I helped him put the condom on and we did it.”

“So, did you like it? What did it feel like? Did it hurt?” Moe fired one question after another.

“It didn’t hurt, but I didn’t think it was all that great, and it didn’t last very long. I liked it better when we were just touching. Afterwards, Danny wanted to kiss and snuggle, but I just wanted to hurry up and get out of his room because I was so worried that his mother would come home. So...that’s my story. Now it’s your turn, Toni.”

“Well... Shane really wants to have sex, but we haven’t gone all the way. Yet. I think that’s one of the reasons we’ve been fighting so much lately. Shane says that all of his buddies have already had sex and he’s the only one who hasn’t. I know he wants to. He says that if I really loved him I would. I don’t really know how I feel about that. I thought I loved him, but now I’m not sure. My feelings are so mixed up lately. I think having sex with him right now would be a mistake.” Toni looked down at her hands, feeling self-conscious.

“Well, don’t do anything that makes you feel uncomfortable, Toni. If Shane loves you he’ll wait, and if he doesn’t, then screw him.” Toni looked up. Lindsay was so sure of herself, and her reassuring smile instantly made Toni feel better. “Okay, Moe. Your turn.”

“Well, the truth is...I mean...well, I’ve never really had a steady boyfriend.” Usually talkative and outgoing, Moe was suddenly quiet as she picked at a thread on the floor.

Lindsay turned her sunny smile on Moe as she patted her arm. “No hurry, Moe. Better to be ready.” Lindsay lay down on her back and put her hands behind her head. “You know, we should ask your mother if we can sleep out here tonight.”

\* \* \*

“I’m sleeping in the middle,” Moe called over her shoulder as she ran to the tent.

“Forget it, Moe. You’re lucky to be sleeping out with us at all. I’m sleeping in the middle.” Toni pushed Moe aside and started to spread out her own sleeping bag.

“How about if I sleep in the middle so the two of you can’t fight?” Lindsay moved Toni’s sleeping bag over and spread her bag out in the center of the tent.

“Actually, that’s even better. Then I won’t have to sleep next to that gigantic pain in the arse.” Toni was still annoyed that her mother said they had to let Moe sleep out with them. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Moe stick out her tongue, but she pretended not to see. Toni smoothed out her sleeping bag beside Lindsay’s and plumped up her pillow. Moe did the same on the other side, then crawled into her sleeping bag and pulled it up around her ears.

“It’s really cold! Look, I can even see my breath.” Moe exhaled a long breath to make her point.

“Yeah, Mom said there was a frost warning for tonight. You should probably go inside. It’s going to get much colder than this.” Toni knew how much her sister hated being cold.

“I’m wearing my flannel pajamas, and I’ve got an extra blanket. I think I’ll be just fine, but thanks for your heartfelt concern.”

Toni rolled her eyes and mimicked her sister's sarcastic tone.

“Come on, you two, cut it out. Let's just have some fun. Do you want to hear some ghost stories? Look what I brought.” Lindsay dug in her bag and pulled out a book: *True Tales of Ghosts and Ghouls*. “It's guaranteed to curl the hair on your toes.” Lindsay giggled.

“Ewww! I don't have hairy toes. Are the stories really true?” Moe sounded a little anxious. She was easily spooked by stories of the supernatural, and the idea of ghosts and spirits often made her jumpy.

“Well, the author wrote about that at the beginning of the book.” Lindsay flipped to the front. “He says that he interviewed a lot of different people and that he only included stories that could be confirmed by several people. In some cases he says that people who didn't even know each other told stories that were almost identical to each other! If you ask me, some of them seem pretty hard to explain. I guess if you believe in this kind of stuff, they're pretty convincing stories.”

“That sounds like fun. You read them out loud, Lindsay.” Toni rolled up on her side and watched Moe squirm closer to Lindsay. Even in the dark, she thought Moe looked a little squeamish. Toni grinned as she made a bet with herself about how long Moe would last.

“What was that noise? Did you guys hear that? Something brushed up against the tent! Didn't you hear that?” They had only read two stories and already Moe was on edge.

“I didn't hear a thing...”

“Shh! Listen! There it is again! Don’t you hear that?” Moe lifted her head, listening carefully.

“I don’t hear anything, Moe.” Toni scratched her fingernail along the tent fabric again. “You’re just...”

“There it is again! How can you not hear that? Didn’t you hear it, Lindsay?” Toni poked Lindsay in the ribs.

“No...” Lindsay caught Toni’s smirk. “No, I didn’t hear anything, either, Moe. Maybe the stories are getting to you. Do you want me to stop?”

“No don’t stop,” Toni jumped in, “the stories are interesting. Moe’s just getting freaked out.”

“No, I’m not,” Moe shot her sister a dirty look, “keep reading.” Her eyes were wide as she looked around anxiously. “But I did hear something!” She scowled at Toni before she settled back down into her sleeping bag, her head craned toward the side of the tent as she listened intently to the noises in the night.

Toni didn’t scrape the tent again, but every few minutes Moe insisted that they stop and listen to something she was sure she had heard.

After only a few more stories, Lindsay closed the book. “Well, that’s enough for me. I’m getting tired.” She slid the book under her pillow. “You okay, Moe?”

“Me? Yeah, I’m fine.” No one spoke for several moments as they lay in the darkness. “You know, it really is cold. Look, I can see my breath!” Moe exhaled a long breath.

“It is pretty chilly. Snuggle over closer, Moe. That’ll help you warm up.” Moe wiggled herself as close as she could to Lindsay. “Come on, Toni, you snuggle up on this side and we’ll all be toasty warm.” Toni wiggled close on the other side.

“You mean you’ll be toasty warm, sandwiched in the middle like that.”

“I guess you’re right. Your backside is going to freeze!” Lindsay laughed.

“Maybe you could trap a few farts in your sleeping bag and that would warm your butt.”

Lindsay broke into a fit of giggles. “Sleeping out in the tent is really fun. I’m glad your parents let me stay for the weekend while my parents are away.”

“You know what?” Moe interrupted, “I think I’m going to go inside.”

“Why? Did the ghost stories get to you?”

“No, no. I’m just really cold.” Moe lied. She knew she would never get to sleep. Toni and Lindsay would fall asleep, and she would lie there wide awake, ears straining at every little sound. “You know how I hate the cold, Toni.”

“That’s true. She’s always cold, even in the summer.” Toni knew that she had orchestrated Moe’s departure, and she felt a twinge of guilt.

Moe stood up and unzipped her sleeping bag. She shook it open and spread it over the other two. “There, that’ll help you two to stay warm.”

“Do you want me to walk you to the house?” Toni felt badly that Moe was frightened and was trying to make up for it.

“No, no, that’s okay. Really, I’m fine.”

“Well, I’ll just watch until you’re inside then.” Moe took off across the damp grass in her bare feet. She took the back steps two at a time and was inside in record time.

Toni zipped the tent door closed and snuggled back up to Lindsay under the sleeping bags. However, now that they were alone, she suddenly felt self-conscious and shy, and she didn’t know what to say. The silence was heavy as it pressed down on her

chest, making it difficult to breathe. Desperately hunting for something to fill the void, she said the only thing she could think of. “It really is cold out tonight, isn’t it?”

“It is. Look, I can see my breath.” Lindsay copied Moe as she exhaled a long breath and began to laugh. Nervous giggles burst from Toni, releasing some of the tension she felt, and before long the girls were rolling around in fits of hysterics.

“Whew!” Lindsay struggled to catch her breath. “You really shouldn’t have scared Moe like that.”

“I know. She was terrified, wasn’t she? Did you see the look on her face when I was scratching the tent? She was starting to get mad that we didn’t hear it, too.”

“Yeah, that was pretty good! I could barely keep a straight face!”

Toni mimicked Moe’s frightened expressions and the giggles erupted again. When the waves of laughter finally subsided, the girls lay breathless, holding their sides.

“Really, though Toni, you shouldn’t be so mean to Moe. You don’t know how lucky you are to have a sister. I’d trade my rotten little brother for a sister like Moe any day.”

“Yeah, I know, as far as brothers and sisters go, she’s not so bad.” Toni did know how lucky she was. Moe was outgoing and fun, and pretty easy to talk to, and most of the time they were good friends. She felt a little guilty about being mean, but she really just wanted to have some time with Lindsay all to herself. She didn’t think that was too much to ask. The two girls lay close together to keep warm, blowing frosty clouds with their breath and giggling.

“Are you warm enough?” Lindsay propped herself up on one elbow and peered closely at Toni in the darkness.

Only inches away, Toni gazed into Lindsay's sea green eyes. "Uh...well...I am a little chilly." Lindsay stretched her arm across Toni's chest and snuggled in close. Toni's heart began to pound and she was afraid that Lindsay might feel it right through her chest.

"I know I told you this before, but I'm really glad that we met." Lindsay stroked Toni's dark hair as they lay quietly in the night. "We've only known each other for a few months, but I feel like I've known you all my life. I feel so comfortable around you; I could tell you anything." Toni felt like she was the lucky one, and was surprised that Lindsay felt the same way.

"Lindsay?"

"Yeah?" When Toni didn't continue, Lindsay pushed herself back up on her elbow and looked down at her. "What?"

"Well...I just wanted to tell you..." Toni felt like Lindsay could see right through her and she had to look away.

"What is it, Toni?" Lindsay's face was clouded with concern as she turned Toni's face back toward her own and gently brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes.

"Well...it's just that...uh... I feel the same way. I've never felt so close to anyone in my whole life and..."

Lindsay leaned down and very gently kissed Toni's lips. It was the fleeting kiss of a butterfly, but it set off a powerful surge of electricity that whipped its way through Toni's body. More confused than ever, Toni looked up at Lindsay, her eyes full of questions.

"But Lindsay..." Lindsay leaned over and kissed her again, her lips lingering a little longer. Toni closed her eyes, drinking in the sensations. Her heart pounded

against her ribs, and she thought she could actually feel the blood moving through her veins. Her body tingled and quivered all over, and something stirred deep inside. She had never felt more alive. She had so many questions, but the feel of Lindsay's lips against her own was overwhelming. She wrapped her arms around Lindsay's body and returned the kiss.

## 7

Toni stepped off the elevator and hurried down the hall. She'd had a hard time finding a parking spot, and she was a few minutes late. She flung the heavy door open and entered the office, slightly out of breath. "I'm so sorry I'm late." She closed the door behind her and turned around to see Pam standing at the secretary's desk.

"Toni!" Pam smiled. "I was just asking Shawna if you'd had to cancel at the last minute. I'm so glad that you made it." Toni felt like Pam really meant it. "Come on in. Coffee?"

"Sure."

"Milk, no sugar. Right?"

"Um-hmm." Toni nodded and smiled. She was surprised that Pam remembered, and wondered if she made notes about that sort of thing in her client's files. She went into Pam's office and took her spot on the small sofa. A folder with her name on it sat

on a small table next to Pam's chair, and Toni was tempted to peek inside to see if it said 'milk, no sugar' on the inside flap.

"There you go." Pam handed Toni a steaming mug and sat down.

"I'm sorry I'm late. I actually arrived in plenty of time, but I couldn't find a place to park. I had to park down the street and around the corner."

"Yes, a lot of people have been late today for the very same reason. Apparently there is a conference going on in the building and the parking lot is overflowing." Pam took a sip of her coffee and smiled. "What would you like to talk about today?"

"Well, I've been thinking about our visits." Toni knew the counseling services provided by the union were intended for short-term assistance, and that people needing longer term or more serious interventions were referred to community-based professionals. "In the beginning I only came to make June happy, and I really thought this would be a waste of everyone's time, but I've come to appreciate the time we spend together." Toni felt the monthly visits were helping her tidy up her life and keep things in perspective. "I know that the union counseling services are intended to provide short-term assistance, and I've been coming pretty regularly, but I'd like to keep coming, if that's okay."

"Of course, that's fine. So long as you find some benefit in coming, and neither of us feels that you need more serious intervention, you can come as often and for as long as you like. That's not a problem."

"Do you think I need more serious intervention?"

Pam grinned. "I would have told you by now if I did. What do you think?"

"I think I'm doing okay, but you're the expert."

“Well, I think you’ve got a lot on your plate, and you have to be careful not to spread yourself too thin, but you have good coping strategies and you seem to be managing fine. If bouncing things off of me once a month is helpful, then keep coming.”

“Okay,” Toni smiled.

“So, how have you been since our last visit? Were you able to find something to let go of?”

“I tried. I didn’t re-offer my name as co-chair of the Parent-Teacher Group, but nobody else would volunteer, so in the end I agreed to do it for another term.”

“Toni, if you’ve done a term as the co-chair already, it’s someone else’s turn. Go back and tell them you’re sorry, but you have too much on your plate right now and you need to withdraw.”

“I can’t do that, I already agreed.”

“Someone else will step up, Toni. You’re not indispensable.”

Toni felt the hairs on her neck bristle. “I never said I was; it’s just that I already said I would do it...”

“Well, now you can’t, and someone else will. You need to find some time for yourself, and for your family. Besides...” Pam grinned, “You’ll be a better teacher if you take care of yourself and if you feel more relaxed and rested.”

“Well, if it’ll make me a better teacher...” Toni returned Pam’s smile. “I feel badly about backing out, though.”

“Just stand your ground. There’s no reason to feel badly about taking care of yourself.”

“I know...”

“Are you feeling any better about the need to protect yourself so that you don’t become a target for other people’s homophobic attitudes?”

“Not really. I’ll probably always struggle with that. It pisses me off that the guy teaching down the hall can talk casually with his students about his wife and their kids, maybe mention what they did on the weekend, or he can have a family picture on his desk... but I can’t. If his life isn’t an issue, then why is mine?” Toni sighed. “But besides that, there were a couple of incidents in the past few weeks that made me feel even more acutely dishonest about being myself.”

“What happened?” Pam looked concerned.

“There are two grade nine girls at my school who have started to date each other, and they have become the victims of a good deal of harassment from some of the other students. I don’t teach the girls, but a concerned teacher approached me to ask if I would be willing to speak to them, to offer them some support. The poor guy looked so awkward and uncomfortable that I felt kind of bad for him. He shuffled from one foot to the other, and he could barely look me in the eye. He had a terrible time getting started, and when he finally did, he stumbled all over his words, particularly when he had to say the word ‘lesbian.’” Toni grinned.

“When I told him that I’d be happy to speak to the girls, he thanked me profusely and bolted out of my room as quickly as he could. He seemed so relieved to be able to escape! He then went to the girls and told them that I’m a lesbian and that they could come and talk to me.”

“He did what?”

“I know; there was definitely a misunderstanding with regard to what I thought I had agreed to.”

“Oh, no, Toni. Did you speak to him about it?”

“I didn’t know what to do. I did want to be a support for the girls, and I know his intentions were good...”

“But Toni, he must understand that he can’t just tell students that you’re a lesbian without your permission!”

“I know. I did go to speak to him, and it quickly became apparent that he thought he had my permission. He was so appreciative; I didn’t have the heart to say anything about it. All I said was that I felt the girls would be protective of my safety, but I didn’t want my sexuality to be confirmed for the student body in general. He looked mortified at the suggestion, and stumbled all over himself to assure me that wouldn’t occur. I felt so bad for him; I left it at that.”

“So what happened?”

“The girls came to see me. I told them that I was glad they had come, and explained how important it was that they protect my confidentiality. They understood completely, and I have no worries that they won’t. I told them that they could come by any time they wanted, and we talked about starting a gay-straight alliance at our school.”

“Are there GSAs in other junior high schools?”

“I don’t think so; I think they’re mostly at the high school level. I don’t think many kids come out in junior high. Junior high can be pretty brutal.” Toni sighed. “It’s been a stressful few weeks.”

“Was that the end of it?”

“No. I went to speak to the vice-principal to tell her that I had been outed to a couple of students. I was nervous about it, and I wanted her to know what was going on in case things exploded, which they definitely had the potential to do.”

“What was her reaction?”

“At first I thought she was upset because of the potential for disaster, but she was genuinely concerned for me, and worried for my safety. I was concerned, too, but the horse was already out of the barn. The best we could hope to do at that point was keep it in the corral.

I explained that I was prepared to accept the risk; I only wanted her to know what was going on just in case there was some fall-out that she might have to deal with. She stood behind me 100%, and then we talked about how to deal with the harassment the girls were experiencing.”

“Oh, Toni, no wonder you’ve been stressed. Are things resolved?”

“Sort of, but not in the way I’d hoped. I’m the Human Rights contact at our school, so I’m the person who was supposed to deal with the harassment situation. The VP didn’t think that was a good idea, though, and to tell you the truth, I agreed. It felt a little too close to home. She took the lead, and I was happy to climb into the back seat on this one.

According to the board policy, all incidents of harassment are to be reported to the Coordinator of Human Rights at the school board, but as hard as we tried, we couldn’t find out who that person was. Everyone passed the buck and said it was someone else’s responsibility. We couldn’t find anyone at the board that was willing to stand behind their policy. It was an exercise in futility and frustration!”

“What do you mean? If it’s their policy, they have to support it.”

“So you would think. In fact, on paper, the school board has a clear, well-written policy with regard to harassment based on sexual orientation; it is not to be tolerated. The policy claims that the board will take an active role in eliminating all forms of

harassment, and there is a very clear procedure for dealing with it. We followed the procedure.”

“So what happened?”

“The students responsible for the harassment were disciplined, and we required them to attend a meeting with one of their parents so that they could be educated about the board’s sexual harassment policy and procedures. We had hoped to have someone from the board present this information to the boys and their parents, but it seemed that no one was available. The principal ended up doing it. The families thought we were making a big deal out of nothing, that we were blowing things out of proportion, but we were simply trying to do what the board policy said we should do.”

“The parents didn’t see their children’s behavior as serious?”

“No, their attitude seemed to be that the whole thing was just kids being kids. I wanted them to understand that not only was their kid’s behavior serious, it was against the law, and that there would be some serious consequences if it didn’t stop. They were asked to sign a form indicating that the policy and procedures had been explained and that they were aware of the consequences, but they refused.”

“They refused what?”

“They refused to sign the form, which simply indicated that the policy and procedures had been explained to them, and they understood it.”

“So what did you do?”

“I just wrote on the forms that they had been asked to sign, and they refused.”

“Really? They wouldn’t sign?”

“I think they saw the signing of the forms as being an admission of guilt, which it wasn’t. We already knew the boys were guilty; they all admitted to their part in the

harassment. Anyway, that doesn't matter. We have a record of the fact that they were made aware of the policy. If the boys continue to harass the girls, we can proceed with the consequences."

"Has the harassment stopped?"

"I think so. We have a couple of school-wide activities planned that will include education and sensitivity training around gay and lesbian issues for all students, so hopefully that will help to make our whole school a more tolerant place as well."

"And how are you feeling about all of this?"

"Well, like I said, it's been a tough few weeks. Mostly I was frustrated with what seemed like a lack of support from the board as we tried to implement and defend their policy. The parents thought the way it was handled was much too harsh, and I don't feel like the school board stood behind us. Those parents needed to know that this was bigger than just our school, but I don't think they got that message."

"Do you think the boys got the message?"

"I think the boys realized that it was a potentially serious situation despite the fact that their parents bailed them out and didn't require them to accept responsibility for their behavior. If nothing else, I think the boys are afraid of the consequences if their behavior doesn't change. That should put an end to the harassment, even if our attempts to enlighten them fell on deaf ears."

"Has there been any fall-out for you personally?"

"Not so far, other than the stress and aggravation associated with the whole situation. The parents of the girls were frustrated as well, but they were understanding and supportive of how things were handled and of what we were trying to do."

"And how about the girls?"

“They are handling things amazingly well. I can’t imagine how hard it must be to come out in junior high; they are brave girls.” Toni admired their courage. “I was nervous about how the whole situation might play out, but it’s been okay. The girls hang out in my classroom a fair bit. Sometimes we talk, but sometimes they just do their thing, and I do mine. I’m glad to be able to provide a safe space, and to support them just by being honest about who I am. It’s how I’d like to be all the time.”

Toni looked out the window and sighed. She wondered if the school board was ready for her to be an openly gay teacher...or if *she* was ready for that. She felt good about being honest with the girls, and that was definitely how she would prefer to live her life, but the idea frightened her. Certainly the difficulties associated with getting the board to stand behind their policy indicated that they probably weren’t ready to support an openly gay teacher. Just thinking about it made her heart pound. Maybe she wasn’t ready, either, but it was a good first step.

Toni looked at Pam and smiled. “Even though it has been a stressful few weeks, I feel pretty good about how things have worked out.”

“I’m glad that *you* feel good, because I’ve been on the edge of my seat just listening to you tell the story! I’m exhausted!” Pam grinned. “The potential for things to explode at any given moment throughout that whole situation was huge.”

“Believe me, I know it! I fell asleep every night imagining the headlines that might be splashed all over the news the next day, *Lesbian Teacher Recruits Children! Are Your Children Safe?* The potentially negative implications for my life hovered very near, but I strongly believed that I was doing the right thing and so I felt compelled to see it through. I was nervous for my family, but they were 100% supportive, and it all

seems to have worked out okay.” Toni leaned back against the sofa and looked at Pam with a tired smile. “Thank God!”

## 8

Toni awoke to the happy sounds of birds greeting the day. She wasn't sure what time it was, but she knew it was early. A pink glow warmed the tent and she knew there would be a beautiful sunrise if she stuck her head outside to look. She also knew she should feel tired, but she didn't. She was wide awake and alert. She and Lindsay had stayed up well into the night, kissing, caressing, and exploring each others' bodies. Thinking of it now still made Toni's body tingle.

She watched Lindsay sleep. Her emotions were muddled, and so many questions raced through her mind that she didn't know where to begin. She did know; however, that she loved this girl. As frightening and confusing as it was, she was sure of that.

Toni lay back on her sleeping bag and listened to the birds sing. She felt like singing, too. She finally understood her feelings for Lindsay, but she also knew she wasn't supposed to feel this way for another girl...and what about Shane? Toni knew

there was a lot to be worried about, but her mind kept returning to the events of the previous night. As she played them over and over in her mind, her heart began to beat a little faster and her face felt flushed. What was happening to her? She wondered if Lindsay felt the same way.

Toni heard Lindsay stir beside her, and she suddenly felt shy and nervous. What if Lindsay didn't say *anything* about what had happened? Toni closed her eyes and pretended to be asleep. She lay still, straining her ears for any clue as to what Lindsay was doing. The minutes crawled by as she listened to Lindsay breathe, and then she heard the rustle of a sleeping bag as Lindsay rolled over.

"Toni?" Lindsay whispered softly in her ear. She was so close that Toni could feel Lindsay's breath against her cheek. Toni mumbled, still pretending to sleep. She felt Lindsay shuffle her body closer and snuggle up against her. Every nerve in Toni's body quivered. Her heart quickened, and she struggled to keep her breathing slow and steady; however, as she felt Lindsay's lips nuzzle softly against her neck, a sudden shudder traveled all the way to her toes, and she gasped. Toni held her breath, afraid to open her eyes. "Toni?" She felt Lindsay's hand against her cheek. "Toni?"

She opened her eyes. Lindsay's face was only inches from her own and she was surprised to see tears brimming in Lindsay's eyes. She reached out and brushed the tears away, then taking Lindsay's face in her hands, she tenderly kissed the damp spots that remained on her cheeks. Lindsay let her head drop onto Toni's chest, and they lay that way, holding each other, for a long while.

"Hey, you guys!" Moe pulled the bottom zipper across the door of the tent. "It was so cold last night I had to get up and close my window in the middle of the night."

Toni and Lindsay quickly separated themselves from each other as Moe yanked the second zipper up and stuck her head into the tent. “I even had to get an extra blanket out of the hall closet!” She flopped into the tent and lay down next to Lindsay. “I’m so glad that I went inside. You two must have froze your butts off! So, what are you guys doing?”

“What do you mean, ‘What are we doing’? We’re not doing anything. We’re just lying here talking. What are you doing? How come you’re so friggin nosy?”

“What’s up your arse? I was just wondering what you guys were doing today. I thought you might want to go to the Sunday matinee at the theater. Anyway, I wasn’t being nosy, Mom sent me out to see if you want some pancakes.” Moe sat up and looked at her sister. She was acting strange lately, and she had been really bitchy all weekend. Maybe her period was due. She gave Toni a dirty look and headed for the door. “So, do you want some pancakes or not?”

The intensity of Toni’s muddled emotions caused tears to brim in her eyes. She knew she had hurt Moe’s feelings again, and she felt badly. So much had happened in the past few days and she felt like an emotional train wreck. She wanted to tell Moe that she was sorry, and was surprised to hear herself say, “Buzz off, twerp!”

“Well?” Moe sounded impatient, “pancakes or not?”

Toni blinked back her tears. “Tell Mom we’ll be right in.”

After breakfast the girls cleaned up the dishes, and then went outside to take down the tent and pack everything away. Moe chattered a mile a minute, but neither Toni nor Lindsay said very much. Every so often they would catch each other’s eye,

and then quickly look away. Toni wondered what Lindsay was thinking. They hadn't talked about what had happened, and so many questions hung in the air between them.

They spent the rest of the morning trying to ditch Moe, who talked non-stop and seemed oblivious to the tension between them. Finally, when Moe's best friend called, they jumped at the opportunity to duck out the back door while she was on the phone.

As they walked down the street, they found themselves alone for the first time since they'd gotten out of bed, and neither was sure what to say. The ease and comfort that Toni normally felt around Lindsay was gone, and the silence between them felt insurmountable. There was so much to talk about, but Toni didn't know how to begin. The awkward silence grew.

Toni glanced at Lindsay out of the corner of her eye as they walked. What had happened between them felt so right, and since she had woken, she had thought about nothing else. Everything had changed for Toni, but as they continued to walk in silence, her anxiety grew and she began to feel more and more uncertain. What if Lindsay didn't feel the same? What if she thought it was all just a big mistake? Maybe that's why she had been crying earlier. Toni couldn't stand to think about that. She desperately wanted to know what was going through Lindsay's mind, and she searched her own mind for some way to begin.

Lindsay finally interrupted the silence. "Did you study for your exam?"

"Yeah. Did you?"

"Uh-huh."

"That's good." Toni couldn't think of anything else to say and several more awkward moments passed.

"So, what do you want to do?" Lindsay broke the silence again.

“Do you want to go over to the ball field?”

“Yeah, okay. Let’s go see if anyone’s there.”

Sunday afternoon was pretty quiet in Farnham Falls, and there was nobody else around, but even so, the girls intuitively understood the need to be out of plain view. They headed toward the bleachers on the far side of the field, then walked around behind and crawled in underneath. With the fence behind and the bleachers above, the girls were fairly well concealed from anyone who might walk by. They sat cross-legged, facing each other, but neither girl looked up.

Toni picked at a blade of grass, wondering how to begin while Lindsay picked at a loose thread on her jeans. So many things raced through Toni’s mind. Her hands were sweaty, and her heart pounded. They sat there silently for several agonizing moments, until Toni finally wiped her palms on her jeans then reached out and timidly took Lindsay’s hand in her own. Still looking down, she gently traced the pale blue outline of veins on the back on Lindsay’s hand until a single wet tear fell into her path. Toni touched the wetness and carefully wiped it away. Still struggling with what to say, she raised her eyes just in time to see another tear spill over Lindsay’s eyelid. She gazed into the watery sea green eyes of this girl whom she knew she wasn’t supposed to love, and felt her heart swell. Tears filled her own eyes, and she didn’t understand how her heart could contain such tremendous joy and torment at the same time. “What are we going to do, Lindsay?” Toni’s tears spilled over and ran down her cheeks.

“I don’t know.” Lindsay dropped her head into her hands and her shoulders shook as she sobbed. “I should have told you before, but I was afraid.” Lindsay’s voice was choked with emotion.

“Afraid of what?”

“I thought things could be different here...”

“What things?” Toni felt herself getting anxious.

“I thought I could change. I tried so hard...”

“What, Lindsay? What is it?”

“I was afraid you might not like me.”

“What’s not to like?” Toni’s heart hammered against her chest. She dropped her eyes to the ground, her voice barely more than a whisper. “I think I love you.” The silence that followed was overwhelming, and Toni wondered with growing horror if she had been dreadfully wrong. Her heart thundered in her ears. Her chest felt tight. She was filled with fear as she waited anxiously for Lindsay to say something.

“I think I love you, too.”

“What?” Toni looked up. “You do?” She couldn’t believe her ears. “Really?”

“I tried so hard not to, I really did. That’s one of the reasons that my family moved here.”

“What is?” Toni was confused.

“They found out about me and Amanda. My parents sent me to see a psychiatrist in the city. I tried to change. I knew they wanted me to, but I couldn’t stop seeing her.”

“What do you mean? I thought you had a boyfriend?”

“I did, and he was a really nice guy. I liked him a lot. I even had sex with him, but it was Mandy that I loved. My parents tried to keep us apart, but we found ways to be together. When a transfer came up in my dad’s company my parents thought it would be good for me to get away from Mandy and make a fresh start. They blamed Mandy; they said she’d seduced me, but I felt the same way about her.

When we moved to Farnham Falls I vowed that I would find a nice guy for a boyfriend. I wanted so much to start over, to be like everyone else, to make my parents happy...but then I met you. I knew a long time ago that what I felt for you was more than just friendship.” Lindsay looked away. “I tried to ignore how I felt, but when we were alone in the tent I couldn’t stand it any more...I’ve wanted to kiss you for such a long time.” Lindsay pulled at a hangnail and made her finger bleed. “I was so scared...but when you kissed me back, it seemed so right.” Lindsay’s voice was thick with emotion. “I don’t want to be gay, Toni...but I think I am.” Lindsay covered her face with her hands as fresh sobs shook her body. Toni moved closer, put her arm around Lindsay’s shoulder and drew her near. The weight of Lindsay’s head against her chest felt good, and Toni couldn’t help but agree that this seemed right. She held Lindsay and stroked her hair as she cried.

It hadn’t occurred to Toni that she might be gay, but now her mixed up feelings were beginning to make sense. When her friends started to express an interest in boys she had played along, but she wasn’t genuinely interested. She liked boys well enough, but she never felt the kind of attraction that her friends talked about. She thought that if she had a boyfriend perhaps that would change, but it didn’t, and she worried that there was something wrong with her. She told herself that she just hadn’t found the right guy, so when she finally started to date Shane, and she had some feelings of attraction for him, she was relieved. She imagined that they would marry someday, and she dreamed about her life as Mrs. Shane Cooper. She knew he loved her, and she had truly believed that she loved him, but now as she held Lindsay under the bleachers, she understood why she could never be Shane’s wife. She was overwhelmed with her feelings for

Lindsay, and she understood with a conviction she had never known before, that she was gay.

Toni was both elated and afraid. Lindsay had come into her life and upset her whole world, yet she had never felt happier. She knew that what lie ahead would not be easy, but as complicated as her life had suddenly become, she knew in her heart that she had to find her way down this thorny path. She bent over and tenderly kissed the top of Lindsay's head as she held her close. She didn't want this feeling to ever end, but when she detected the faint murmur of voices in the distance, her happiness was instantly replaced by alarm. She peered out between the wooden seats, and her heart lurched.

Shane scuffed his feet through the dirt on the ball field, making dusty clouds as he and Tom headed across the field. With his hands stuffed deep in his pockets, and his shoulders hunched, he watched the clouds billow around his ankles. Shane was worried. He had tried to study all weekend. He would write his final exam on Monday, and he needed to do well, but he just couldn't get his mind off Toni. They hadn't spoken since Friday at lunch when he had stormed out of the cafeteria. He had tried to call her several times on Saturday and he had left messages, but now it was Sunday afternoon and he still hadn't heard from her. He didn't understand how they had ended up in such a big fight. Tom interrupted his thoughts.

“So, where have you been all weekend?”

“I picked up a couple of extra shifts at the garage, and I've been trying to study for my exam tomorrow.”

Toni was looking for you on Friday night at the ball field. She said you guys had a fight, and she seemed kind of upset that you didn't show up.”

“She did?”

“Yeah. She even went home early.”

“Did she say anything else?”

“No. What do you think of Lindsay Jones? Do you think she’d go out with me?”

“A handsome stud like you?” Shane punched his friend in the shoulder. “Of course she would. You should ask her out.” Shane was pretty sure if Lindsay had a boyfriend, his problems with Toni would go away. “She didn’t say anything else?”

“No. Maybe I’ll ask Lindsay to the prom.” Shane and Tom headed toward the bleachers.

Toni and Lindsay watched with mounting horror as the boys approached. Toni held her breath, hoping they would walk right by. “What are we going to do?” Lindsay whispered. “What if they see us?”

“Shh! Maybe they won’t notice us if we’re quiet.” The girls were terrified of being discovered, and as the boys drew closer, Toni felt certain they’d be seen. She wondered what they’d say. Shane and Tom sat down on the edge of the bleachers, only inches from where the girls were hiding.

“Can you believe how hot it is today?” Tom pulled his t-shirt over his head. “Do you want to go sit in the shade under the bleachers?” Toni barely stifled a gasp as she and Lindsay locked wide eyes and tried to stay very still.

“Nah, it’s gross under there. Let’s just go to the bleachers on the other side. There’s some shade under the trees over there.” Shane and Tom got up and strolled across the infield, kicking up the dust as they walked.

Toni slowly exhaled the breath she'd been holding and watched until the boys sat down on the other side. Although she was curious to hear what they were saying, she was relieved that they had moved. Temporarily trapped, Toni lay her head down in Lindsay's lap as they waited for the boys to leave.

"So, what are you and Toni fighting about?"

"I don't know. Lately, she seems to be mad at me all the time, but I don't know what I did! Ever since Lindsay moved here, they spend all their time together. I've been trying to call her since Saturday. I know Lindsay was spending the weekend, but she should have called me back by now."

"Well, why don't we go over there?"

"No... I want to talk to Toni alone, and Lindsay might still be there."

"Well, since I am such a good friend, I suppose I could take it upon myself to occupy Lindsay so you and Toni can talk." Tom smirked.

"Well that's big of you, but once you see Lindsay you won't be able to string two words together." Shane knew how nervous Tom got around girls. He was also feeling a little vulnerable and nervous himself, and he wanted to speak to Toni when they were alone. "I'll try her again later, or maybe I'll catch up with her at school tomorrow. I really should go home and study for my chemistry exam."

"You don't need to study; you're one of the smartest guys around."

"That's because I study, doofus! You should try it."

Tom was smart, but he rarely took a book home, and he never studied; his grades were mediocre as a result. "Yeah, I suppose you're right. Maybe I'll try that some time. You sure you don't want to go over to Toni's?"

Shane nudged the dirt into a small pile with the toe of his sneaker. He knew he'd find it hard to concentrate on studying until he sorted things out with Toni, but he didn't want to do it with Tom and Lindsay around. "Yeah, I'm sure."

Toni lay on her back, her head resting in Lindsay's lap. Only ten minutes had passed, but it felt like a lot longer. Lindsay kept an eye on the guys, but they showed no sign of moving on, and as the minutes crawled by, the girls wondered how long they'd be trapped under the bleachers. After what seemed like hours, the guys finally stood up.

"Hey, Toni, I think the guys are leaving." Lindsay smiled, her eyes still red and puffy. Toni rolled over and got up on her knees so she could peer through the gap between the seats. The girls watched until the boys were out of sight and then crawled out into the late afternoon sun, blinking in the brightness.

"Let's take the path and cut through the church yard so we don't risk bumping into them." The girls walked across the field in silence. There were so many things that they needed to talk about, but Toni couldn't think of anything to say. When they finally entered the shelter of the trees, Toni took Lindsay's hand, but after only a few moments Lindsay pulled her hand away.

"Someone might come along." Lindsay sounded apologetic as she looked away. The girls continued to walk in silence until they arrived at the church yard a few minutes later. They stood awkwardly in the parking lot, not wanting to go their separate ways, and not really knowing how to part.

"Well, I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah, I'll see you at school." Lindsay smiled.

“Do you want to do something after school? We could go back to the bleachers.”

“Yeah, okay.” Lindsay kicked at a stone. Toni had never seen Lindsay seem so vulnerable and afraid; she always appeared confident and self-assured. Toni wanted so much to reach out and pull her close, to tell her how much she loved her, and assure her that everything would be alright... but she didn't. She picked a buzzie off her sleeve.

“Well, I guess I'll go then. My family always sits down together for supper on Sundays and Mom will be mad if I'm late.”

“Yeah, I should go, too. My parents are probably back from the city by now and they'll be wondering where I am.” Neither girl moved.

“I'll call you before I go to bed.” Toni offered. Lindsay's face lit up.

“Okay.” Lindsay turned toward her home. Toni watched her walk away and wondered how all of this was going to turn out. Finally, with her mind churning, she turned and headed in the direction of her own home.

## 9

Toni watched the numbers above the door of the elevator. She had a doozie of a story to tell Pam this time. She pushed the heavy door open. “Hi Shawna.”

Shawna looked up from her computer. “Hi Toni. You can go right in, Pam is expecting you.”

Toni thanked her and walked toward Pam’s open office door. Pam was sitting at her desk, making notes in a folder. Two steaming cups of coffee were waiting on the coffee table. Toni knocked on the door frame. “Hi there.”

Pam spun around in her chair and smiled. “Well, hello, Toni. Come on in and have a seat. I’ll be right with you.”

Toni sat down on the sofa and took a sip of her coffee. She picked up the small rake and drew crisscross designs in the sand. Just last week she had seen a similar sand tray in the mall and bought it for her desk. Toni made the sand smooth and drew a series

of waves, then wiped it clean again and made a never-ending spiral. She found it very soothing.

Pam stood up and joined Toni. “I drink way too much coffee at this job. I’m terribly addicted.” She took a sip then set her cup on the table. “I thought we should probably take some time today to talk about how you feel things have been going, and where you see things going from here. If I remember correctly, you came to see me at the urging of a friend who felt you were overworked and stressed in your job. Is that right?”

“Yes, things have been difficult at work, but I think I’m managing.”

“You’ve talked about some very difficult things...”

“Interestingly enough, I really didn’t think that I needed to talk about that stuff, but I have found that I feel more at peace with some of it.”

“You’re still finding your visits to be helpful, then?”

“Yes. I think telling those stories so many years later has helped me to put them in perspective and to put them away where they belong. You’ve been a good sounding board, affirming some things I already knew, and prodding me to make some changes. I think the visits have been helpful.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Pam smiled. “If you don’t mind, I’m just going to top up my coffee and then we can get started. Would you like your cup topped up?”

“No thanks, but you go ahead.” Toni settled into the now familiar sofa. As she waited for Pam to return, her mind wandered back to the events of the previous week.

*“Okay class, settle down. Today we’re going to go through the questions in the question box. Now remember, I will answer all of the questions as honestly as I can, unless they are completely and utterly inappropriate.”*

*Toni had been discussing puberty and sexuality issues with her students for the past couple of weeks and she always ended the unit by answering any questions that students had anonymously dropped into the question box during that time. Toni enjoyed reading through and answering the questions and they always had some interesting discussions as a result. She waited for the excited murmuring to stop.*

*“Okay, are we ready?” Toni could hear a pin drop as she looked out over the anxious faces before her and smiled. “Are you sure you can handle this?”*

*“We can if you can,” one of the boys at the back called out. The class erupted in laughter, and Toni waited again for them to settle.*

*“Okay, then,” Toni grinned, “let’s get started.” She reached into the box and pulled out the first question. The students waited anxiously as she unfolded the tiny scrap of paper. Toni read the question out loud. “Can a girl become pregnant if she hasn’t had her first period?” She set the paper down on her desk and looked up at the class. “It’s unlikely, but not impossible. Ovulation occurs about 14 days prior to menstrual bleeding, so there could be a couple of weeks prior to a girl’s very first period when she very well could become pregnant. However, if a girl has not yet started her period, she is much too young to be having sexual intercourse. There is no such thing as completely safe sex, and it is much better to wait until you are emotionally prepared to accept and deal with the many potential consequences of being sexually active.”*

*She reached into the box and drew out another question. “How do you know if you’ve had an orgasm?” Toni smiled as giggles erupted all over the room. She walked*

*around to the front of her desk and sat on the edge as she thought about how to answer. “Well...” she began, “a person will experience warm, tingly, excited feelings all through his or her body. Those feelings become more and more intense until they reach a climax. At that point the male will usually ejaculate and a female may experience some wetness in her vagina. Both males and females will feel strong sensations in the area around their genitals. When you’ve had an orgasm, you’ll probably know it.”*

*Toni turned around and reached across her desk to pull another question from the box.*

*“Are you speaking from experience?” A voice called out from the back.*

*Toni turned around to face the giggling class. “Who wants to know?” She had a pretty good idea who the voice belonged to, but no one spoke up. Toni gazed around the room as the laughter subsided and the students watched her closely to see how she would respond. “Sexual feelings are a normal, healthy part of every person’s life, however; asking about my **personal** sexual experience is highly inappropriate and demonstrates immaturity on the part of the person asking.”*

*Toni could feel the blood rise in her face, and she was grateful for the opportunity to momentarily turn her back on the class as she reached into the box and fished around for another question. She unfolded the slip of paper and read the question to herself. “Are you a lesbian?” Although it wasn’t unusual for that question to make its way into the box, it always filled her with dread, and her heart sped up ever so slightly. As she set the question aside and reached for another, she noticed several students whispering amongst themselves and she wondered if they were the ones who wanted to know.*

*Several more questions and answers went by without incident until a girl near the back of the room raised her hand and stood up. “Ms. Morgan, I’m not trying to be mean or anything, but we all really want to know.”*

*Toni’s heart skipped a beat as she turned toward the girl. She was a good student and a hard worker, and although they’d had a few run-ins over the year, Toni admired her confidence and her ability to speak her mind. Toni smiled as she tried to calm the anxiety she felt churning in the pit of her stomach. “What do you want to know, Sarah?”*

*Sarah looked Toni in the eye. “Are you a lesbian?”*

*An immediate hush fell over the room. Toni felt like all the air had been sucked out of her lungs and her heart began to pound. That question had been submitted to the question box on several occasions, but she had never been asked directly in front of an entire class. She felt the sweat begin to rise across her lip, and she tried to keep the fear she was feeling from registering on her face. She had been standing at the front of the room, leaning against her desk, but her knees suddenly felt wobbly and weak. She moved around behind her desk and sat down. Her mind raced. Had the girls told? She had been so confident that they wouldn’t. What was Sarah’s purpose in asking? How should she respond?*

*Toni looked at Sarah and tried to keep her voice calm and even. “Why do you really want to know?”*

*“It’s just that some kids think you are, and you know...” Sarah looked away. “...we were just curious.”*

*“Curiosity is not a very good reason to ask about somebody’s personal life...” Toni wondered if the hammering of her heart would give her away as it echoed in the*

*silence of the room, "...but I would like to respond to your question." The air in the room suddenly felt charged with electricity as the students' eyes opened wide and they leaned forward in unison. Time slowed to a crawl, and it seemed to Toni that the students held their collective breath, waiting on the edge of their seats for her response. She took a deep breath and began. "I wonder if you assume I'm a lesbian because I speak up about prejudice and discrimination against gay and lesbian people. Interestingly enough, nobody is asking if I am Jewish...or curious if there is African heritage in my family history, even though I also defend their right to equal treatment.*

*If I am a lesbian, and if I were to confirm that for you today, I could be putting myself at great risk..."*

*"Not from us, Ms. Morgan, not from us," several students sang out.*

*Toni smiled at their heartfelt responses, but she knew that she would not have the support of all her students, nor their parents. "I could be at risk because we know how gay and lesbian people are often treated in our society. I may very well experience prejudice and discrimination from students, from parents and even from the community. My job could be affected."*

*Toni's heart continued to pound against her chest. "On the other hand, if I were to confirm for you that I am heterosexual, I would feel like a hypocrite because I have worked hard all year long to help you understand that a person's sexuality should be a non-issue, that it shouldn't matter. By having this conversation we are making it an issue."*

*Toni took a deep breath. "For someone to tell you that there is nothing wrong with being gay, but then make sure that you know they are not gay themselves, seems*

*hypocritical to me.” Toni paused and looked out at the sea of earnest faces. She wanted so much to just say, “Yeah, I am,” but she knew she couldn’t.*

*“So, the answer to your question is...” Her heart rumbled against her chest as she drew another deep breath. “...it doesn’t matter.”*

*“Oh, come on, Ms. Morgan! You’re not going to tell us?”*

*“What difference would it make if I was? I already told you... it shouldn’t matter.”*

*“But that’s not...”*

*Their protests were interrupted by the bell. Toni was never more thankful for the end of a class in her entire life. As the last of the students spilled out into the hallway, she closed the door, turned out the lights and leaned her back against the wall; she needed a few minutes alone. She took several deep breaths as her heart rate slowly returned to normal, and then went back to her desk and sat quietly in the darkness, thinking about what she had just done.*

“I just couldn’t believe that she had the nerve to stand up in front of the entire class and ask me that. I was so unprepared for the question; you could have knocked me over with a feather! I can’t describe the panic I felt as the eyes of thirty silent students bore through me, waiting on the edge of their seats for my reaction. I wanted to tell them... I wanted to say, “Yeah, I am, and so what?” but I was afraid.”

“With good reason, Toni. You are right to say that there is great personal risk associated with a public school teacher making that kind of disclosure to her students. I’m not saying that you shouldn’t come out, you have to make that decision for yourself,

but you must be prepared for the potentially serious consequences. Remember, attitudes change slowly.”

“I know.” Toni sighed. “I’ve been over and over my response a thousand times in my head. I felt like I was scrambling at the time, but I think I handled it pretty well considering that I was on the spot and thinking fast, and I feel like I answered more or less honestly. I didn’t confirm anything either way, but I think those who needed to know got their answer.”

“I think you handled it amazingly well under the circumstances; I’m not sure that you could have come up with a more appropriate answer. It allowed you to be honest with yourself and with your students.”

“Well, not completely, but as honest as I felt I could be.”

“Did you ever find out if the girls had let things slip?”

“I decided not to ask them because I didn’t want them to feel that I was accusing them of anything. However, you know how kids talk...” Toni smiled, “...news travels fast! The girls heard about the conversation I’d had with the class, and they came to see me later in the day to assure me that they hadn’t told anyone. They were very worried that I thought maybe they had. The rumors may have begun to percolate simply because the school ‘lezbos’ were spending a fair bit of time with me.”

“Were there any consequences as a result of your conversation with the class?”

“Of course!” Toni groaned. “Before the day was over, the principal caught wind of what had happened, and he came to see me. He must have been waiting in the hallway because as soon as the final bell rang and the last student had filed out, he hurried into my room and shut the door. He cleared his throat a few times, and then looked at me with a worried expression on his face and said, ‘You didn’t really ‘come

out' to one of your classes, did you?' I explained what happened, and how I responded, but I hate that I had to. I resent feeling like I have to defend who I am."

"It doesn't sound like your principal was very supportive. Do you think it would have been an issue for him if you *had* come out to your students?"

"Oh yeah, he made that pretty clear, but he couched it in concerns about how that might create a difficult situation for me. He talked about how society just isn't ready to have an openly gay teacher in a middle school, about how the kids are just beginning to experience and understand their own sexuality, and about how the parents would call.... His relief was obvious."

Toni gazed out the window. "I think he would stand behind me if push came to shove," she looked back toward Pam, "but his message was clear: I am **not** to come out to my students. He doesn't want to have to deal with it."

"How did that make you feel?"

"I felt like I was being reprimanded, which made me angry, but what could I do? I felt bullied and devalued, and powerless to do anything about it..." Toni looked away, "...and I was afraid." Her eyes filled up with tears. "It felt pretty fucking shitty!" She reached for a tissue and blew her nose. "Some day I'm going to be an administrator who supports her teachers and stands up for equity issues."

Pam smiled. "You will make an outstanding administrator, Toni."

# 10

No sooner had Toni turned the doorknob than she heard her mother call from the kitchen. “Toni, is that you? Where have you been all afternoon? Supper’s on the table. Go wash up and tell your father that supper’s ready.” A few minutes later her family sat together at the table.

“Toni, can you pass the gravy please? Her father smiled as he reached for the dish. “Thank you, dear. So, what were you up to today?”

“Yeah, where did you go?” Moe’s tone was accusatory. “I was only on the phone for a few minutes and when I got off, you and Lindsay had disappeared. If you didn’t want me around you could’ve just said so, you didn’t have to go sneaking off.”

“Well, if you didn’t follow me around like a shadow, I wouldn’t have to sneak off. Why don’t you get your own friends?”

“Toni!” Her mother snapped. “How would you feel if Moe said something like that to you?”

“Yeah, why don’t you shut up? I’ve got plenty of friends...”

“Okay, girls, that’s enough. No fighting at the supper table.” Their father sounded stern.

Toni slumped down in her chair and scowled. Moe was really getting on her nerves. She just wished she’d mind her own damn business.

“What’s wrong, dear? You haven’t seemed very happy lately.”

“Nothing, Mom, I’m fine.” Toni sat up in her chair and made herself smile at her mother. She didn’t want her parents asking probing questions. “I guess I’m just stressed out about exams.” She nudged Moe’s foot under the table. “Sorry, Moe.”

“Have you been studying?” her mother asked.

“Yes.” She knew the material, but in light of recent events, she was having a hard time staying focused. She would try to review her notes before bed, even though her mind was more than a little preoccupied.

“Well, I’m sure you’ll do just fine, dear, you always do.” Toni’s mother smiled and patted her arm. “How about you, Moe? What exam do you write tomorrow?”

Toni picked up her fork and began to eat. She wondered how Lindsay was doing and wished she could see her. She was surprised by the ache she felt to be near her and to hold her. She had never felt that way about Shane. As soon as supper was over she’d try to sneak away and call.

“Toni...”

She could take the portable phone into her room.

“Toni!”

“Yeah?” Toni realized her mother had been speaking to her.

“You sure were off in outer space. Are you worried about your exams?”

“Yeah, a little.”

“You haven’t eaten much of your supper. Do you want something else?”

“No, thanks, Mom. It’s good; I’m just not very hungry.”

“Do you want some apple pie?”

“No, thanks.” Toni was anxious to leave the table. She felt like her parents kept looking at her, and it was making her uncomfortable. Besides, she really wanted to get to the phone. “May I be excused?”

“Are you sure you’re okay? Are you feeling alright?” Her mother looked worried.

“I’m fine, Mom. I just want to get upstairs and go over my notes for tomorrow’s exam.” She smiled at her mother. “Thanks for supper.” Toni took her dishes into the kitchen and loaded them into the dishwasher; she was glad that it was Moe’s turn to clear the table. She took the stairs two at a time and grabbed the portable phone from the table in the hallway as she went by. She sat down and crossed her legs on her bed; her heart was pounding. She pushed the numbers and waited anxiously as she listened to the phone ring on the other end.

“Hello?” Toni’s heart leapt at the sound of Lindsay’s voice.

“Hey...I miss you.”

“I miss you, too.” Lindsay whispered.

“I can hardly hear you. Are your parents around?”

“Yeah, we just finished supper, and I have to help my brother do the dishes.”

“We just finished, too, but it’s Moe’s turn to clean up and load the dishwasher.”

“You’re so lucky; I wish we had a dishwasher.”

“Yeah, its way better than washing and drying by hand.”

“I have to go, Toni, my dad’s yelling at me to get off the phone and come help. Call me back later.”

“Okay. Bye.”

“Bye.” Toni listened to the phone click on the other end. “I think I love you.” She lay back on her pillow, holding the phone close as if there was somehow still a connection to Lindsay. She thought about the night in the tent. It was only two days ago, but so much had happened in such a short time that it seemed like a lifetime. Recalling the moment that Lindsay first leaned over and kissed her on the lips sent tingles all over her body. Toni closed her eyes, remembering the way her body felt when Lindsay touched her. She squeezed her knees together and squirmed on her bed as her body began to feel warm.

“Hey, your favorite TV show is coming on.” Moe stuck her head in the door. Toni jumped.

“Get the fuck out of my room, Moe!” She threw a pillow in Moe’s direction.

“Geez! Take a friggin’ pill!” Moe slammed the door. Toni flopped her head back down on her pillow. If Moe didn’t stop barging into her room she was going to pound her. It was definitely time to get a lock. Toni got up and went to find her father.

Toni lay on her bed thinking about Lindsay. She had tried to call her, but the answering machine came on, so she left a message. She had called a few more times after that, but each time the machine clicked on so she hung up. In between calls she tried to study, but her mind kept wandering back to Lindsay. She wondered where she

was, and why she hadn't called back. Toni looked at the clock on her desk. 10:15 was probably too late to call on a school night, but she decided to try once more before she went to bed. She dialed Lindsay's number and hoped one of her parents didn't answer. Toni listened anxiously to the rings on the other end. After four rings she had decided she should hang up just as someone picked up the receiver. "Hello?" the voice on the other end panted, clearly out of breath.

"Uh... is Lindsay there?"

"This is Lindsay, stupid."

"Oh!" Toni giggled; she was so relieved that Lindsay had answered. "You don't sound like yourself. You sound funny."

"Well, I just ran up the stairs to get the phone, and I'm out of breath. I guess I'm not in as good shape as I thought."

"I think you're in pretty good shape." Toni blushed at her own boldness and was glad that Lindsay couldn't see. "I tried to call you earlier. I left a message..."

"Dad took us out for ice cream after supper, and we ran into his boss. He invited Mom and Dad over for a drink, so we're just getting home."

"But it's a school night, and you have exams tomorrow."

"I know... Dad apologized, but he didn't feel he could turn his boss down. It's okay, though. I'll look over my notes in the morning. I'm writing my Math exam tomorrow, and that's my best subject; I'm not too worried."

"Well, I just called to say goodnight...and to tell you that I wish you were here."

"Wouldn't it be good if we could sleep out in the tent every night?"

"Yeah, but then we wouldn't get any sleep." Toni giggled and blushed again. "I miss you. I've been thinking about you all day."

“I miss you, too.” Lindsay’s voice was hushed. “I have to go; my mom is on her way up the stairs. I’ll see you tomorrow at school.”

“Okay. Good night.” Toni wasn’t sure she could wait that long. Maybe if she went to sleep in a hurry she would see Lindsay in her dreams. She closed her eyes.

\* \* \*

Toni stretched as she climbed out from under the covers. She picked up the blanket from the foot of her bed and wrapped it around her shoulders, then sat in the chair near her bedroom window. As the wispy light of morning crept up the edge of a new day, she thought about how her life had changed over the past few days. She knew she would see Shane at school, and he would want to talk, but she didn’t know what to say. She didn’t want to hurt him. The prom was only a week away, maybe she shouldn’t say anything until school was out. She picked up her favorite pen and opened her journal.

*Monday, June 18*

*Dear Journal,*

*So much has happened in the past few days. I don’t even know where to begin.*

*I kissed Lindsay! Well, I guess I should say that she kissed me. It was so unexpected, and at first I was shocked, but her lips were so soft and my whole body was on fire. It felt exactly right and I didn’t want her to stop. I kissed her back!*

*Last night I lay awake in bed for what seemed like hours. I couldn’t stop thinking*

*about her, and I couldn't sleep. I can't wait to get to school to see her again. I'm afraid I'm in love...*

Toni closed her journal and watched as the pale blue and pink sky caught fire, creating a brilliant background against the dark silhouettes of the trees. The sleeping birds awoke and began their tribute to the day as the world outside her window was bathed in a rosy glow. The sunrise was spectacular. It was going to be a good day. Toni tucked her journal under the edge of her mattress, and went to have a shower.

She patted her hair with a towel as she stood in her room in front of a full length mirror. She dropped the towel on the floor and shook her hair loose. As she gazed in the mirror, she slid her housecoat over her shoulders and let it drop to the floor. She studied her reflection. She turned sideways and sucked in her belly as she rubbed her hand over the soft bulge, and examined the dimples in her butt. She was terribly self-conscious about the few extra pounds she carried, and she had a new commitment to lose some weight.

She moved to her closet and began the lengthy process of digging through all of the clothing she owned until she found just the right combination that didn't make her feel fat. It seemed even more important than ever that she look good today. She pulled shirt after shirt over her head, wiggled in and out of several pairs of jeans, looked at herself this way and that, until the reflection in the mirror finally smiled back.

# 11

Toni watched the numbers above the door of the elevator and wondered what she and Pam would find to talk about this time. She really didn't feel like she had much more to say, and Pam wasn't telling her anything she didn't already know. On the other hand, Toni doubted she would have done anything to lighten her load without the prodding that Pam provided. And besides that, Pam was a great listener, and Toni did enjoy their conversations. She opened the door. "Hi Shawna."

"Hi Toni. Pam asked me to send you in. She'll be right with you."

Toni sat down on the sofa and raked the sand. She had hardly finished her design when Pam came in with two cups of coffee. She handed one to Toni and sat down.

"Hey, Toni." Pam smiled. "It's good to see you. How've you been?"

“Pretty good. I’ve been trying really hard to learn how to say ‘no;’ I practice in the car on the way to work in the morning.” Toni grinned. “You’ll be glad to hear that I successfully declined the co-chair of the PTG position.” Although she felt guilty about backing out and she had found it hard to do at the time, she was pleased to be able to tell Pam how she had followed through.

“Good for you, Toni. How do you feel about that?”

“It was tough, but you were right, someone else eventually came forward and filled the vacancy. In retrospect, I’m glad I did it.”

“That’s wonderful.” Pam smiled warmly. “Did anyone from the school board ever respond to the harassment of the girls?”

“Not that I’m aware of. We sent the forms to the board as their policy indicates, but we don’t know what happened to them after that. I suppose they were filed somewhere. We had a couple of workshops at our student conference about gay and lesbian issues, and they were well attended. I’m not sure if that was because the students were interested in the topic or curious about the presenters, but the sessions went well, and I think the kids who attended left with a more balanced understanding of homosexuality. As far as I know, there haven’t been any further incidents of harassment.”

“What about the conversation with your class? Was there any fall-out from that?”

“There were some difficult moments, and lots of potential for disaster, but it’s been okay. I am so glad to have been able to support the girls, just by being myself. I feel like I was really able to make a difference for them.” Toni paused. “I don’t think I would do anything differently.”

“You must be relieved that things have worked out.” Pam smiled.

“I am, but I was disappointed by the administrative response to the whole situation, both at the school level and at the board level, and I felt powerless to do anything about it. I’m still fuming about the lack of support I felt from the principal.

The VP tried her best to be supportive, but I know she knocked heads with the principal about how all of this should have been handled.” Toni looked out the window and sighed. “I saw her in the hall one day and asked her how things were going. Her eyes filled up with tears, and she asked me to come into her office. As I shut the door behind me, she kicked the garbage can clear across her office then sat down at her desk and cried. She was so frustrated! She felt like she was swimming upstream and getting nowhere, and she was concerned that I thought she wasn’t doing anything. I also learned that the whole situation was deeply personal for her. She had a gay cousin who died of A.I.D.S., and she felt like she had failed us both. I assured her that I didn’t feel that way. Knowing that she stood behind me allowed me to find courage I didn’t know I had. I felt completely secure in her support.”

“That must have made her feel better.”

“I think so, and you know... it got me thinking, too. Her support made a huge difference for me, and ultimately for a lot of kids. We addressed homophobia at our school *only* because she insisted that it was unacceptable. Many schools don’t even deal with homophobic incidents, let alone make it part of a school wide conference in an effort to educate the entire school population. The administration really sets the tone for the culture of the school; imagine if that was all about social justice and equity? And imagine if you had two administrators on the same page? I want to be a person who can

help create the kind of community where diversity is truly valued and respected, and where teachers and students feel supported. I think I'm going to go into administration."

"You mentioned that last time, and I think you would make a wonderful administrator, but you realize that you will also probably often feel like you are swimming upstream."

"I've been swimming against the current for my entire life! At least as a school administrator, I might feel like all the energy I'm exerting is making a difference."

"It's a thankless job, Toni. You will always be wrestling with something or somebody, and there is a lot of administrivia that will get in the way of the work you want to do as a school leader. It can be exhausting."

"I'm sure it can, but teaching is exhausting, too. I might as well be an exhausted administrator and help to create a climate of mutual respect and equity for the entire school rather than just my own class. Anyway, if I don't try, I won't know. I can always go back to teaching if I don't like it."

"It sounds like you've already made up your mind."

"Well...in fact... I already went to the university and switched the focus of my Master's Degree to Educational Leadership, and I put my name forward to be included in the board training for potential administrators."

"Boy, you don't waste time once you make up your mind! I just hope the board realizes how lucky they are to have you."

"I don't know how lucky they'll feel if I begin to make waves." Toni grinned.

"Don't make waves too soon, Toni, and make sure you have a first-rate PFD before you rock *that* boat. You will be no good to anyone if you get in over your head and drown."

Toni knew that Pam was right, and although she never set out to stir things up, she had a hard time keeping her mouth shut, especially when it came to equity issues. Trouble and controversy seemed to follow her wherever she went. However, Toni was much less fearful about being in turbulent waters than she had been as a younger teacher. She had come to realize that although she deeply understood what it meant to be marginalized, she operated from a position of much more power and privilege than not. She had been raised in a family where she was well loved, and despite the difficulties she'd had as a result of coming out to her family, she'd had a privileged middle class upbringing. She had been privileged in her educational opportunities and professional choices as well. She had been teaching for almost 12 years, she had a permanent contract, there was human rights legislation in place to protect her, and she clearly understood her rights. She was aware of her cultural capital, and the power that gave her, and she strongly believed that she had a responsibility to capitalize on it for those who couldn't.

“I know... it seems that trouble finds me,” Toni shrugged her shoulders and grinned, “but I'm less afraid than I used to be, and I think the less afraid you are, the more responsibility you have to take up the political work of social justice and equity issues. I've always tried to do that kind of work in my classroom, and it has *always* made me nervous, but I do it anyway because I think it's important. Somewhere deep inside of me there's a conviction that I can't ignore, and even though the potential for disaster always seems to be lurking around the corner, I know I can depend on myself to stand up for what I believe. If push comes to shove, I know that I'll be there for myself. It doesn't mean that I'm not afraid, but somehow I know that I'm going to be all right.”

“I understand, Toni, and I agree, but I feel like I need to be the voice of caution here. Your reasons for wanting to go into administration are admirable, but don’t stick your neck out if there are irreparable consequences for your life. Don’t be reckless. Make sure you have something to fall back on and that the consequences are somewhat palatable.”

“I don’t think I’ve *ever* stuck my neck out, and therein lies some of my personal struggle. I’ve got social class, I’ve got status, and I’ve got power. Someone has to be first...someone has to stick their neck out. Why *shouldn’t* it be me?”

“Sometimes you can accomplish more by getting inside and agitating in small ways, like the speck of dirt that gets inside an oyster.” Pam smiled. “And you must remember, Toni, change happens slowly. If you try to push people too far, too fast, they will resist.”

“I understand what you’re saying Pam, and I appreciate your caution. I won’t do anything reckless but what I’ve come to realize is that ultimately, I have to be able to look myself in the mirror and say, ‘Can I live with you until we die?’”

# 12

Toni arrived at school a little early, hoping to see Lindsay before her exam began; however, as she hurried toward the front door, it was Shane who hurried out to meet her. In her preoccupation with Lindsay, she had forgotten that she had some things to sort out with him.

“Hey, Toni.” Shane looked tired and worried, and Toni’s heart went out to him. He was such a nice guy, and she did have feelings for him. “I tried to call you on the weekend. Didn’t you get my messages?”

“No. I was really busy studying all weekend,” she lied. Shane shuffled his feet, looking uncomfortable, and Toni felt badly. “Come on, Shane; let’s go someplace where we can talk.” Toni took his hand, and they walked outside toward one of the picnic tables that were scattered around the school grounds. She still didn’t know what she would say to him, and she anxiously hoped something would come to her quickly.

“Toni...” Shane looked at his hands. “I feel like you’re mad at me for something, but I’ve been wracking my brain all weekend, and I can’t figure out what I’ve done.” He twisted the strap on his back pack. “I love you so much, Toni...,” His voice became choked with emotion. “I thought you felt the same way....” He lifted his eyes to meet hers, and Toni was surprised to see his eyes brimming with tears. Her heart ached for him because she already knew how this story was going to end.

“I do love you, Shane.” That wasn’t a lie. She moved closer to him and put her arm around his shoulder. “I’m sorry. I’ve been a little edgy lately, with exams and graduation, trying to make plans for next year, and everything else. I’ve just been a little preoccupied these past few days.” That wasn’t a lie either. Toni knew in her heart that her relationship with Shane was over, but she just couldn’t break up with him right now. She would wait until after the prom.

Shane sniffed and wiped his face on the back of his sleeve. “Really?” He smiled.

“Really.” Toni smiled back and kissed his cheek. She hated that she was going to hurt him, but she knew that was the way it had to be. Shane leaned over and kissed her on the lips. Toni closed her eyes and tried hard to feel something, but all she could think about was how Lindsay was a much better kisser. She hoped that Lindsay didn’t walk by and see them.

Toni set down her pen and leaned back in her desk. It was a long exam, and she was one of the last ones to finish, but she felt confident that she’d done well. She picked up her bag, passed in her exam and walked down the hall to where Lindsay was writing

her math exam. She peeked in the window and saw Lindsay hunched over the paper on her desk.

Toni leaned against the wall to wait. She had hoped to see Lindsay before exams, but Shane was all over her, and she couldn't get away. It wasn't long before the door opened. Lindsay came out and turned down the hall in the opposite direction. Toni grabbed her bag and jumped up.

"Hey, Lindsay, wait up!" Lindsay turned around. Her face broke into a huge smile and her eyes danced. Toni felt suddenly shy.

"Toni, I didn't see you there. I was just going to see if you were still writing your exam. How did you do?"

"It was long, but it wasn't hard. I think I did well. How about you?"

"I think I aced it." She smiled at Toni. "Where were you this morning? I looked for you everywhere."

"Well, I need to talk to you about that. Do you want to go outside?"

"Sure. Did you talk to Shane?"

"Well, sort of."

"What does that mean?"

"I'll tell you about it outside." They found an empty picnic table at the back of the building and sat down across from each other. Toni wanted so much to reach across the table and take Lindsay's hand, but she had to settle for nudging her foot underneath.

Lindsay smiled and nudged back. "So what happened when you talked to Shane?" She took a bite of her sandwich.

"When I arrived at school this morning, Shane was waiting for me at the door."

“Is he still mad? Did you two work things out? You’re lucky to have such a nice boyfriend.”

Toni was confused. “Well, sort of. I wanted to tell him that we couldn’t keep seeing each other, but he was so sad. He even started to cry, and he told me that he loved me.”

“Why would you want to break up?”

Toni was more confused than ever. “I thought...you know...you and me were...well...”

“You know how I feel about you, Toni, but that can’t last forever. You and Shane are going to get married, remember? And I asked Tom to the prom this morning, and he accepted. Isn’t that great?”

Toni felt like she’d been hit in the stomach. “But I only want to be with you. I thought you felt the same way...”

“I do, Toni, but we can’t go to the prom together, and I didn’t want to go alone. Besides, we can’t marry each other.”

“Yes, we can. The law is changing in some places. I saw it on the news.”

“Yeah, but those people are freaks. We’re not like them.”

Toni couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She had imagined that she and Lindsay would spend the rest of their lives together, but clearly Lindsay had not imagined a similar future. “What are you talking about? I thought you told me you were...” Toni leaned across the table and whispered, “...gay?”

Lindsay’s eyes swelled with tears. “I don’t want to be gay, Toni. My parents sent me to a psychiatrist to be cured; they’ll be so upset, and everyone will think I’m weird and gross. They’ll treat me differently and call me names...” Tears spilled over

and dropped onto her sandwich. “Things were so hard in the city. I just don’t want to be gay.” Lindsay wiped her face on her sleeve.

Toni handed her a napkin. She wanted to take Lindsay in her arms and tell her that everything would be okay, but all she could do was capture her foot under the table. “It’ll be okay, Lindsay. We’ll figure things out.” Although she wasn’t sure how, she knew she couldn’t let Lindsay go that easily. “Let’s just wait until after the prom, and then we’ll figure out what to do.”

Lindsay nodded as she blew her nose on the napkin. “What happened with Shane?”

“I really wanted to tell him about us.” Lindsay’s eyes grew wide with alarm. “But I didn’t,” Toni added quickly. The relief on Lindsay’s face was clear.

“When he started to cry, I just couldn’t break up with him. I decided to wait until after the prom.”

“Are you really going to break up with him because of me?”

Toni couldn’t believe that Lindsay even had to ask. “Yes.” Her voice was quiet as she looked into Lindsay’s eyes. “I love Shane, I really do, but lately I’ve known that something wasn’t right.” She looked away. “I just didn’t know what that was until I met you.” She pulled the crusts off her half eaten sandwich. “Even then, I wasn’t sure what was going on until this past weekend. Nothing has ever felt more right.” Toni ventured a look at Lindsay and wondered if she should continue. Lindsay’s face was blotchy, and her eyes were swollen. Toni couldn’t tell anything from her expression. She decided to muster her courage and go on. “Ever since my friends started to become interested in guys, I knew I was different somehow, and now I realize it’s because I’m gay. My feelings finally make sense to me, Lindsay. I could never marry Shane and

still be happy. I want to marry you.” She had said the words out loud, and as unsettling as all this was, Toni also felt a sense of relief. She timidly raised her eyes to see how Lindsay had reacted to her words.

Lindsay was still sniffing and crying, but she smiled at Toni through her tears. Toni reached across the table without giving a second thought to who might see, and impulsively kissed the back of Lindsay’s hand. “We’ll work it out, you’ll see.” Lindsay pulled her hand away as she anxiously looked around, but when she realized that no one was there, she smiled and nodded. Encouraged, Toni asked, “Can you come over to my house after school?”

“I think so.” Lindsay blew her nose. “I’m pretty sure Mom is off today, so I won’t have to look after my little brother. I just have to call home and make sure.”

The girls finished eating their lunch as they made plans to meet after school. With only a few minutes left in the lunch hour, they cleaned up their garbage, gathered up their bags, and headed back to the building for their afternoon exam. Toni didn’t know how she was going to stay focused on her exam when she was so distracted by what was happening in her life. She’d really have to try and concentrate.

“Hey, wait up!” Both girls turned around to see Shane running down the path toward them. “I was looking for you. The Chemistry exam was tough, and I wrote through part of the lunch hour, but then I went looking for you. Where were you?” He caught up to the girls and threw his arm around Toni’s shoulder. “Hey, Lindsay.” Shane smiled; he was in a good mood. He leaned over and kissed Toni on the lips. Toni felt self-conscious about kissing in front of Lindsay. She gently pushed him away and smiled.

“Come on, Shane, let’s not be rude.” She jabbed him playfully in the ribs. Toni searched Lindsay’s face, but her expression was blank.

“Lindsay doesn’t mind, do you, Lindsay?” Shane cuffed her in the shoulder. Lindsay smiled at him but said nothing. Shane and Toni walked back to the building holding hands while Shane chattered away. The girls walked in silence.

\* \* \*

“Lindsay! Over here! Toni waited at the edge of the parking lot behind a tree. Let’s go before Shane sees us.”

Looking over her shoulder, Lindsay hurried to catch up with Toni. Shane was nowhere in sight, but she was sure he’d be looking for them.

Toni grabbed Lindsay’s hand and pulled her down the street. “Come on, let’s run.” Anxious to be out of sight of the school, they didn’t stop running until they were around the corner. Toni leaned against a tree, giggling and gasping for air. “I feel like we’re part of some big undercover conspiracy.”

“Well, we do have a big secret.” Lindsay wasn’t laughing.

Toni bent over and leaned her hands on her knees as she tried to catch her breath. She couldn’t argue there. “Yeah...I know, but we’ll figure it out. Come on; let’s go before he finds us.” More and more Toni wanted to tell their secret, to shout it from the rooftops. So she loved a girl? Big deal. Lots of people were gay, and the world had become a much more accepting place, especially in the city. After graduation they could even move to the city, get married and live happily ever after. Toni couldn’t help but smile as she played out the fantasy in her mind.

She wondered what Lindsay was thinking about and stole a look in her direction as they walked. Lindsay also appeared to be lost in thought, but she wasn't smiling. Her furrowed brow and worried expression brought Toni back to earth and she wondered how they would ever sort this out.

"Hi, Mom!" Toni took her lunch bag into the kitchen. "Lindsay came over for a while. We're going to study for our exams."

"Okay, dear. Does Lindsay's mother know she's here?"

"Yes."

"How were your exams today?"

"Fine. They were long, but they weren't hard."

"Would you girls like a snack?" Mrs. Morgan held out a tin of cookies.

They each took one. "Thanks. We're going upstairs to study now." Toni was anxious to get to her room and shut the door.

"How about you, Lindsay? How were your exams?"

"They were pretty good, Mrs. Morgan. They weren't too tough."

"Well, that's good. We have some pretty smart girls in our midst. Would you like to stay for supper, Lindsay?"

"Thanks, Mrs. Morgan, but my mom said I had to be home in time for supper."

"Well, maybe another time, then." Mrs. Morgan smiled at the girls as they helped themselves to another cookie and headed down the hall.

"I thought she'd never stop asking questions!" Toni grabbed her school bag from the front hall and dragged it up the stairs.

"Toni!" Mrs. Morgan called from the kitchen. "Pick up your school bag!"

“But it’s heavy!” Toni heaved her school bag over her shoulder and rolled her eyes at Lindsay. “What a nag.”

“Your mom is really nice, Toni.”

“Yeah, I know. Everyone says so.” They threw their school bags on the floor and sat down on Toni’s bed. For the past 24 hours Toni could think of little else besides when she and Lindsay would be alone again, but now that they were, she felt timid.

“Well...what do you want to do?”

“I thought we were going to study?” Lindsay smiled.

“Yeah...right...we were. I’ll just close the door so Moe doesn’t disturb our hard work.” Toni stood up and noticed that the tempo of her heartbeat had increased; it had been doing that a lot lately. She closed the door and locked it. Moe wouldn’t be barging in again. She sat down next to Lindsay on the edge of the bed as her heart began to drum against her chest. She wondered how hearts were able to beat so hard and still last a whole lifetime. Her leg tingled at the point where it touched Lindsay’s leg, and she wanted so much to kiss her, but she was unsure how to proceed. They sat for a moment in awkward silence. Finally, Toni offered her hand, palm up, and Lindsay took it. That was the only encouragement Toni needed. She spun around and sat cross-legged on the bed, facing Lindsay, as she squeezed her hand and gently caressed the skin. She lifted Lindsay’s hand to her lips and eagerly kissed her palm and her fingers.

Electricity traveled through Lindsay’s fingers all the way to the center of her body. She let her fingers explore Toni’s face, trace the soft skin of her lips, and then she took Toni’s face in her hands and pulled her close. Their lips met.

Toni’s body was on fire. She put her arms around Lindsay and pulled her down onto the bed into a passionate embrace. Her hands found their way under Lindsay’s

shirt and caressed the silky-smooth skin of her back. Toni's heart tapped a staccato against her chest and her breath quickened. The weight of Lindsay's body against her own was exquisite.

# 13

Toni rolled over and looked at the clock. 4:27 am. She hadn't slept well, but she didn't feel tired. She had recently accepted her first position as a vice-principal, and she was feeling more than a little nervous. Remembering Pam's words of caution, she vowed not to make any big waves. She closed her eyes and tried to count backward from 100, but her mind was already racing and thoughts about her first official day at her new job kept interrupting and making her lose her place. She knew she'd never get back to sleep, so she decided she might as well get up. Slipping out of bed quietly, she tip-toed into the bathroom.

She had already spent most of the past week at the school, and she had met a few of the teachers as well as the principal, but today she would introduce herself to the entire staff. She had a pretty good idea of what she wanted to say, but it was the delivery that worried her, and she had been rolling things around in her head for several

days. She wanted to come across as professional, but casual, hard-working, but laid-back, fair-minded, but firm...and she wasn't sure how to embody so many dichotomies in a brief introduction. She believed the old adage that you never get a second chance to make a first impression, and she didn't want to blow it. Most of all, she wanted the staff to know that she believed the most important part of her job was to support them and their work with students. She would do everything in her power to do whatever they needed in order to do their jobs well.

Toni stepped into the shower and let the hot water massage her shoulders and back. The school had been through a fair bit of change in the recent past, and she didn't want to stir things up. Although she knew that change was an inevitable and essential element of growth, she also understood that it was often difficult for people. Slow and steady was best. The school had received a new principal the year before, and Toni wanted to slide into her new position without creating any waves, at least not to begin with, and then maybe only a gentle ripple or two. She intended to have an open-door policy, to work hard at being a good listener, and to focus on building open, trusting relationships with students, staff and parents. If that was all that she was able to accomplish in her first year, she would be thrilled.

The principal was a lovely woman in her mid-50s whom Toni had liked right away. She knew Mary MacDonald by reputation only, but June knew her and had encouraged Toni to apply for the position, saying that they would make a marvelous team. There weren't very many female administrators at secondary school, and Toni felt fortunate to have the opportunity to work with and learn from Mary, who was well respected, competent, and seemed genuinely kind. She would have to remember to

thank June for once again pointing her in the right direction and nudging her along on her career path.

Her new school was a good-sized junior high in the heart of the city and it took in students from a wide area, including a large upper middle class community and a large low-income trailer park. The spread in socio-economics seemed to be the root of a number of on-going problems at the school. Toni believed that discipline should be an educational process rather than a punitive measure, and that was one change she did intend to make. She hoped that both students and staff would find her to be fair-minded and equitable.

Toni dried her hair with the towel and then wiped the steam off the mirror. She had turned 35 in July, but somehow she didn't feel old enough to be a vice-principal, and she felt a little awkward about being in a leadership and supervisory role with people who were already teaching when she was still a child. Many of the administrators in the school board were considerably older, and she hoped that her relatively young age would not be an issue for some of the more experienced teachers at the school. She hoped she was up for the challenge.

Toni looked at her reflection in the mirror. She had gone through 15 outfits, trying to find just the right combination that would convey a professional, but casual demeanor. She had settled on a pair of navy slacks and a soft yellow t-shirt with navy trim. She looked at her profile and sucked in her belly. If only she could lose those last few stubborn pounds. She slid her arms into a navy blazer and considered her reflection again. The jacket definitely dressed up the outfit, and Toni thought it was rather slimming. She smiled. Scooping up all of the abandoned items of clothing, she tiptoed into the bedroom and dumped them on the dresser. She would have to put them away

when she got home. Creeping down the stairs past her sleeping family, Toni headed toward the kitchen. Anxious to get to her new school, she filled a travel mug with coffee, grabbed a bagel, and headed to the car.

Toni pulled into the driveway and noticed that there were no other cars in the parking lot. She glanced at the clock on the dash. 6:58. No wonder. School didn't go in until 8:30, and she remembered Mary saying that she usually arrived around 7:30. She had intended to be early on her first day, but this was probably a bit much. Toni climbed out of her car and walked toward the building as she dug in her bag for the keys. Sliding the key into the keyhole, she peered through the window at the panel on the wall. She hoped she could remember how to turn off the alarm.

She set her bag on the chair next to her desk and sat down on the small sofa, her heart pounding slightly. It had been close, but she had remembered the code and managed to punch it in before the time ran out and the alarm sounded. She gazed around her new office. She wanted it to be an inviting place where both students and staff felt welcome and comfortable, and where it was okay to put your feet up and have a conversation. She would be dealing with a lot of discipline issues in her new role, and she knew that connecting with kids and building relationships was going to be crucial. Above her desk hung one of her favorite quotes by Pastor Martin Niemoller:

*First they came for the Communists, and I did not speak up,  
because I was not a Communist.*

*Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak up,  
because I was not a Trade Unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak up,  
because I was not a Jew,  
Then they came for me, and by that time --  
there was no one left to speak up for me.*

The quote reminded her how important it is to do the right thing, even when doing the right thing is extremely difficult. Toni smiled. Her office was a little small, but given the limitations of the space and available furniture, she felt like she had done a pretty good job.

Toni stood up and walked over to her desk. She sat in the office chair and twirled around, feeling a little at odds as to what she should do. She decided to take her lunch to the fridge, but as she stepped out into the main office area, she noticed Mary struggling through the doors with a heavy load. Mary carried several bags draped over her shoulder, two fruit trays, as well as a couple of boxes from the local bakery stacked one on top of the other in her arms, and a paper coffee cup between her teeth. Toni hurried out to meet her.

“Can I help?”

“Umhmm” Mary murmured around the cup as she handed Toni the things in her arms. Taking the cup out of her mouth she smiled. “Thanks, Toni. I was taking a lazy person’s load so I wouldn’t have to make two trips. I see that you remembered how to disable the alarm.”

“Yeah, but it was a little nerve-wracking.” Toni smiled.

“It’ll become second nature to you before long.” Mary fished for the key to her office, and then kicked the door open with her foot. “You can set those things on the table beside my desk.”

“What are they for?”

“Breakfast. It’s always good to feed the staff. I bought some juice yesterday, which is in the fridge, and we’ll put on some tea and coffee. Breakfast will be at 8:30 and the staff meeting will begin at 9:00.”

“What a nice way to begin the year.”

Mary grinned. “They’re less likely to complain if you feed them.” Her eyes twinkled. “That’s not really true, but it is one small way to let the staff know that I appreciate every thing they do. I try to provide snacks at every staff meeting.” Mary set her bags down on the floor. “Can you take the fruit over and put it in the fridge, while I get myself sorted out here?”

“Sure.” Toni picked up the fruit trays.

“When you come back we can go over the agenda for the meeting.” Mary reached out and patted Toni’s arm, smiling warmly. “I’m sure you’re feeling a little anxious about how the day will unfold.”

“Truth be told, I am.”

“It’ll be fine, Toni. The staff at this school is tremendous. I don’t think I’ve worked with a more dedicated group of professionals. Besides, I consider myself a pretty good judge of character and I’m absolutely certain that they are going to like working with you as much as I know I will.” Mary smiled.

“Thank you, Mary.” Toni felt herself begin to blush. Pleased to have something purposeful to do, she left in search of a fridge.

# 14

Toni looked at herself in her bedroom mirror and giggled. The hairdresser had swept her hair back and gathered it elegantly on top of her head with small white flowers, but she was still wearing cut-off jean shorts, a tank top and sandals. Her head didn't look like it belonged on her body, and the incongruence made her laugh.

Toni glanced at the clock on her dresser. It was 3 pm and Lindsay would be arriving any minute to get ready for the prom. The week had dragged by painfully slowly, and Toni was glad it was finally over. She and Lindsay had stolen a kiss here and there between studying, writing exams, and the graduation ceremony, but they hadn't been alone together since after school on Monday when they'd made-out in Toni's room. Toni heard the door bell ring and hurried downstairs.

“Come on in, Lindsay! Your hair looks beautiful!”

“Thank you Mrs. Morgan.” Lindsay came in carrying her dress in one hand, shoes in the other, and several bags over her shoulder. She looked up and smiled at Toni coming down the stairs.

Toni smiled back. “You do look beautiful, Lindsay. Here, let me help.” Toni took Lindsay’s dress as the girls headed upstairs to get ready.

“Let me know if you need anything, girls. I’ll send Moe up with a snack before long. You’ll probably need a little something to tide you over until you get to the restaurant.”

“That’s okay, Mom. We’ll come down for a snack. I wouldn’t want to get anything on my dress,” Toni called from the top of the stairs. She didn’t want Moe anywhere near her bedroom this afternoon. She hung Lindsay’s dress in the closet, then closed her bedroom door and locked it. She turned to look at Lindsay. “You look amazing!” She took Lindsay’s face in her hands and kissed her tenderly. “I wish you were my date tonight.”

“Toni, you know we couldn’t...”

“I know... but I wish things were different.” Toni sighed as she sat down on the edge of the bed. Lindsay sat down next to her and put her arm across Toni’s shoulder.

“You know how I feel about you; it’s just that I’m not as strong as you.”

Toni raised her moist eyes to look at Lindsay. “We could be strong together, Lindsay. I can be strong enough for both of us.”

Lindsay wiped away the tears that crept down Toni’s cheek. “Let’s just get through the prom, and then we’ll figure out what to do.” She smiled at Toni and kissed the salty trails still visible on her cheeks. “I do love you.”

Toni wrapped her arms around Lindsay and buried her face in her neck. They hung on to each other for several long moments, reluctant to let go. Finally Toni lifted her head and wiped her eyes. “Who knew that being in love could be so complicated? It should be the easiest, most wonderful thing in the world.” Toni wiped the tears from Lindsay’s cheeks. “Come on, we don’t want to be all red and puffy on our prom night.” Toni smiled and stood up. “Let’s get dressed.”

“Can you help me with my shirt?” Toni carefully pulled Lindsay’s t-shirt over her fancy hair-do and dropped it on the floor, and then Lindsay stood up and wiggled out of her shorts. Toni couldn’t help but admire Lindsay’s toned and athletic body.

“Here, help me with mine, too.” Toni sat down on the edge of the bed and raised her arms as Lindsay worked the tank top over her head without messing a single hair. With the shirt out of the way, Toni grabbed Lindsay around the middle and kissed her bare belly.

“Come on, now, Toni. We have to get ready.” Lindsay looked down at Toni and smiled; her eyes twinkled. Toni smiled back and her heart swelled with the love she felt for this girl.

“You’re right.” Toni kissed Lindsay’s belly button and stood up, suddenly self-conscious about the soft contours of her own body in the bold light of day. She lifted her housecoat from the hook on her closet door and covered herself. “Do you want a housecoat?”

“No, thanks.” Lindsay sat down at the mirror in her bra and underpants and began to apply her make-up. Toni wished she could feel as comfortable with her own body. Toni unlocked her door and went down the hall to Moe’s room where there was another chair, and carried it back to her room.

“Scoot over.” Toni set the chair next to Lindsay so they could share the mirror. “Can you believe we’re almost finished school forever?” Toni pulled a few stray hairs from under her eyebrows with a pair of tweezers.

“I know; it doesn’t seem real.” Lindsay carefully applied a thin layer of dark eyeliner. “I guess it’ll feel more real after tonight. Don’t you think it feels a little strange, too? I mean, I don’t remember a time when I wasn’t in school. I think I might miss it a little.”

Toni wasn’t going to miss school one bit. She couldn’t wait to leave high school behind and begin a new life with Lindsay. Both girls had been accepted to the college in the neighboring town, and although they both planned to live at home in order to save money, Toni secretly dreamed that they might move in together. She had been entertaining fantasies about their future together all week, and even though they hadn’t really discussed any plans, Toni felt certain they could work things out. Lindsay hadn’t said anything more about not wanting to be gay, and Toni felt confident that the love they felt for each other was strong enough to get them through the difficulties that she knew would inevitably arise.

“I’m not going to miss high school, and I think college is going to be awesome. Maybe we should see about getting an apartment together.” Toni snuck a peek at Lindsay’s reflection in the mirror.

“That would be so cool, but how would we pay for it?”

“We could get part-time jobs to pay the rent.” Toni’s enthusiasm bubbled over as she imagined a future filled with possibility and promise.

“I already have to get a part-time job to pay the tuition. My parents are helping me out as much as they can, but they can only pay my tuition for the first semester.”

“Well, we could work during first semester and save up to pay the rent in second semester. My tuition is paid for the year, so whatever I earn could go toward the rent. Between us we could do it.” Toni turned to look at Lindsay, filled with hope. “I know we could do it, Lindsay.”

“I don’t know...” Lindsay worried about a lot of things. She liked to plan things out in advance and be prepared. Spontaneity made her uncomfortable, but Toni barreled on, unable to see that she was pushing Lindsay up against a wall.

“Don’t you want to be together?” Toni furrowed her brow. She knew this was an unfair question, as she tried to play on Lindsay’s emotions and manipulate her decision. If only she could get Lindsay to agree, Toni knew she could make her happy.

“Of course, I want to be with you.” Lindsay lifted Toni’s chin. “I’m just scared, Toni. Everything is so uncertain. Aren’t you even a little scared?”

“Well, just a little.” Toni lied. She was terrified, but she knew what she wanted and being scared wasn’t going to stop her. “Let’s move in together. I love you so much! I know we can work things out.” Toni leaned toward Lindsay and gently kissed her on the lips; familiar sensations stirred in the center of her body as Lindsay responded.

Toni heard the doorknob turn a moment too late. She spun around to see Moe standing in the doorway with a tray of sandwiches and drinks, her mouth open and her eyes wide. “Damn it, Moe! Get the hell out!” Toni charged toward the door, shoving Moe into the hallway.

“Hey!” Moe stumbled back as she struggled to balance the items on the tray.

“I told you to stay the fuck out of my room!” Even as she said the words, Toni knew that it wasn’t really Moe’s fault. She slammed the door and locked it.

“Oh, my god!” Lindsay stood near the bed, wringing her hands. “What are we going to do, Toni? She saw us!” Tears sprang to Lindsay’s eyes and spilled over, dragging mascara across her cheeks. “You have to go talk to her. What if she tells?”

“It’s okay, Lindsay. I’ll talk to Moe.” Toni reached out to comfort her.

“It’s not okay!” Lindsay wheeled around, her eyes wide with fear. “I can’t go through this again.” She sat down on the edge of the bed as sobs wracked her body.

Tears sprang to Toni’s eyes, too, but not for the same reasons. In that split second she felt Lindsay pull away and slip beyond her reach. Toni’s heart ached. She wished she could turn back the clock. If only she had remembered to lock the door after she had gone for the chair. She desperately wanted to take Lindsay in her arms and assure her that everything would be fine. She also knew she needed to speak to Moe; she had to make her understand. Toni stood there, looking at Lindsay as the tears rolled down her cheeks; she didn’t know what to do.

“Go speak to her, Toni. Tell her that it was all a mistake. Tell her that we were just practicing. Tell her something!” Desperation crept into Lindsay’s voice.

Toni felt her world begin to crumble, and she felt helpless to prevent it. Her love for Lindsay was real, and nothing in her life felt *more* right. It certainly wasn’t a mistake, and she wouldn’t say it was. If only she could make Moe understand, maybe things would be okay. Toni knelt down on the floor in front of Lindsay. “It’ll be okay, Lindsay. Please don’t cry,” Toni pleaded through her tears. “You’ll see; I’m going to fix it.” She stood up and wiped her eyes, then hurried off to find Moe.

Toni found Moe sitting on the bed in her room, still holding the tray of food and drinks their mother had asked her to deliver. Toni knocked on the door casing. “Can I come in?” Moe nodded. Toni’s heart pounded as she shut the door. She took the tray

from Moe and set it on the dresser, then sat down next to Moe on the bed. “I don’t know where to begin.” Fresh tears filled her eyes.

“Try the beginning!” Moe snapped, anger flashing in her eyes as they filled with tears. “What the hell were you two doing?”

Toni took a deep breath and looked at Moe. “I think I might be gay.”

“Don’t say that!” Moe stood up and walked across the room.

“Moe, please, I need you to understand.” Tears streamed down her face. “I didn’t just decide to be this way. I’ve always felt that I was different than everyone else, that I didn’t fit in, but I didn’t know why. I thought there was something wrong with me because I wasn’t interested in guys like the other girls.”

“What about Shane?”

“Shane was the first guy that I had any feelings for, and I thought maybe I loved him, but when Lindsay moved here, everything changed. At first I didn’t know what was going on. My emotions were up and down and I didn’t understand what was happening to me, but when I finally realized that I was in love with Lindsay, everything else made sense.”

“It’s all Lindsay’s fault. She never should have moved here.”

“It’s not Lindsay’s fault, Moe. I was a square peg trying to fit into a round hole. I felt like I didn’t fit for a long time, I just didn’t know why. Lindsay simply helped me realize what I had been trying to figure out anyway. I’m...I’m... gay.” Toni looked at her hands. The words were harder to say than she thought. “For the first time in my life, I feel like this fits. It feels right.”

“But, how do you know?”

“I don’t know; I just do.” Toni reached for a tissue. “How do you know you’re *not* gay?”

“I know I’m not!” Moe snapped.

“But *how* do you know?”

Moe ignored the question. “But what about Shane, Toni? Does he know?”

Toni hung her head. “No. I haven’t told him yet. I know he’s going to be hurt, and I want to wait until after the prom. I’ll tell him tomorrow.” Toni’s heart ached for Shane, but she knew it couldn’t be any other way.

“That’s not fair! You should have told him right away.”

“I couldn’t, Moe. I had to be sure myself, and I don’t want to ruin his prom night.” Toni stood up and walked toward Moe. “I need you to understand.”

“Well, I don’t!” Tears spilled over and ran down her cheeks. “You were kissing a girl! That’s so gross!”

The disgust in Moe’s voice caused a stabbing pain in Toni’s chest. “But I love her, Moe.” Toni’s words were barely more than a whisper. “Please...” She reached out and touched Moe’s arm. “I need you to be on my side.” Fresh tears welled up in Toni’s eyes.

“Don’t touch me, Toni.” Moe jerked her arm away. “Just leave me alone.”

“Okay, okay,” Toni sighed. “But please don’t tell anyone, Moe. Lindsay’s freaking out because you saw us and that would just make everything so much worse. I just want to get through the prom tonight, and then I’ll figure out what to do.”

“Well, you have to tell Mom and Dad.”

“I will, but I need to think about it first. Please don’t tell.”

“Okay, I won’t. Now just get out of my room.”

Reluctantly, Toni turned and left. She had hoped for a different reaction, but at least Moe had agreed to keep the secret to herself. Things were not going as Toni had planned.

Toni took a deep breath, and turned the doorknob. She closed the door quietly and locked it behind her. If only she had remembered to do that earlier. Lindsay had put on her prom dress and was sitting at the dresser in front of the mirror. Her eyes were swollen and her face was blotchy from crying, but she was no longer sobbing. Toni hoped that was a good sign. She pulled the chair over next to Lindsay and looked at her reflection in the mirror. “Everything’s going to be okay, Lindsay. Moe promised that she wouldn’t tell.”

“What’s to tell? We were just getting ready for our big date tonight. I bet the guys will look really handsome in their suits.” Lindsay continued to re-apply her mascara.

“What are you talking about?” Toni’s heart filled with dread.

Tears brimmed in Lindsay’s eyes and spilled over onto the dresser. “Damn it, Toni!” She reached for a tissue and dabbed at the black streaks that ran down her cheeks. “I just can’t do this. I’m sorry; I’m not as strong as you.”

“Lindsay, don’t say that. Please...we can work things out.” The tears ran freely down Toni’s cheeks now. “I know we can.” Toni knelt on the floor in front of Lindsay and looked up at her through tear-filled eyes. “I love you.”

Lindsay closed her eyes and tenderly kissed Toni’s forehead. “I love you, too,” she whispered, her voice barely audible. Toni’s heart was filled with relief as she clutched those three words close to her chest and hung on. Lindsay touched her cheek.

“Let’s get ready for the prom. The guys will be here to pick us up before long, and I have to re-do my make up again!” She smiled at Toni as she dabbed at her swollen eyes. “Besides, we can’t go out looking like this!”

“You’re right.” Toni forced a smile as she stood up to put on her dress. One thing at a time. Going to the prom with Shane was the last thing she wanted to do, but the guys would arrive in less than an hour, and they needed to get ready. Toni squirmed into her dress then sat down next to Lindsay at the mirror to apply her make-up. All she really wanted to do was to hold Lindsay in her arms and reassure her that things would work out. She wasn’t sure how, but she knew things would be easier if they left Farnham Falls. She stole a sideways glance at Lindsay and wondered if she could convince her to ditch the prom and catch the bus to the city. Toni sighed; she already knew the answer to that question. The girls finished getting ready as they put the final touches on their makeup in silence, each lost in her own thoughts.

Finally finished, Lindsay brushed a stray hair off the front of her dress and stood up. Time, and some carefully applied make-up, concealed the fact that she had been crying. Toni’s gaze followed her as she walked across the room to the full length mirror; she moved with such grace and ease that she almost seemed to float, and Toni was certain she had never seen anyone more beautiful. Toni stood up and teetered on her heels, wishing she could wear her sandals. “You look amazing, Lindsay!”

Lindsay smiled as Toni found her balance. “So do you, but you better practice walking in those shoes.” Toni wobbled toward Lindsay. She stood behind her, looking over her shoulder into the mirror and vowed that if she made it through the whole night without falling over she would never wear heels again. She put her hands on Lindsay’s waist to steady herself and smiled. “See, I can do it.”

Lindsay smiled back. “Hopefully you won’t break an ankle.”

”My thoughts exactly.” Impulsively, Toni leaned over and kissed the smooth, sensitive skin on Lindsay’s neck. Lindsay stretched her neck to the side as a sigh of pleasure escaped from her lips.

“Toni, we can’t...” Toni continued to kiss her way toward Lindsay’s ear.

“Toni...” Lindsay couldn’t stand it any longer. She turned around and wrapped her arms around Toni’s neck. Toni’s heart soared. Lindsay’s kiss told her everything she needed to know. However, a split second later, their kiss was interrupted by the doorbell.

“Damn!” Toni muttered. She really didn’t want to go to the prom.

Lindsay quickly checked her make-up in the mirror and touched up her lipstick; Toni did the same. Lindsay picked up her sweater and her purse from the bed and turned to face Toni. “Well, here we go, the biggest night of our lives.”

Toni didn’t think so. “Let’s just get through it.” She leaned toward Lindsay to kiss her cheek, but she turned away.

“Come on, Toni, the guys are waiting.”

The girls walked past Moe’s closed door toward the stairs as Tom let out a long, low whistle. Mr. and Mrs. Morgan stood beside the boys in the entry and watched the girls come down the stairs. When they reached the bottom, Shane reached for Toni’s hand. “You look amazing!”

“You don’t look so bad yourself.” Toni smiled. Both Shane and Tom looked very grown up and handsome in their suits and ties, and Toni felt a pang of guilt about the charade that was about to unfold.

“You all look simply splendid!” Mrs. Morgan gushed. “Your father wants to take a picture of the four of you before you go. Come stand over here beside this plant.” Shane put his arm around Toni’s shoulder and pulled her close. Following Shane’s lead, Tom did the same. “What handsome couples you make! I wonder where Moe is. She should come and see how nice you look. Moe!” Mrs. Morgan called up the stairs.

“It’s okay Mom, she doesn’t need to come down.” Toni replied quickly. “I think she has a headache.”

“She didn’t mention anything about a headache. Moe!” Moe’s door opened. “Are you okay, dear? Toni says you have a headache.” Toni held her breath, hoping that Moe would go along.

“Yeah, just a bit. I think my allergies are acting up, and my eyes are a little itchy.” Moe leaned over the balcony rail, but didn’t come down the stairs. Toni thought her eyes still looked a little puffy from crying, and she was grateful for Moe’s quick thinking. She would have to remember to thank her later for covering.

“You should take your anti-histamine.”

“I already did. It should be kicking in soon.” Moe smiled at her mother.

“Well, that’s good, dear. Don’t Toni and her friends look nice?”

“They do.” Moe’s eyes met Toni’s. “Picture perfect couples.” Toni couldn’t stand Moe’s gaze and had to look away.

“We thought so, too.” Mrs. Morgan smiled at the girls and their dates as Mr. Morgan snapped several more photos.

“We better be going, Mrs. Morgan. My dad is waiting outside in the car to drive us to the restaurant.”

“Good heavens, Shane! You should have brought him in.”

“That’s okay. He agreed to be the chauffeur tonight, so he’s staying in the car. He brought some things to keep him busy, and he even put on a suit so he would look the part.” Shane smiled warmly at Mrs. Morgan, who was pleased that Toni had such a pleasant, well-mannered boyfriend.

“Well, that’s very nice of him. I guess you better not keep him waiting any longer than. Have fun.”

As the girls headed toward the door, Toni glanced over her shoulder at Moe. Their eyes met briefly, and she hoped Moe knew how grateful she was. She made her way carefully down the front stairs toward the car, thankful that she didn’t have to wear heels very often. Shane held the door open as they piled into the back of the van.

“Where to, ladies and gentlemen?” Shane’s dad looked very official.

“To the best restaurant in town, Antonio! We are having a celebration!” Tom and Lindsay laughed at Shane’s Italian accent, but Toni didn’t feel much like laughing. Since there was only one restaurant in town, she knew they would see many of their classmates there, and she really didn’t feel like socializing. She wished she could have just stayed home. To be honest, she didn’t feel much like celebrating, either.

# 15

Toni sat back in her chair and sighed. She couldn't believe it was already mid-November. She had been working hard to build solid, trusting relationships with students, staff and the community, but she was having a hard time with one boy in particular.

Raymond Bishop was a grade nine student who lived in the trailer park with his mother and three younger siblings. He was a capable boy with a good deal of potential, but he continually acted up in class, and his teachers were losing patience with him. His mother was doing her best to raise four children on her own with only the income she received from welfare. Toni didn't question that she loved her children and wanted what was best for them, but she was at the school a lot, and she was beginning to make a nuisance of herself.

There had just been a call to the office to say that Raymond had been kicked out of class for the third time today. This was his last chance. Toni had no choice but to suspend him, and she knew that a tornado was about to come down on her head as a result.

“Raymond is here.” The secretary stood in the doorway.

“Thank you, Karen. Could you send him in?”

Raymond shuffled to the door.

“Come on in Ray.” She smiled at him. “Sit down on the sofa for a minute.”

Toni stuck her head into the outer office. “Karen, can you see if you can get Raymond’s mother on the phone?” Toni went to her desk and picked up a pad of paper and a pen which she handed to Raymond. “I want you to write down exactly what happened that resulted in you being kicked out of class.”

“I didn’t do nothing. That fucking Mr. Benton just hates my guts.”

“That’s not helpful, Ray. Do you need a minute to calm down?”

“I told you, I didn’t do nothing.”

“I’m pretty sure that Mr. Benton didn’t send you out of class for no reason. You know that I try really hard to be fair, so I will collect as much information from as many people as I can in order to put together a complete picture of what happened. This is your opportunity to tell your side of things, but I need you to be honest about what happened. We can’t fix the problem if we don’t know what it is.” Toni stood up. “You write down your version, Ray, and I’ll be right back.”

Toni stuck her head in Mary’s office. “Could you go up and cover Jack’s class for a few minutes? Raymond Bishop has been kicked out of class again and I want to talk to Jack before his mother arrives.”

Mary stood up and gave Toni a knowing look. "I'll send him right down."

Excuse me, Ms. Morgan," the secretary interrupted. "Cheryl Bishop is on the phone. Do you want me to transfer the call to your office?"

"No, I'll take it here." Toni took the receiver from Karen. "Hello, Ms. Bishop. It's Toni Morgan. Raymond has been kicked out of class for the third time this morning. Is it possible for you to come up to the school to discuss the situation?" There was a pause as Toni listened to the voice on the other end. "I'm not sure, but I'm going to speak to his teachers now. Thank you, that will be fine. I'll see you then." Toni handed the phone back to Karen. "Can you let me know when she arrives and just ask her to take a seat? I'll be with her as soon as I can."

Toni felt she had gathered enough information and had a pretty clear idea of what had happened. She was ready to speak to Raymond's mother. She stuck her head into the main office area and smiled. "Thanks for coming, Ms. Bishop. Come on in." Toni motioned for her to have a seat on the sofa next to Raymond. "I'm going to tell your mother what I know, Raymond. You can jump in if I leave anything out or get anything wrong."

Toni looked at her notes. "Another student addressed Ray by saying, 'Hey, what's up nigger?'" Understandably, Raymond took offense to this, and shoved the other boy, knocking him over a desk, and yelling that he was going to beat his 'fucking white face to a pulp.' The teacher didn't hear the other boy's comment, but sent Raymond to the office for his outburst. This made Ray even angrier, and he proceeded to swear at Mr. Benton."

Cheryl Bishop looked at her son. "Is that true, Ray?"

“Yes.” Ray hung his head, “But he called me a nigger, Mom!”

Toni jumped in. “The other student says he didn’t mean anything by it. He claims he has heard Ray and his friends greet each other in the same way, and he thought it was okay.”

Cheryl Bishop’s eyes flashed with anger. “So you’re going to take that boy’s word over Raymond’s?”

“It’s not about believing one person over another, Ms. Bishop. Raymond’s outburst was unacceptable, regardless of his reasons. Actually, this is the third time that Raymond has been kicked out of class this morning, so he is being suspended for the rest of the day.”

“Just fucking lovely! What about the other boy?”

Toni’s heart rate began to quicken. “He will be disciplined and educated about his inappropriate use of that word. However, it is difficult to explain that it is okay for some to use that word and not others. If the word is offensive, no one should use it, including Ray and his friends.”

“Is the other boy being suspended?”

“I can’t discuss that with you. This meeting is about Raymond and his behavior. In fact, Raymond has been acting out all morning, and I was actually wondering if there is something else going on. Do you know if there is something upsetting him?”

Cheryl Bishop snapped her head around and glared at Toni. “Isn’t it enough that he has to go to this fucking racist school?”

Toni’s heart began to pound. “Just a minute Ms. Bishop, I need to be sure I’ve got this straight. Are you calling me a racist?”

“This is fucking bullshit! You’re a part of this school; you’re all a bunch of fucking racist pigs.” She stood up to leave.

The hairs on the back of Toni’s neck stood up, and she couldn’t help but feel defensive. She stood up, too. “Just hold on Ms. Bishop, I need for you to explain to me how this is racist, because I don’t get it. Help me understand.”

“My son gets called a racist name, and he’s the one who is suspended?”

“He is being suspended because of his violent reaction. I have a responsibility to enforce the school board policy to protect *all* of the people in this building and keep them safe. It is also my job to ensure that your child is not creating such a disturbance as to prevent others from learning. Ray has jeopardized our safe learning environment several times today, and he cannot come back to school until we come up with a plan to ensure that this won’t happen again.”

Cheryl Bishop sat back down on the sofa as her eyes filled with tears.

Toni’s voice softened, and she sat down as well. “Ray must take responsibility for his own actions. If somebody makes him angry, Ray still has a choice about how he will respond, and if he doesn’t learn to control his anger, he will find himself getting into more and more serious trouble.” Toni sighed. “You have a choice, too. It is your job to make sure that Raymond learns, and he can’t learn if he is suspended. You have a right to appeal my decision. However, I think you’ll find that the decision to suspend Raymond is within the school board policies, and that I have applied the policy fairly.”

Cheryl Bishop sighed, and although she was probably not more than 35, she looked much older. “Let’s go, Raymond.” She stood up and left Toni’s office as Raymond shuffled along behind. Toni’s heart ached as she watched them go.

# 16

As Toni predicted, the restaurant was filled with their bubbly classmates; laughter and energy filled the air. Like most graduating seniors, they were thrilled to be celebrating this milestone in their lives. The host escorted them to their booth and left them to browse the menus.

Out of the corner of her eye, Toni noticed Lindsay shift on the bench. It was a subtle shift, but it brought her a little closer to Tom, and Toni was sure their legs must be touching. Shane slid across the bench and draped his arm over Toni's shoulders. The girls' eyes met, and Toni desperately wished she knew what Lindsay was thinking.

“Good evening, folks. On behalf of the owner, we would like to extend our congratulations on your graduation this evening. Drinks are on the house tonight.” The waiter set down four wine glasses filled with sparkling lemonade. “I'll be back shortly to take your order.”

“Well, in that case, I think we should have a toast.” Shane lifted his glass, and the others followed. “To the best girlfriend,” Shane beamed at Toni, “and the best friends any guy could ever hope to have. Here’s to the beginning of the rest of our lives.” They clinked glasses and took a drink. Shane set his glass on the table and leaned toward Toni for a kiss. Feeling uncomfortable, she gave him a quick little peck as she glanced in Lindsay’s direction. Their eyes met briefly, before Lindsay turned her attention toward Tom.

“You look so handsome, tonight, Tom.” Lindsay made no attempt to disguise her unabashed flirting as she scooted even closer to Tom.

Toni couldn’t believe it; Lindsay was practically sitting in his lap. She nudged Lindsay’s foot under the table, her eyes wide as she tried to silently communicate the questions that were galloping through her mind. What the hell was Lindsay doing? Toni had not been prepared for how hard it would be to see Lindsay with someone else, but to watch her boldly flirting with Tom was torturous. She lifted her glass and took a long swallow, wishing it was wine. Drinking wasn’t really her thing, but she thought she might *need* a drink or two before this night was over.

Lindsay turned to Tom and smiled sweetly. “Can you let me out, Tom? I have to go freshen up.” Tom stood up to let Lindsay slide out of the booth.

Not without me, Toni thought to herself, as she practically pushed Shane off the bench in her hurry. “That’s a good idea. Wait for me, Lindsay; I have to go, too.”

“It must be a real emergency,” Shane laughed as he scrambled to stand up.

“Thanks, Shane,” Toni smiled, “sorry about that.” She looked at Lindsay. “It is a bit of an emergency.” Toni hurried to catch up with Lindsay who had already started

walking, and grabbed her arm. “What are you doing, Lindsay? You can’t lead Tom on like that! Besides, I can’t stand watching you fall all over him.”

“Be quiet, Toni, someone will hear you,” Lindsay hissed as she pulled her arm away from Toni’s grasp.

When they arrived at the bathroom, Toni was relieved to discover that no one else was there, and as soon as the door was closed, Toni asked again, “What are you doing out there?”

“I’m just having some fun, Toni, and so should you.”

Toni’s eyes brimmed with tears. “It’s not fun to watch you falling all over Tom. I can’t stand it!”

“Oh come on, Toni. Lighten up! It’s our prom night. We should be having the time of our lives,” Lindsay insisted as she leaned toward the mirror and touched up her lipstick. She turned toward Toni and smiled. “Come on, cheer up.” Lindsay touched Toni’s cheek. “The guys are going to start asking questions. We can sort things out tomorrow. Let’s go see if our meals have arrived.”

Lindsay opened the door, and Toni followed her out of the bathroom, blinking back tears. Lindsay had been so nonchalant about the whole situation that Toni felt worse than before.

\* \* \*

Shane’s dad pulled up to the front of the school and the kids piled out. The restaurant had been packed, and it took a long time before they were served. While they waited, Toni was forced to watch Lindsay fall all over Tom, and she was feeling

tremendously jealous. She scowled as Tom helped Lindsay out of the van. He had been fawning over her all evening, and Lindsay was lapping it up, which made him fawn all the more. Toni thought it was sickening, especially since she knew it was all a sham. Shane offered his hand, and Toni accepted as she carefully climbed out of the van. She had gotten used to walking in the heels, but climbing was another thing.

Shane stuck his head in the door. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Have you got the cab fare I gave you to get home?”

“Got it.”

“Okay, then. You guys have a great time.”

Shane pulled the sliding door closed and waved at his father. He turned to Toni. “I’m so glad we worked things out.” He beamed at her, and she tried to smile back through a pang of guilt. “You look so beautiful tonight. I’m going to be the luckiest guy at the prom.” He leaned over and kissed her on the lips, and it occurred to Toni that he was a genuinely nice guy. He smiled at her broadly. “Let’s go.” As they walked toward the doors of the school holding hands, Toni couldn’t help notice that Lindsay and Tom were walking arm in arm. She couldn’t wait for this night to be over.

Shane held the door, and Toni walked into a tropical jungle. Large, leafy plants completely concealed the brick walls of the foyer and surrounded a small waterfall that cascaded over glistening stones in the corner. Birds sang and crickets chirped to the soft lilting beat of Jamaican music in the background. Several large palm trees created a canopy over the doorway into the gymnasium. Toni was impressed. The prom committee had put a lot of effort into making the scene look authentic, and she truly felt like she had entered another world. Toni and Shane ducked under the canopy of trees. As they headed toward the gym, Toni reached her hand out to move a palm frond aside,

and came face to face with a large snake hanging from the tree. Startled, she jumped back, banging into Shane as a wild squeal leapt from her lips. Shane roared with laughter as Toni clutched her heart.

“Holy shit! That’s a little too authentic.” Toni giggled, thinking of something other than Lindsay for the first time all evening. She looked at Shane who was still laughing and gave him a playful nudge. “It wasn’t that funny!”

“Yes, it was!” Shane tried to catch his breath. “Someone really got you good. Too bad we didn’t have that on camera!”

Toni smiled. It was pretty funny. She took Shane’s hand. “Okay, let’s try again, but this time you better protect me as we travel through the jungle.” They ducked under the palm leaves and entered a tropical paradise. The sun dipped into the ocean on the far wall of the gymnasium, as it threw an orange glow across turquoise water and a twilight sky. The silhouette of a sailboat was visible on the horizon. Toni could even hear the sound of waves gently lapping against the shore. A load of sand had been dumped on the floor just below the scene on the wall, and if you took off your shoes, it looked as if you might even be able to walk right into the ocean. At the other end of the gym, tables and several hammocks surrounded a cabana. Inside the straw hut a bar offered tall, cool drinks of punch, served in fancy glasses with little umbrellas.

Toni and Shane made their way through the couples who were dancing near the beach and found Tom and Lindsay settling in at a table near the cabana. Shane held Toni’s chair as she sat down next to Lindsay.

“Tom and I are going over to the bar. Do you two want a drink?”

“Yes, please.” Even though the fans were on high, it was already beginning to feel tropical in the gymnasium, and Toni knew the temperature would only rise as more and more people arrived and began to work up a sweat on the dance floor.

“Doesn’t the gym look awesome?” Lindsay slipped off her shoes and kicked them under the table. Toni did the same; after all, they were at the beach.

“Yeah. The prom committee really did an amazing job. Did you see the big snake in the palm trees out front?” Toni couldn’t help but giggle as she told Lindsay about her unexpected encounter. Tom and Shane returned from the bar with drinks for everyone and joined the girls at the table.

“Man, it’s getting hot in here.” Tom loosened his tie.

“Well, what did you expect? We’re at the beach.” Shane nudged his friend playfully as he removed his tie and stuffed it into his pocket, then undid his collar button. He shrugged his suit jacket off his shoulders and draped it over the back of his chair. “That’s better.” Shane smiled as he sat down and rolled his shirt sleeves up to his elbows. Tom did the same as he sat down next to Lindsay, grinning mischievously. He pushed his chair away from the table and began to untie his shoes.

“What are you doing?” Lindsay screwed up her face.

“Well, I don’t want to ruin my new shoes at the beach; I’m taking them off.” Tom peeled off his sock and stuffed it into his shoe.

“Ewww!” Lindsay wrinkled up her nose. “Put them back on.”

Tom ignored her as he rolled his pant legs up past his ankles. “Ahhh! That’s much better.” He grinned as he leaned back in his chair and wiggled his bare toes.

“Come on, Lindsay; let’s go for a walk on the beach. I just love the feel of warm sand between my toes.” Tom grabbed Lindsay’s hand and pulled her out of her chair.

“I need my shoes.”

“Forget your shoes; we’re at the beach.” Tom tugged on her arm as he pulled her toward the sand.

“But I need my shoes,” Lindsay protested. She turned around and screwed up her face as Tom continued to pull her across the gym floor. Toni knew how much Lindsay hated walking barefoot. She watched as they wove their way through the dancers and disappeared into the crowd. Toni turned her attention back to Shane as she lifted her glass and took a long swallow of punch.

“Any news about Jackson?”

“Well, actually,” Shane sat up and leaned his elbows on the table, “I just found out that I won the second largest scholarship.” He beamed. “Now we’ll be able to get out of this dead-end town, and I’ll be able to make a good life for us.”

Toni winced at his words.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m okay; I just banged my toe against the table.” Toni still hadn’t figured out what she would tell Shane, but she knew she couldn’t put it off much longer. “That’s wonderful news, Shane.” Toni smiled at him. “You must be really excited.”

“I am. I think Dad’s a little disappointed that I won’t be taking over the garage, but they’re both really happy for me. The only bad thing is that I’ll be away from you.”

“Well, that’s not so bad, Shane.”

“What do you mean? It’s the worst!”

“Well, I mean, it’s only temporary, we’ll still see each other on holidays.”

“Yeah, I suppose. I was thinking I could drive home on weekends. It’s only an hour and a half away, and the car I’ve been working on at the garage is in pretty good shape now.”

“Don’t do that, Shane. Engineering is a tough program, and you should be using your time to study, not driving back and forth to Farnham Falls. Come on, let’s dance.”

“I won’t be able to study anyway because I’ll be missing you so bad.” Toni took his hand and pulled him onto the dance floor.

“You’ll survive. Your grades should come first.” Shane put his arms around Toni and pulled her close, but she pulled away and continued to tug him through the crowd. “Let’s go over near the beach and dance in the sunset.”

They found a spot near the sand, and Shane once again pulled Toni close as they slowly swayed to the music. Toni tried to locate Tom and Lindsay in the crowd but she couldn’t see very well over Shane’s shoulder, and she didn’t want to seem too obvious. She scanned the faces in the darkness. As they slowly circled the room, she noticed a couple kissing on the far end of the beach. She wondered if the chaperones would turn a blind eye tonight. Maybe Tom and Lindsay had stepped outside for some fresh air; it certainly was hot and stuffy in the gym.

As they continued to dance, Toni glanced again at the couple making out, and she suddenly had a terrible sinking feeling. She nudged Shane toward the couple. As she squinted at them in the darkness, she recognized the outline of Lindsay’s face, her lips locked onto Tom’s. She looked away and closed her eyes as a lump swelled in her throat. She swallowed hard and blinked back the tears that threatened to spill down her cheeks.

“Maybe I could come home every second weekend.”

“Yeah,” Toni’s voice cracked. She cleared her throat. “That might be better.”

“Toni, what’s wrong?” Shane lifted her chin, his voice filled with concern.

Toni avoided his eyes. “Nothing, I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine. It looks like you’re about to cry.”

Toni’s eyes filled up at the suggestion. “I’m just feeling a little emotional about school being over, that’s all,” she dabbed at her eyes. “It’s really hot in here. Let’s go sit down and get a drink.” Toni couldn’t stop looking at Tom and Lindsay, and she wanted to get as far away from them as possible. She smiled at Shane through watery eyes.

“A drink sounds good. Have you seen Tom anywhere?” Toni pointed. Shane squinted through the darkness in the direction that Toni indicated. “Is that them?”

“Uh-huh.”

Shane grinned and nudged Toni. “I guess this is his lucky night. Let’s go see if they want to come get a drink with us.”

Toni was mortified at the suggestion. “They look a little busy.” She took Shane’s hand and pulled him toward the tables.

“Oh, come on. It looks like they could use a breather, anyway.” Shane tugged Toni in the opposite direction as they headed toward the kissing couple. They stood behind Tom and Lindsay for several moments, but their presence went unnoticed. Toni looked at the floor; she felt painfully jealous and couldn’t bear to watch them kiss. Finally, Shane cleared his throat and tapped Tom on the shoulder. “Hey, lovebirds.” Lindsay jumped as she wiped her mouth. She looked at Toni, and then quickly looked away. “It’s really hot in here. Do you want to come get some drinks?”

“I guess I could use some refreshments.” Tom was grinning from ear to ear as he and Shane exchanged playful shoves. “What about you, babe? Do you want a drink?” Toni cringed at his words.

“Sure.” The boys laughed as they wove their way through the twisting and squirming crowd. The girls followed in silence. Toni knew that if she said anything she might lose the fragile hold that she had on her composure, besides, she couldn’t think of a single thing to say. The girls sat down at the table as the guys went to retrieve their drinks. Toni stared off into the crowd.

“Toni...” Lindsay touched her arm.

“Don’t, Lindsay.” Toni moved her arm. She forced her tears back and took a deep breath. She saw the guys making their way back to the table with the drinks and knew she had to escape. “I’m going to the bathroom. Tell Shane I’ll be right back.” Before Lindsay could say anything else, Toni jumped up from the table and disappeared into the crowd.

Shane set the drinks down on the table. “Where’s Toni?”

“She had to use the bathroom. Actually, I have to go, too.” Lindsay stood up. “I’ll be right back.”

Tom grabbed her around the waist and kissed her. “Don’t keep me waiting long.” Lindsay pulled away from him and hurried into the crowd after Toni.

Shane smirked at Tom. “It sure looks like you’re having a good time tonight.”

“You better believe it! Lindsay is so hot! I wish I’d asked her out sooner.”

“What are you talking about? You didn’t have the balls to ask her out at all! She asked you out.”

“Oh, yeah...” Tom blushed. “Well... I was just about to ask her out.”

“Sure you were.” Shane grinned at his friend. “So, are you two a couple now, or what?”

“Yeah, man, I think so.” Tom took a drink of punch and leaned back in his chair, wearing a huge smile. “This prom rocks!”

“Yeah, except I think Toni’s upset about something...”

“What?”

“I don’t know. I’m going to see if she’s alright.”

Lindsay didn’t know what she would say to Toni when she found her.

Everything was such a mess. She pushed open the door to the girl’s bathroom. Several girls stood at the mirror applying lipstick. “Did anyone see Toni Morgan come in here?”

“We haven’t seen her.”

“Toni?” Lindsay looked under the doors to the stall, but didn’t recognize Toni’s feet.

Lindsay stood in the foyer and scanned the crowd of people milling about amidst the tropical foliage. Maybe she had stepped outside. Lindsay began to make her way through the crowd when she remembered seeing some benches in a somewhat secluded, leafy little alcove off the foyer. She would check there first.

As she crossed the hallway, she could see the back of someone’s head through the leaves. “Toni?” The person didn’t respond, but as Lindsay came around the front of the bench she could see that it was her. “Toni, I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

Shane made his way through the crowd toward the girls' bathroom. As he stood outside the door wondering if he should knock, the door opened and a girl from his biology class came out. "Hi Jill. Did you notice if Toni's in there?"

"No, the bathroom's empty."

"Have you seen her?"

"Not since you two were dancing in the gym."

"Okay, thanks." Shane went to look around the foyer. He searched through the crowd and asked several people, but nobody had seen her. He pushed the door open and stepped outside. There were several people cooling off in the crisp evening air of early summer, but Toni wasn't among them. He was beginning to get worried. Where could she be? He decided to head back to the table in case they had crossed paths.

On his way back to the gymnasium, he noticed a couple of benches nestled in a leafy little alcove off the foyer and he grinned. The perfect make-out spot! He'd have to find bring Toni and bring her back. He peered through the leaves to see if anyone else had the same idea, and saw the back of someone's head. Oh well, maybe they'd be gone by the time he returned. Shane hurried toward the gym; however, as he passed behind the bench he realized that someone was crying. He knew it was none of his business, but he stopped to listen.

Lindsay sat down on the bench next to Toni and saw that she was crying. Her eyes were red and swollen, mascara smudged across her cheeks. Her shoulders shook as she sobbed quietly, and tears dropped onto her lap. Lindsay moved closer and put her arm around Toni's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Toni."

“You’re sorry?” Toni shrugged Lindsay’s arm off her shoulders and turned to look at her. Anger flashed in Toni’s eyes. “You’re sorry? What are you sorry for? Are you sorry for making out with someone else, for acting like a slut, or for flaunting it in front of me? How did you think I would feel? I thought you loved me?”

“I do, Toni. I do love you.” Lindsay’s eyes began to fill with tears. “It’s just that...”

“Well, then why are you leading Tom on?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know how I feel anymore. I do love you, Toni, you know I do, but I’m not strong like you. It’s so hard to be gay; I don’t think I can do it.” Tears ran down Lindsay’s cheeks.

“We’ll move away; it’ll be easier in the city.” Toni held Lindsay’s face in her hands. She could feel Lindsay slipping away and her heart was breaking.

“My parents would disown me, Toni. How could I ever feel proud about being gay when my own parents would be so ashamed? I don’t think I could ever feel good about being gay.”

“But you are!”

“Maybe I *could* make a life with Tom. He’s a really nice guy, and he treats me well.”

“What?” Toni couldn’t believe her ears. “I don’t want to hear this, Lindsay! Will you feel good about living a fucking lie?” Toni’s sobs came harder now. “You kissed me and made love to me. You told me that that you could never feel the same way about anyone else, and I believed you! Do you feel the same things when you kiss Tom as when you kiss me?! Don’t do this, Lindsay! I love you!” Toni got up from the bench and knelt on the floor in front of Lindsay, her face streaked with tears. “Please,

just come away with me. We can work it out, you'll see. I promise everything will be fine. Just come with me." Toni sobbed uncontrollably.

Shane couldn't believe what he was hearing.

# 17

Toni had not anticipated how difficult being a vice-principal would be, and going back to the classroom was looking more and more inviting. She felt like her interactions with students were mostly negative, and there were many days when she questioned if she was making any difference at all. She rubbed her temples as she felt the beginnings of a headache, and dug in her desk drawer for some Tylenol.

She tried to focus on her long list of things to do, but her mind kept returning to Raymond and his mother. They had not discussed a plan to help Raymond return to school, and she was unsure about how to proceed. Also, she was upset about being called a racist. She worked hard at being fair and equitable, and she thought she understood better than many what it's like to feel marginalized. She prided herself on being a champion of social justice issues, and her feelings were hurt.

She walked over to Mary's office and stuck her head in the door. "Do you have a minute?"

"Sure. How did things go with Ms. Bishop?"

"That's what I want to talk to you about." Toni shut the door and sat down.

"She left angry, and nothing was resolved. She called us all a bunch of fucking racist pigs, and left." Toni's eyes unexpectedly filled with tears, and she hurried to wipe them away. "I'm sorry, I guess it upset me more than I realized."

Mary handed Toni a tissue. "You can't take that stuff personally, Toni. That sort of posturing and intimidation is usually a defense mechanism, an attempt to lay blame elsewhere. We all have a hard time accepting responsibility for our shortcomings."

"But I admire Cheryl Bishop. She's doing the best she can for her children in the face of tremendous obstacles. Nobody could question that she loves those kids."

"It doesn't matter what you think, Toni. She's struggling with her own demons."

Fresh tears welled up in Toni's eyes. "But I try so hard..."

"I know you do." Mary smiled warmly and patted Toni's arm. "Here's what I have learned after 30 years in education, Toni. You don't actually own a job, you rent it, and you treat it like an apartment. You put beautiful pictures on the walls, but you don't put anything permanent in there that you can't take away with you, and I don't mean that in a cynical way at all. Nothing stays the same, Toni, change is inevitable, and eventually all people move on. Don't invest your soul. I'm not saying that you shouldn't care; I'm saying that you need to care for yourself first."

Toni sniffed and dabbed at her eyes. "I guess it could have been worse," Toni grinned, "she could have called us a bunch of fucking dykes."

Mary threw her head back and laughed. “And she wouldn’t be wrong now, would she?” Her eyes twinkled.

It wasn’t long into the school year before Toni learned that Mary was also a lesbian, and they shared a bond that only those who live on the margins can truly understand. “I feel so fortunate to have the opportunity to get to know you Mary, and to learn from you. You are so... unflappable.” Toni felt herself begin to blush. She admired Mary’s wisdom, her quiet strength and confidence, and if she could be half the leader that Mary was, she’d be pleased.

“Well, thank you dear, but that feeling is mutual.” Mary smiled.

“So what do you think I should do about Raymond and his mother?”

“Give her some space. If you don’t hear from her by Monday, then you should call her and invite her and Raymond to come in. Frame it in a positive way. Let her know that you need her help in order to develop a plan to get Raymond back in school, something that will work for everyone.”

“Do you have any ideas about what that plan might look like?”

“Well, Raymond has some difficulty controlling his anger. Perhaps some strategies he could use when he feels himself getting angry would be helpful. Maybe we could find a location where he could give himself a timeout when he needs to get his anger under control, and perhaps some rewards for doing well. Talk to Cheryl and Raymond and see what they suggest. If you have their input, the plan is much more likely to succeed.”

“Okay. That gives me some ideas about where to go from here. Thanks, Mary.”

“You’re welcome, but I’m sure you would have come up with a similar direction on your own. One other thing, Toni, I have always found that it helps to get the

complainers and troublemakers actively involved in the life of the school. You might want to think about trying to get Cheryl Bishop involved in some positive ways.” Mary smiled. “Give them a job and get them busy. They have less time to cause problems, but also, they often gain some valuable insight into what we do here, and their opinions change. Their children also seem to do better when a parent is around. Isn’t one of our safe arrival volunteers leaving?”

“Yes. The mother who does Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings has a new job and won’t be able to continue.”

“Perfect. We need to find someone right away, and Cheryl would be helping us out of a bind.”

Toni smiled. “I’ll ask her if she can help us out.”

# 18

Concealed by the plants and unable to tear himself away, Shane listened with mounting horror. Tears welled up in his eyes. How could he have been so stunned? Why hadn't he seen it before? As he thought back over the events of the past couple of weeks, it seemed so obvious now. Hot, angry tears ran down his cheeks, and he felt like he was going to be sick to his stomach.

He had heard enough. He flung open the gym door, grateful for the cover of darkness as he slipped into the back of the room. He wiped angrily at his tears. Grateful for the temporary sanctuary he found in the shadows, he leaned against the wall and tried to make sense of what he'd heard. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't go back to the table. Not yet. And it was too early to go home. He slid down the wall and sat on the floor, as he fought hard to subdue his tears.

Toni got up from the bench and knelt on the floor in front of Lindsay, her face streaked with tears. “Please, just come away with me. We can work it out, you’ll see. I promise everything will be fine. Just come with me.” Toni sobbed.

Lindsay stroked Toni’s hair. “I can’t...” her voice barely audible as tears streamed down her cheeks. She slid off the bench and sat next to Toni on the floor. Putting her arms around Toni, Lindsay held her close, and both girls cried. Lindsay’s heart ached. She did love Toni, perhaps more than Toni would ever know, and she hated herself for not being stronger. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered, as she kissed the top of Toni’s head and stood up.

“Don’t go...” Toni pleaded, her voice choked with sobs.

Lindsay wiped her eyes and took a deep breath. Her heart was breaking. She looked down at Toni’s tear-streaked face and the beautiful, earnest eyes that silently begged her to stay. With all the resolve she could muster, Lindsay turned away and disappeared into the palm trees.

Toni laid her head in her arms on the wooden seat of the bench and sobbed. How had things gone so wrong? If only Moe hadn’t walked in on them; Moe had ruined everything! And then Tom had come along and been so fucking nice.

Toni was beginning to hate this small town where she had spent her entire life. If only she could convince Lindsay to move away with her, she was sure that things would be different. Toni could be strong enough for both of them. She took a deep breath, exhaling slowly as she lifted her head off the bench. She felt drained and all cried out.

She picked herself up off the floor and sat on the bench, taking several deep breaths as her sobs subsided, and her breathing returned to normal. She wanted to go

home. She wiped her face with her hands and leaned back against the bench, wondering what she could tell Shane. She decided to say that she was feeling sick to her stomach and needed to leave, which wasn't really far from the truth.

Peering through the leaves, she wondered if she could make it to the bathroom without running into any of her friends. She was sure her eyes were red and swollen, and she wanted to avoid the inevitable barrage of well-intentioned questions. No one had come or gone from the girls' bathroom in the last few minutes, and the crowd in the foyer was surprisingly thin. She scanned the few faces that lingered, and as the melody of a popular song crept into her consciousness, she realized that a lot of people were probably dancing. She should go before the song was over.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped out from behind the leaves. Keeping her eyes down, she hurried across the vast expanse of ceramic tile toward the refuge of the bathroom. Her heart pounded, and as she neared the door, she realized she had been holding her breath. She exhaled. Thinking that she had made it to the bathroom undetected, she jumped when someone called her name. *Damn!* Toni cringed. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Jill Sanford waving and hurrying across the foyer. Toni pretended not to notice. The bathroom door was only a few steps away, and she was sure she could make it before Jill caught up.

"Toni! Toni!"

Toni pushed the heavy door open and slipped inside. She sighed with relief as the door closed, and Jill's muffled shouts disappeared. Quickly scanning the bathroom, she was relieved to find that she was alone. She stole a quick glance at herself in the mirror, then slipped into the last stall and locked the door. Toni sat down on the toilet seat.

The muffled pulse of the music suddenly grew louder as she heard the bathroom door open, and held her breath.

“Toni? Are you in here?”

Toni didn't answer, wishing Jill would just go away.

“I'm sure I saw you come in here.” Toni could hear Jill going from stall to stall checking for feet under the doors, and she wondered if she should pull her feet up. “Oh, there you are. Didn't you hear me calling you? Shane has been looking everywhere for you. I promised if I saw you I'd let you know.”

“Oh, Jill, I'm sorry; I didn't hear you. I just really had to pee, and I was on a mission. Thanks, for letting me know, I'll go find him. See you later.” Toni hoped that having delivered her message, Jill would hurry up and leave. She knew she could only stay in the stall for so long before Jill would become suspicious. Toni stood up and peered through the crack in the door. Jill stood at the mirror, fluffing her hair and straightening her dress.

“He seemed kind of worried. Is everything okay?” Toni saw Jill's gaze shift toward the stalls, and she quickly sat back down on the toilet seat.

“Oh, yeah, everything's fine. I just needed to get some air; it's really hot in the gym.” Toni wasn't sure if Jill was being a busybody or if her concern was genuine, but she wished she would just drop it and leave. “Anyway, thanks again. See you later.”

“Well, okay. See you later, then.” Toni heard Jill walk toward the door. She heard the loud pulse of the music as the door opened, and she waited as the steady thump died away to a barely audible throb off in the distance.

Toni unlocked the door and stepped out of the stall, looking at her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes were still a little red, but not too bad. She blew her nose. The

fluorescent lights in the bathroom were unforgiving, but she was pretty sure no one would even notice in the dim light of the gym. She straightened her dress and touched up her lipstick. She took a deep breath and went to find Shane.

Shane sat alone in the darkness, wondering what he had done wrong. Hadn't he been a good boyfriend? Had he pressured her too much to have sex? Maybe he hadn't pressured her enough.

He picked at a hangnail. Catching the small flap of skin between his teeth, he pulled slowly, tearing deeply into the flesh around his nail. He winced at the pain but continued to pull until the small piece of flesh separated from his finger, raising a drop of blood. He watched as the drop of blood grew, and spread across the base of his fingernail, threatening to drip onto the floor. He stuck his finger in his mouth and sucked, wondering why he had done that. His finger throbbed.

Tears burned in his eyes, and he worked hard to blink them away. Toni was his girl. They were going to get married and have a family, and live happily ever after, but now she was changing the ending. Why was this happening to him? What would the guys say? He had lied to them about having sex with Toni, and now he would be the butt of their jokes. *Guess you just weren't man enough for her*; he could hear them already. Shane vacillated between feeling deeply sad and furiously angry. Toni was ruining everything.

Toni stood at the doorway to the gym and peered into the darkness, waiting for her eyes to adjust. She took a deep breath and made her way through the crowd toward the place where they'd been sitting. As she drew near the table, she saw Lindsay sitting

on Tom's lap and cringed. Taking several deep breaths, she pulled her shoulders back, mustered every last ounce of strength she had, and walked toward them.

"Hi guys." Toni attempted what she hoped was a believable smile. "Where's Shane?" Lindsay jumped up, avoiding eye contact with Toni.

"Hey, don't go." Tom grabbed at Lindsay and tried to pull her back onto his lap, but Lindsay sat down in her own chair, looking uncomfortable. He turned toward Toni. "I don't know where Shane is. He went looking for you a long time ago, and he hasn't come back. Didn't you see him?"

"No, I haven't seen him." Toni's mind raced and an uneasy feeling churned in her stomach. "I guess I'll go look for him." Toni couldn't get away from the table fast enough, but she really wasn't looking forward to finding Shane, either. She headed back toward the foyer.

Toni blinked as her eyes adjusted to the brightness in the hallway. None of the people she asked had seen him. He wasn't outside either. She pushed the heavy double doors open on her way back inside and stood in the foyer once again. She looked around, wondering where he could be when she saw Jill Sanford hurrying toward her. Toni tried to turn away but it was too late.

"Hi Toni! Did you find Shane?"

"Actually, no, I was just looking for him. Have you seen him?"

"You mean you still haven't found him? Have you two been together *at all* tonight?" Jill grinned. "Are you sure he's even your date?"

"What kind of question is that?" Toni scowled. Jill's innocuous comments hit a nerve. "Of course he's my date," Toni snapped, "who else would I go to the prom with?"

Jill was taken aback. “Whoa! What’s got into you?”

Toni could feel the tears begin to well up again as she blinked them back. “I’m sorry, Jill.” Toni tried to back-pedal and smooth things over. “I’m just not feeling well, and I need to find Shane so I can go home. I think we keep missing each other. He must go in one door while I go out the other.” Toni forced herself to smile.

“What a drag to be sick on prom night!” Jill looked sympathetic. “I did see him go in the back door to the gym, but that was about 15 minutes ago.”

“Thanks, Jill. Sorry I snapped at you.”

Toni walked across the foyer and pulled open the back door to the gym. She stood there for a moment, waiting for her eyes to adjust as the door slowly came to a close behind her. Wondering which way to go, Toni peered left and then right.

She saw Shane was sitting in the shadows on the floor, and the uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach grew. His knees were drawn up to his chest, his head buried in his arms, which rested on his knees. Toni sat down beside him, but he didn’t look up.

“Shane?” Toni touched his arm. “Shane?”

“Don’t touch me!” Shane pulled his arm away. Toni’s feelings of unease quickly escalated to alarm as fear clutched at her heart.

“Shane, what’s wrong?”

“What do you care?” Shane lifted his head and looked at her.

She could tell that he’d been crying, but it was the anger she saw in his eyes that upset her the most. “Please, Shane, what is it?” Panic began to rise in Toni’s throat and tears stung her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“You’re a fucking dyke, that’s what’s wrong!” he spat. Tears filled his eyes, then spilled over and ran down his cheeks. He brushed them away with an angry swipe.

Toni had to stifle a sob. Tears sprung to her eyes. She didn’t know what to say.

“I really thought you loved me.” His voice was barely more than a whisper.

Toni could see the pain all over his face. “I do love you...”

“You don’t!” he snapped as anger flashed in his eyes. “You love a fucking girl! I saw you in the alcove, and I heard everything!”

Fear gripped her heart as she realized what Shane had witnessed. This was not how she wanted him to find out. Her head pounded. This night was turning into one disaster after another. “I’m so sorry, Shane!” Toni sobbed. She did love him, and the last thing she wanted to do was hurt him. “I wanted to tell you, but I didn’t know how.”

“You’re sorry? You’ve ruined my fucking life, and you’re sorry? What about all the plans we made? Was everything you said to me a lie? I can’t believe I was so stupid that I didn’t see it!”

“I meant the things I said at the time. Things haven’t been easy for me lately, Shane, and I ...”

“Not easy for you? Did you think about how I would feel? Did you make out with her and then come make out with me, you fucking whore?” Shane wanted to hurt her as much as she’d hurt him.

“Please, Shane, don’t...”

“Don’t what, speak the truth? Something you obviously know nothing about!”

“I didn’t want to hurt you, Shane. Please you have to believe me. You’re the best boyfriend any girl could ever hope to have. It’s just that...I think I’m...well... you know... I’m pretty sure I’m gay.”

“You’re pretty sure?!”

“Well, no... I am sure. I’m gay.” Toni looked at the floor, her cheeks burned. Saying it out loud was so much harder than she thought it would be. “I’ve been struggling with this for a while, but I wanted to be absolutely sure before I told you. I wish I had figured it out sooner. Really, Shane, it has nothing to do with you.”

“Well, thanks... thanks a lot.” Fresh tears welled up in Shane’s eyes.

“That’s not what I meant...” Toni wracked her brain for a way to make Shane understand.

Suddenly he turned toward her and grabbed her by the shoulders. Tears flowed down his cheeks. “Please, Toni, give me another chance.” Toni’s heart ached for him and her own tears flowed freely.

“It’s not about giving you another chance; you didn’t do anything wrong. It’s just me; it’s who I am. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner, but I had to be sure, and I didn’t want to ruin your prom...”

“Well you did a fucking fine job of that!” The anger returned to his voice as he stood up, wiping the tears from his cheeks.

“Shane, please try to understand...”

“Find your own fucking way home! I’m going to find a real woman to be my date.”

Shane stormed off into the darkness as Toni cried quietly in the shadows. She deeply regretted hurting him. Perhaps she should have told him sooner, but she thought she was being kind by waiting until after the prom. She understood why he was angry, and she was beginning to understand the pain Lindsay so desperately wanted to avoid. Nothing was going as she had planned, and she was sure things would only get worse

when she called her parents to come and get her. She'd have to give them some sort of explanation. Maybe it was time she just told them the truth.

Toni saw her father pull up at the curb, and she hurried toward the car, but before she could get there, he had jumped out and was hurrying toward her. Toni could see the worry etched into his face and she wished she hadn't been so vague on the phone.

"Toni, what's wrong? Your mother and I have been so worried ever since you called. You've been crying! What's going on?"

"I'm sorry I worried you Dad, I just didn't want to get into it on the phone." Tears brimmed in her eyes as her father gathered her into his arms and fresh sobs shook her body. She wished her father could fix everything with a kiss, like he used to.

He lifted her chin and looked into her eyes. "What is it, Toni? You're frightening me."

"I'm sorry, Daddy. It's just that Shane and I had a big fight. I'll be okay." Toni wiped her eyes and tried to pull herself together. She quickly looked around and was relieved to see there were no students standing around outside to witness the exchange with her father.

"Oh, honey!" He wiped a tear from her cheek and kissed her forehead. "What an awful way to spend your prom night. Do you want me to go beat him up?"

Toni couldn't help but smile at her father. "No thanks, Dad. Can you just take me home?"

"Of course." He opened the car door for her, and Toni climbed in. She was amazed at how quickly things had blown up and spiraled out of her control, and she

wondered how all the dust was going to settle. Her father's voice penetrated her thoughts.

“What did you say, Dad?”

“I was saying that all couples fight and have disagreements. That's a part of all relationships. I'm sure you and Shane can work things out.”

She glanced at her father's profile as he drove. He was a kind and gentle man with pleasant features and an easy smile, but tonight his face was filled with worry and concern. He had always been generous with his affection, and Toni had never questioned how much he loved her. She hated that she was causing him to worry. Perhaps she *could* tell him the truth. She briefly considered how to begin, but as her heart began to pound furiously against her chest, she decided against it. “I don't think Shane and I will be working anything out, Dad, but I'd rather not talk about it right now.”

“Okay, honey.” He patted her leg and smiled at her. They drove the rest of the way home in silence.

Toni hung her coat in the hall closet and turned toward her father. “Thanks for coming to get me, Dad.”

“Sweetheart, I'm just glad that you felt you could call me.” He looked at her with such obvious love and tenderness, that Toni felt tears begin to swell again. He took her face in his hands and looked into her eyes. “Whatever it is, Toni, there is nothing...,” he paused and looked deeply into her eyes, “...nothing, that would ever make me stop loving you.” He kissed her forehead and pulled her close. She hugged him tightly as tears crept down her cheeks.

“I love you too, Dad.”

“Toni! Your father and I have been so worried! Is everything okay?” Her mother came hurrying down the hallway toward them. Toni sniffed and quickly tried to pull herself together as her father answered on her behalf.

“She and Shane had a little fight, but she’s going to be okay.”

“Oh, you poor dear, what a rotten way to spend your prom!”

Her father lifted her chin and wiped away her tears. He smiled at her and kissed her forehead again. “You must be tired. Go on to bed. Things may look differently in the morning.”

Toni doubted that anything would be better tomorrow; in fact, she was pretty sure things were about to get much worse. She knew her mother was concerned, she also knew her mother would have a multitude of well-intentioned questions and offers of advice that Toni would prefer to avoid. She was grateful to her father for giving her an escape. She stood on her tip-toes and kissed her father’s cheek. “I think I will go to bed. Thanks again, Dad...for everything.” Toni walked over and kissed her mother’s cheek. “Good night, Mom.”

“Are you sure you’re okay? I could make us some warm cocoa and...”

“Thanks, Mom, I’m just going to go to bed. I’ll be okay.” She suddenly felt exhausted as she forced what she hoped was a reassuring smile.

“Well, if you’re sure. Good night, then.”

“Good night.” Toni climbed the stairs to her room. She closed the door and sat down on the end of her bed. She felt emotionally drained, and certain there couldn’t possibly be another tear left for her to cry. She kicked her shoes across the room and stood up as she stepped out of her dress and let it fall into a heap on the floor. She

pulled her night shirt over her head and flopped down onto her bed. She'd wash her face in the morning.

As tired as she was, Toni lay there in the darkness, staring at the ceiling, unable to settle her mind. She hoped Shane wouldn't do anything stupid, and she cringed every time she thought about what Lindsay might be doing. As she lay there trying to quiet her mind, her thoughts were interrupted by a gentle tapping at her door. "*Damn!*" Toni thought. It was too much to hope that her mother would just let things go. "Come in." The door opened a crack, and Toni was surprised to see Moe's face come around the corner. "Hey, Moe! You finally learned how to knock!" Toni tried to sound upbeat.

"Can I come in?"

Toni didn't really feel like having company, but Moe sounded earnest. "Yeah, sure, come on in." Toni sat up in bed, hugging her knees to her chest.

Moe shut the door behind her, and sat down on the edge of Toni's bed. The two girls sat in awkward silence while Toni waited for her sister to begin. She peered at Moe's silhouette in the dim light, remembering how badly things had gone between them earlier in the day. She waited anxiously, wondering what Moe had come to say. Moe turned to look at Toni, and even in the darkness, Toni could see that she was crying.

"Its okay, Moe...."

"No, it's not okay."

Toni's heart dropped. She had hoped that maybe Moe had come to tell her that she'd had a change of heart.

Moe continued. "I've been thinking about what you told me all day, and I still don't understand, Toni. I don't understand how you can be attracted to another girl, but

that's not really why I'm upset. Honestly, I don't really care if you're gay or not; I think I was just caught off guard, and I'm not sure why, because when I look back on things now, it seems so obvious."

Tears sprang to Toni's eyes.

"Even though you're my sister, you're more than that to me." Moe's eyes filled with tears. "I look up to you, and although I've never told you this, I always thought I was pretty lucky to have such a cool big sister. I thought we were friends."

"Moe..." Toni couldn't believe she had any tears left.

"Let me finish, Toni. I understand now why you've been so mean to me lately, but I didn't get it at the time. My feelings were hurt, and I was angry that you didn't want me around. I just wish you would have told me sooner."

"You're not the only one," Toni muttered. Her head was pounding, her eyes burned, and she could hardly breathe because her nose was so stuffed up.

"I know I didn't react well this afternoon, and I'm sorry about that, but I wish you had trusted me enough to tell me sooner. Anyway, I wanted to tell you that I *am* on your side, and I will always be on your side. If you want me to, I'll come with you when you tell Mom and Dad."

Toni's voice was choked with emotion, and she couldn't speak. She put her arms around her sister's neck and hugged her tightly. More than anything, she needed someone to be on her side, and she hoped Moe knew how much. All she could manage was a squeaky '*thank you*' through her tears.

Moe stood up and sniffed, wiping her own eyes. She smiled at Toni and headed toward the door, turning around just before she left. "You're welcome." She closed the door quietly.

Toni laid her head back on her pillow and closed her eyes, finally able to surrender to some much needed sleep.

# 19

Christmas had come and gone, and spring was just around the corner. Toni couldn't believe how the year was flying by. She leaned back in her chair and remembered how hard things had been in the fall, and how many times she wished she was back in her own classroom. She didn't wish that so often any more.

She felt more settled in her role as vice-principal, and she was finally beginning to feel like she was making a difference. Raymond and his mother were attending an anger management group at the local community health service center, and he was doing much better in school. His grades had improved, and the time-outs that he needed to take in her office were fewer and farther between.

Raymond's mother had taken over safe arrival and was in the midst of organizing the second big clothing drive and swap event of the year. Families were asked to donate good used clothing that they no longer needed, and then come to the school on parent-

teacher night to swap. Cheryl Bishop had organized volunteers to go around and pick up the clothing, sort it into sizes, and then display it in the gym. Those who attended parent-teacher meetings were invited to the gym afterwards to help themselves to any clothing items they felt they needed. In a community with a sizeable low-income population, this was a wonderful opportunity to build positive relationships between the school and the community, and to clothe growing children when there never seemed to be enough money to go around. It also had the added benefit of increasing the number of parents who scheduled meetings with their child's teacher. Toni smiled. Despite their rocky beginning, Raymond and his mother were helping her to feel like she was making a difference.

Toni was also pleased about the upcoming day-long student conference that would focus on issues of respect. She had been planning it since the fall, but now that it was less than a month away, they had run into some opposition. A small, but vocal group of parents were kicking up a stink about several workshop topics they felt should not be offered. There were a number of controversial topics, but Toni didn't understand why people couldn't start living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A signed parental consent form was required before students would be allowed to attend any of those workshops, and there were more than 20 other workshops being offered. She wondered why some people always seemed to make things harder than they had to be.

The sessions in question included one being presented by a former prisoner, one by a victim of sexual assault, another by a former prostitute, and one by a Holocaust survivor, but the workshop that seemed to be causing the biggest upset was the one being led by the Gay and Lesbian Education Coalition.

Earlier that morning, Toni had received a very frustrating call from the mother of a student who insisted that the topics were far too mature for junior high aged kids. Toni disagreed and politely refused to eliminate any of the workshops. She suggested that if the woman did not want her child to participate in those particular workshops that she should not sign the consent. The woman was angry and accused Toni of pushing her own personal agenda, and before she hung up, informed Toni that she would be taking her concerns to the school board and then to the media. The implied threat was loud and clear, and Toni was pretty sure she understood her meaning.

Toni stood up and walked across the office to Mary's door. "Can I come in? Once again, I need your sage advice."

"Sure, Toni, have a seat. I just have to send this email and then I'll be all ears."

Toni sat down, wondering if anything would come of the angry woman's threats, and why trouble always seemed to find her no matter where she went.

Mary scooted her chair closer to Toni. "What's up? You look worried."

"I don't know, maybe it's nothing.... I had a phone call from Brenda Fraser about an hour ago."

"Well, that's never good. She only calls to complain."

"She's complaining all right. She wants us to eliminate some of the workshops...I'm sure you can guess which ones...and when I refused, she said she would be going to the school board and then to the media."

"She's just blowing smoke, Toni. Let her go. She doesn't have a legitimate complaint."

“I think it might be more than that.” Toni sighed. “I’m not sure, but I think she’s threatening to bring my sexuality into the issue. She said that I was pushing my own agenda. Maybe I misinterpreted her comments, but that sure is how it felt.”

“Your sexuality is nobody’s business, and it’s entirely speculation on her part, Toni. People in the community have been talking about me for years. I wouldn’t worry about it too much, but I *am* going to call Joe over at the school board and give him a heads up.”

“Do you think we should remove those workshops?”

“Absolutely not! We are not about to pander to pushy, narrow-minded parents. What she wants us to do amounts to censorship. The parental consent form takes care of her concerns. She doesn’t need to monitor the morality of everyone else in the community.”

“But what if she goes to the media? The school board isn’t going to like the negative publicity.”

“Well that’s too bad; the school board will just have to deal with it. You know what; I want you to let me deal with this. I’m going to call Brenda Fraser myself to let her know that this is a school decision, not just yours, and that if she has any plans to go to the media, she should be careful not to say anything that could possibly become a human rights complaint.” Mary grinned. “I can be pretty good at making subtle threats myself.”

“Are you sure, Mary?”

“Of course, I’m sure. I’m in a much better position to take this on than you are.” Mary had only two more years until retirement. “What are they going to do?” Her eyes twinkled with mischief. “Fire me? I think that lesbian women my age and in my

position have a responsibility to speak out against homophobia. I didn't always feel that way, but age has brought me the gift of courage. I think the less you have invested in your own need for safety, the more generous you ought to be."

Toni sighed. "I don't know why my sexuality always has to become an issue."

"It has nothing to do with your sexuality, Toni. It is all about the fact that you are a strong, capable, confident woman who knows her own mind, so for some people, the only conclusion they can come to is that you must be a dyke. It wouldn't matter if you were 100% heterosexual, they would say the same things about you. Now, don't lose any sleep over this. Brenda Fraser is all talk, I don't imagine she will do anything, but if she does, we'll be ready for her."

"Okay." Toni smiled. "Thanks again for coming to my rescue."

"Someday you'll do the same for someone else."

"How did you get to be so sure of yourself, Mary?"

"I didn't always feel so confident..." Mary looked out the window and sighed. "It's been a long, hard journey." She turned back toward Toni. "I grew up during a time when being gay or lesbian was considered perverted. In fact, it was against the law, and if you were arrested your name would be printed in the newspaper the very next day, like a common criminal. There was a strong connection in people's minds between pedophilia and homosexuality, even though the research clearly indicates that most sexual abuse is perpetrated by heterosexual men. Also, until 1977, homosexuality was considered to be a mental illness, and many people were sent to psychiatrists to be cured using outrageous treatments that would be considered inhumane today. And God help you if you were a religious person because being homosexual was a mortal sin and you would most definitely be going to hell! The message from every sector of society was

loud and clear: if you were gay or lesbian, there was something dreadfully wrong with you, so I grew up trying to hide my true identity.” Mary sighed. “I was very secretive about my life for a very long time. I dated guys, and I denied who I really was, even to myself. I went through a great deal of heartache as a result.”

“Did you lead separate lives for a long time?”

“I did. When I first started to teach, it was impossible to be openly gay or lesbian and to work in education. You’d be crucified if anyone ever found out! So, I put a lot of energy into maintaining separate lives. My family life was in one compartment, my personal life in another, my professional life in a third, and the three never met. I was extremely well defended, but it was exhausting! There was no human rights legislation in place to protect me, and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms didn’t even exist until 1982, and even then, sexual orientation was not included specifically. If anyone found out, I would have been fired. I was probably 40 years old before I was able to say, ‘This is who I am and that’s okay,’ but it’s only been in the past few years that I feel comfortable enough to just be myself here at school.”

“Really? You seem so at ease with yourself.”

“Age does that.” Mary smiled. “Also, I think it’s at least partly because the times have changed. Changes to human rights legislation provide a measure of protection, but I was also very fortunate to find a wonderful community of supportive women. Having that support system definitely contributed to helping me develop a positive sense of who I am.”

Toni nodded. “I was also very lucky to find a group of women like that when I was in university, and I’m not exaggerating when I say that they saved me from self-destruction.”

“You know, gay and lesbian people are unlike any other marginalized group of people because we grow up being different from the other people in our family. If you grow up in a Black family, you are raised by people like yourself who can help you learn to deal with the racism and discrimination that you will have to face in the world. The majority of gay and lesbian kids are raised by straight parents who have no idea how to support their gay children or prepare them for the homophobia and discrimination they will have to endure. In order to develop a positive sense of self, I think it is absolutely essential that gay and lesbian people find a group of friends who can be that support system that our families just aren’t able to be. For some people, that support system is the difference between life and death.”

“I’ve never thought about that before, Mary. What a good point! Even if there weren’t many visible minority role models in the public world, at least you would have your family and relatives to guide and support you. Most gay and lesbian youth don’t even have that, and to make matters worse, it can be difficult to identify one another in order to find that much needed support.”

“Being invisible does have its disadvantages.”

“So are you ‘out’ now?”

“Well... I’m not in. People make their assumptions, and I neither confirm nor deny them, but I think they know. It has been a tremendously liberating experience to stop putting so much energy into hiding.”

“Do you feel safe being open about your sexuality at work?”

“I wouldn’t go that far, and I’m not exactly open about it. It’s one thing to let people make their assumptions; it’s quite another thing to confirm those assumptions. That feels considerably more dangerous. There is no question that things are far better

now than when I was young, but I still don't see the school system as being particularly accepting. If you think about the concept of education, it should be something that frees us, that opens our minds to a bigger world and to broader understandings, but I think it is really quite oppressive, not just in terms of sexual orientation, but about a lot of things.”

“I just wish I could relax and be who I am. Then maybe people would stop speculating about who I sleep with and leave me alone.” Toni sighed. “The most powerful example I can be for kids is just to be who I am, to be a decent person, a good teacher, and a positive citizen who also happens to be gay. I think kids need those kinds of role-models. Why can't I be that person?”

“I don't think we are there yet, Toni, and I don't know why that is. Maybe it has to do with the fact that we are entrusted with children's lives, and no parent wants to give their child over to someone they consider to be a bad example. It's a lot to live up to. I do think we are getting closer and closer to a time when you can authentically be who you are, but you have a lot of years left in this system. Now for me, that's a different story. Getting close to retirement brings me a lot of freedom.” Mary smiled. “Like I said, you let me deal with Brenda Fraser and the school board.”

“Do you think we'll ever get there, Mary?” Toni sighed.

“I do. I have great faith in the goodness of people, and in our ability to evolve. My heart is warmed every time I see gay and lesbian youth who are clearly comfortable with their sexual orientation, and I think ‘What a great way to be!’ We have come a tremendously long way since I was a teenager. And you know, most people today are quite accepting of difference; however, there are still pockets of intolerance, and in some ways that can be worse. You begin to believe that things are good, maybe you get lulled into a sense of security, you let your guard down, and then bang, all of a sudden it's not

so safe anymore. It all boils down to safety, Toni. Legislation won't protect you from a small-minded bigot who is intent on making your life miserable. Attitudes change slowly, and so you can never let your guard down completely."

"I hate that!"

"Me, too, but we are making a difference, Toni. You do important work with our students to help them understand and appreciate diversity. This student conference is a good example. Feel proud of that. Celebrate the small steps, and seek out like-minded people. We'll get there." Mary smiled. "Are you feeling okay about things?"

"Better." Toni smiled warmly at Mary. "Thanks so much for your support and guidance. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"You'd manage. I'll let you know how things go with Brenda Fraser."

## 20

Sunlight poured through Toni's bedroom window and skipped across her pillow. She kicked off the covers and stretched, glancing at her alarm clock. Usually an early riser, she was surprised to see that it was almost 9:00 a.m. She flopped back onto her bed as she remembered the catastrophe at the prom, and realized that things were probably going to get worse before they got any better. She needed to at least try and make Shane understand how sorry she was that she'd hurt him, and she desperately needed to speak to Lindsay. And then there were her parents....

Toni rolled out of bed and reached under her mattress for her journal. Perhaps writing would help her to organize the confusion that seemed to have taken up residence in her brain. She re-read her last entry and smiled as she remembered the excitement of feeling head-over-heels in love. She couldn't believe she had written those words less than a week ago; it seemed so long ago, now. Toni gazed out the window, watching the

sunlight dance playfully on the leaves of the big oak. It was a beautiful morning, a new day full of hope and possibility. Maybe her dad was right, maybe things would be better today. She could always hope. She picked up her pen and began to write.

*Sunday, June 24*

*Dear Journal,*

*Sometimes I feel like I must have been abducted by aliens. My life has changed so much and so quickly in the past couple of weeks! My head is spinning! Is this really **my** life? Am I really gay? Somewhere deep inside I think I know that I am...I'm pretty sure. I know that it feels right. Is there any way to know for certain? What if I'm not gay? Maybe I just need to try harder. Maybe I just haven't found the right guy. What if I'm creating all this grief and I find out that I'm not really gay? Is that likely to happen?*

*Wait a minute! Would I even be asking myself these questions if my friends and family were supportive? I know how I feel! Who I am shouldn't depend on what other people think! For the first time in my life, my feelings are beginning to make sense. And it feels right. Why should it be wrong to love another person?*

Toni set her pen and journal aside and stood up. Deep inside, she realized that it wasn't her own feelings she doubted so much as the reactions of others. She knew her parents would love her no matter what, but she was pretty sure that they wouldn't be thrilled about the news. She was also pretty sure that her father would handle it better

than her mother, but ultimately, she didn't really know what to expect from them. She was grateful that Moe had offered to go with her. Feeling battered and more than a little fragile, Toni wondered if she could be strong enough to stand her ground if her parents reacted badly. She was reminded of how badly Shane had reacted, and of course, who could blame him? That scenario certainly hadn't played out the way she had imagined, and she was sure it couldn't possibly have gone any worse. She wasn't sure if he would even speak to her, but she had to try.

Toni opened her door and stepped into the hallway. She could hear her mother humming from the kitchen below. She picked up the portable phone from the table and quietly returned to her room, closing and locking the door behind her. She sat down on her bed and dialed Shane's number, listening anxiously as it started to ring on the other end. It was only 9:45 on a Sunday morning, but she couldn't wait any longer; she had to talk to him, even though she wasn't sure what she would say.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Mrs. Cooper. Can I speak to Shane?" Toni's heart pounded. She wondered if Mrs. Cooper knew.

"Oh, good morning, Toni. Shane is still sleeping. It was pretty late when I heard him come in last night. He'll probably sleep until noon. You're up early for someone who had such a late night. How was the prom?"

"It was good," Toni lied. "The decorations were amazing." That part was true. "Could you ask Shane to call me when he wakes up?"

"Yes, dear, I will."

Toni held the phone against her chest, wondering why Shane had been so late getting home. She wondered if he would return her call. She dialed Lindsay's number.

“Hello?” Lindsay’s little brother answered.

“Hi, Michael. Can I speak to Lindsay?”

“Lindsay!” Michael bellowed into the receiver. Toni could hear the sound of his mother’s voice in the background. “Mom says she’s still in bed.”

“Will you tell her I called?”

“Yep.” Michael hung up the phone before Toni could say anything else. She wasn’t convinced that Lindsay’s 11 year old brother would actually pass along the message. She’d try again later.

Toni turned her thoughts to her own family. Like every family, they’d had their share of troubles, but Toni knew how fortunate she was to be a part of a genuinely loving and affectionate family. She and her mom had their share of arguments, but she never questioned her parents love. She wondered how they would respond to her news. How she should tell them? What should she say? Maybe if she wrote her thoughts in a letter, she could sort out what she wanted to say and be sure not to leave things out. Toni reached for her journal and began to write again.

*Sunday, June 24*

*Dear Mom and Dad,*

*This is a difficult letter for me to write, and I’m sure it will be just as difficult for you to read, but I’ve given this a lot of thought and I hope you’ll try to understand.*

*Ever since I was in junior high, I’ve felt different from the other girls somehow. I knew I wasn’t interested in boys in the same way as my friends, but I wasn’t sure*

*why, or what it meant. I thought there was something wrong with me. Then I met Shane and I thought that maybe I just had a slower start than the other girls. I tried really hard, but as time passed, I realized that I wasn't really attracted to him either.*

*I've fallen in love with a girl, and my feelings finally make sense to me. In fact, I actually feel a sense of relief because for the first time in my life I feel like I know who I am. I'm gay. I know that this is right for me. I've tried hard to be attracted to boys, but I'm not. This is who I am.*

*I'm not looking for your approval, and although it would be nice, I'm not expecting it. However, I do continue to need your love and support, even if you disapprove. I don't want to hide such a big part of my identity from you; I don't want us to become strangers. I want to share this with you because I love you and I want to be able to include you in my life, in the things that I struggle with, and the things that are important to me.*

*This past week has been one of the hardest of my life. I know you've noticed that I've been upset, and I know my behavior has worried you lately. I've hurt people that I care about, and I feel badly about that. I'm hurting, too, but I know that listening to my heart is the right thing to do. I want to be able to discuss this with you, to try and help you understand, but I also want you to realize that all I can do is talk about how I feel. You won't be able to change me, or talk me into being 'straight.' I've tried that. I've tried to be like all the other girls, and I know that I can't. I've accepted that this is who I am and that I can't change. I want to help you understand, too, and to accept me as I am.*

*More than anything, I want for you to be proud of me, and I hope that you will. I'm a good person; that hasn't changed. In fact, I'm the same person today that I was yesterday. The only difference is that now you know something about me that you didn't know before. The last thing in the world I want to do is hurt you, but I can't live my life for you, or for anybody else. I realize this will be hard for you, and I'm sorry. I also realize that this will probably not be an easy road for me, but that's something that I will have to deal with one day at a time. I have to give myself the freedom to be who I know I am, so that I can have a chance at being happy. I know you would want that for me, too.*

*I had intended to tell Shane as gently as I could, but he overheard me talking to Lindsay last night and he found out by mistake. That's why he was so upset at the prom last night, and why I called for you to come and get me. It wasn't a good scene. He was really upset and angry, and I don't know what he'll do with that information today. I suppose if worst comes to worst, I'll quickly find out who accepts me for who I am.*

*I hope you will try to understand that I can't be anyone other than me, and this is who I am. I'm sorry if I've hurt you, but please understand that I'm sharing this with you because I love you and I want you to be a part of my life.*

*Toni xo*

Toni set down her pen and read over what she had written. It was a good letter. Her thoughts seemed more composed and collected on paper, and she felt that she had

expressed herself clearly and honestly. She was pleased with the result. Although she wasn't looking forward to the conversation, she certainly felt more confident about initiating it. Maybe she would re-write the letter and just give it to her parents to read.

Toni glanced at her clock; it was almost 11 a.m. She hadn't heard from Shane, but his mother said he'd probably sleep until noon. She resisted the urge to call again. She decided to try Lindsay, though. She knew that Michael wasn't very good at delivering messages. She dialed the number and waited, hoping desperately that Lindsay would pick up.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Michael, it's Toni again. Is Lindsay up yet?"

"I haven't seen her." Toni could hear that he was playing a video game.

"Could you check, Michael?"

"Sure. Lindsay!" he bellowed in her ear. "Mom says she hasn't come downstairs yet."

"Okay, can you please ask her to call me as soon as she gets up?"

"Yep."

"Michael! It's important."

"Yeah, yeah, okay." He sounded impatient. "I'll tell her."

"Thanks." Toni sighed and hung up the phone. She went to her desk, took out a couple of pages of writing paper, and began to re-write the letter to her parents.

Finally finished, Toni signed her name, then stood up and stretched, shaking the cramp out of her hand. She still thought it was a good letter, but maybe she'd ask Moe to read it anyway, just to see what she thought.

Toni opened her door and looked down the hallway. Moe's door was still closed, but it was after 11 a.m. She wasn't usually a late sleeper. Toni walked down the hallway to Moe's room and leaned her ear against the door. She tapped lightly, listening carefully for a response. She tapped again. Toni reached for the doorknob, and then hesitated. She had been really mad at Moe for walking into her room without permission; she probably shouldn't go in. But she had knocked, that was more than she could say for Moe. Toni was just about to turn the doorknob when someone tapped her on the shoulder. Toni jumped and spun around.

"Looking for me?" Moe stood in the hallway in her bathrobe with a towel wrapped around her head. Toni remembered that she hadn't even washed her face last night. She would surely end up with a pimple today.

"Damn it, Moe! You scared the crap out of me. I want to show you something. Can you come down to my room for a minute?"

"Well, just let me get dressed and dry my hair."

"Okay, maybe I'll have a quick shower while I'm waiting. Come down to my room when you're done drying your hair."

Toni pulled on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, just as a knock came to her door. "Come on in," she called as she towel dried her hair. Expecting to see Moe, Toni was surprised to see her mother's face. Her heart jumped as she glanced at the journal that lay open on her bed. "Uh... hi Mom." She moved toward the door and stood between her mother and the bed.

"Good morning, or should I say afternoon? You look much better today. A good night's rest seems to have done you a world of good. Is everything okay?"

Toni knew her mother was genuinely concerned, but she just wished she'd go away. She moved closer to the door and leaned her arm against the frame, preventing her mother from coming any further into the room. Toni smiled at her mother, hoping to put an end to her questions. "Everything's fine, Mom. Just relationship stuff. It'll all be sorted out soon."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that, dear. I'm making blueberry pancakes for lunch. They'll be ready in about a half an hour. Would you like some?"

"Yes please, that would be great."

Her mother smiled and closed the door. Toni heaved a huge sigh of relief as she scooped up her journal and tucked it under the edge of her mattress. It would be nice to have pancakes with her family before she dropped the bomb.

Toni waited anxiously as Moe sat on the end of her bed and read the letter. She watched Moe's face for any sign of a reaction, but it was hard to tell what she was thinking. She seemed to be taking forever, and Toni tried to wait patiently. Finally, Moe set the pages down and looked up at Toni, her eyes swimming in tears.

"I still don't get it, Toni. Maybe I never will, but it's a good letter. It's to the point and well written, and its obvious how hard things have been for you. I'm sorry you had to go through all of that alone. Are you absolutely sure about this?"

"I'm sure. I've never been more sure about anything in my life. I finally feel like I know who I am, and I want Mom and Dad to understand that. Isn't that clear from the letter?"

"Yeah, it is. I meant are you sure about telling them?"

"Oh. Well, that I'm not so sure about."

“You know that Mom is going to have a really hard time with this.”

“I know,” Toni’s eyes filled with tears, “but I just can’t keep it a secret. They know something is up, and I don’t want to lie to them. I’m going to tell them this afternoon. Will you be there with me?”

“Of course I will.”

Tears dropped onto Toni’s bare leg; she was so grateful for her sister’s support. “Thanks, Moe. I don’t know if I could face them on my own. I know this hasn’t been easy on you, either, and I’m sorry. I’m pretty lucky to have such a great sister...” Suddenly shy, Toni looked away. “...and even though I don’t always show it, I love you a lot.”

“I know you do.” Moe reached out and wrapped her arms around her older sister. Pleased to be the one Toni had turned to for support, Moe tried to comfort her, and reassure her that everything would work out fine. She felt fiercely protective of the sister she had looked up to and admired her whole life. In that moment, Moe understood that Toni was not defined by her sexual identity; she was so much more than that. She was her sister, her friend, and her confidante. In that moment, Moe’s support was guaranteed. She vowed with the conviction of the fervent that she would defend her sister’s right to express her whole self and to be treated with the dignity and respect that is the right of all people. In that moment, Moe became Toni’s best friend and greatest ally.

“Pancakes are ready girls!” Mrs. Morgan called from the bottom of the stairs.

Toni wiped her eyes on her sleeve. “Thanks, Moe.”

Moe smiled. “Let’s go have some lunch.”

Toni picked up the letter from the bed. She wasn't sure if she would actually give it to her parents to read, or if she would be able to tell them what she needed to say. She folded the letter and stuck it in her back pocket, just in case.

# 21

Mary had only one year left until retirement and Toni had intended to stay on for at least a couple more years to help provide some consistency through the change in principals. However, when a position was posted for the principal of a brand new high school in her home town of Farnham Falls, Mary had encouraged her to apply. Toni wasn't sure that she was ready, but Mary insisted she was.

She hadn't been looking for a change; she loved working with Mary at the junior high, and after her second year, she felt like the school was really making some progress. The number of discipline incidents had decreased significantly over her two year tenure, and the school had earned the right to hang a Peaceful School flag in their foyer. She felt like the staff and students, and even some of the parents were beginning to trust her.

In the end, she decided to apply for the position partly to appease Mary, but also because she thought it would be a good experience to go through the interview and selection process; she really didn't believe she had much of a shot at getting the position. When the director of personnel at the school board called to offer her the job, she was absolutely shocked, but since she had applied, she felt compelled to accept. There were many days when she wondered if she was getting in over her head, but despite her apprehension, she remembered the excitement she felt the day she'd visited the site for the first time.

*“That house is just what we’ve been looking for.” Toni took one last look over her shoulder before pulling out of the driveway. It was a lovely two-story home nestled in the woods about 20 minutes away from the site of the new school, and it was the first home they both really liked. The house had a big verandah across the front, and even though it was only a couple of years old, it had a lovely old farmhouse feel to it. It also had a beautiful big sun-room off the kitchen that would make a wonderful studio for Mel. It was far enough away from the school to allow Toni to maintain her privacy, but close enough to allow for a reasonable commute, and there was plenty of room for a growing family.*

*“It’s a terrific house, Toni. Do you think they’ll accept our offer?”*

*“I sure hope so.”*

*“Wouldn’t it be great if we could get moved in over the summer and settled into the community before Jesse begins primary in the fall?”*

*“Yeah...and before I have to start my new job!”*

*“That too.”*

*“Since we’re sort of in the area anyway, can we drive over and see where the new school will be?”*

*“Sure. What do you say kids? Should we go see where Mama Toni’s new school is going to be and then go for an ice cream cone?”*

*“Yeah!” A joyous chorus erupted from the back seat.*

*Toni pulled off on the side of the road and parked. She opened the back door and leaned in to unbuckle Lucas from his car seat while Mel helped Jesse out on the other side. Toni crouched down for her three year old son to climb up onto her back. “Jesse, you hold onto Mama Mel’s hand.” They began to walk toward a large clearing filled with many fallen trees and several huge yellow sleeping machines.*

*“What’s wrong with all the trees, Mama? Why are they all laying on the ground?” Lucas sounded worried.*

*“This is where they are going to build the new high school, and those trees needed to be cut down in order to make room for the new building. The workers have the day off because it’s Sunday, but they’ll come back tomorrow and take the trees away, and they’ll use the wood to build things.”*

*“Will this be my school in September?” Jesse sounded excited.*

*“No, sweetie. This school will be for big kids, and it won’t be ready for a whole year. This is where my new job is going to be, but we can drive by your new school on the way home and show you.”*

*They climbed over several fallen trees and sat down on a log. It was a beautiful spot. The school would be nestled among the trees; there would be a field in the back, and several gardens in the front, and a small stream meandered along the left-hand side*

*of the property. Toni looked around, trying to imagine the finished school on the site. She realized that she knew very little about the process of construction and her heart fluttered with anxiety. It certainly was exciting, and she was grateful for the opportunity to be part of the planning and design of the new school from the very beginning, but once again, she found herself wondering if she was up for the challenge. How did she get herself into these positions?*

*Lucas squirmed down off the log and began to make his way toward a large yellow backhoe. Toni stood and picked him up. Carrying him over logs and stumps, she sat him on the tread of the huge machine.*

*“I want up, too, Mama.”*

*Toni hoisted Jesse up onto the tread next to her brother. “Hey, Mel.” Toni stood next to the kids. “Take a picture of us.”*

*Mel dug out the camera. “Okay everybody, on the count of three...”*

*“Cheese!”*

Toni had mixed feelings about leaving the junior high. She was flattered that she had been offered such a challenging position, and excited about the opportunity; however, with only a few weeks left before the end of the year, she was also beginning to feel a little sad. For the past two years she had worked hard to build strong relationships, and she felt like she was finally beginning to see some results. In many ways she felt like she was just getting started; she didn't feel ready to go.

There were many people Toni knew she would miss, but none more than Mary. Mary had been a wonderful teacher, infinitely patient and kind, and Toni had learned so much from her. She also admired Mary's easy confidence and comfort when it came to

her sexuality. She was who she was; Toni wished she could be more like that. She sighed. It had been a hard decision; she hoped she had made the right one.

Toni glanced at the lengthy To Do List on her desk. She had been putting off calling the union all week, and was annoyed that she was finding it so hard. She stared at the number in the phone book. She picked up the receiver, and then set it back down. Damn! She and Mel had been together for 15 years. They were as married as any other couple, and Mel should be entitled to the same coverage under her health plan as any other spouse. However, as a self-employed artist, any time Mel needed health care, they had to pay one hundred percent of it out of their own pockets. Fortunately, Mel had been pretty healthy over the past 15 years, but that wasn't the point. A man in the city had taken the government to court and won the right for his long-time partner to receive health care benefits under his plan, and the teacher's union had followed suit. All Toni had to do was to call and request it. However, after so many years of putting up carefully constructed walls, she was finding it hard to tear them down.

All her life she had been cautious about what she said around her colleagues, carefully changing or omitting pronouns, diverting questions about her personal life and avoiding work-related social functions. She was very good at manipulating conversations. She did it so automatically and with such ease that it had almost become second nature, but it was actually a highly developed skill that commanded huge amounts of mental and emotional energy, and required her to always be on her guard. She was a master of diversion. However, she didn't like hiding. For as long as she could remember, she had struggled with her desire to just be herself versus her need for personal safety. And now, after more than 16 years of teaching, she was finding it more

and more difficult to ignore what she believed was her obligation to be a positive role model and to make a powerful impact on the lives of her students through her example.

She picked up the receiver again, rehearsing what she would say in her mind. This would be the first time she had spoken about her sexuality to anyone that she didn't implicitly trust with that information, and it would now become a matter of public record. Her heart pounded as she listened to the phone ring on the other end.

“Good Morning. Health Services.”

Toni's heart beat against her chest. “Uh...yes, good morning. I would like to have my spouse included for coverage under my family health plan.”

“Yes, ma'am. What's his name?”

Damn! Why hadn't she said partner instead of spouse? Toni was sure the woman on the other end must be able to hear her heart pounding right through the receiver. She took a deep breath. “Her name is Melissa Edwards.”

“Excuse me?”

“Melissa. Her name is Melissa Edwards.”

“That's what I thought you said. And your relationship is?”

“Partner.”

“Like a business partner?” The confusion in the woman's voice was evident.

Toni sighed. “No, like a spouse.”

“Ohhhh!” Toni could almost see the understanding register on the woman's face. “Just one moment and I'll adjust your information.”

When they were finished, Toni hung up the phone and heaved a sigh of relief. She had found that difficult, and there had been a number of awkward moments, but

she'd done it. She smiled. It felt good to say, 'This is who I am, and we are entitled to this coverage.' She was proud of herself. She couldn't wait to tell Mel.

Toni stuck her head in Mary's office door. "Hi there. I was just leaving for the day but I have something to tell you. Do you have a minute?"

"Sure, come on in." Mary swiveled around in her chair.

Toni sat down, unable to keep the enormous grin off her face. "You aren't going to believe what I did."

"What?"

"I called the union and requested that they put Mel on my health plan to receive coverage as my spouse."

"Good for you, Toni. How did it go?"

"There were a few awkward moments, but I got through it."

"Congratulations! Does Mel know?"

"Not yet. I tried to call her but there was no answer, and my adrenaline is all pumped up...I had to tell someone."

"Well, I'm honored to be your second choice!" Mary smiled. "That truly is cause for celebration. Before long you'll be carrying the flag in the Gay Pride Parade."

"I don't think so. Supporting from the sidelines is where I'm most comfortable."

"You never know, Toni. At one time you said you'd never feel comfortable enough to bring Mel to a staff function, but she's accompanied you to two events now."

"Well, that's true," Toni grinned, "but only because you were relentless about it."

"But aren't you glad I was?"

“I am...but I wasn't so sure at the time. Sometimes that first step is really tough, like making that call today. I also realize that sometimes it's my own fear that prevents me from doing things, and I need that little extra push.” She smiled at her friend. “I was really nervous the first time Mel came to a staff party, but everyone went out of their way to make us feel welcome. Nobody asked any awkward questions or made us feel uncomfortable. The staff has truly been wonderful. So, I guess you never know, maybe I will lead the parade someday and I'll carry a big sign that says 'Proud to be on the Team!'”

“And I'll walk beside you with a sign that says 'Proud to be a Teammate.'”

Toni grinned. “It's a date!”

## 22

“Toni?”

“Yeah?”

“You’ve been off in outer space ever since we sat down. Do you have something on your mind? You seem pre-occupied.” Her mother sounded a little annoyed.

“Sorry. What was the question?”

“Your father asked what your plans are for the summer. Will you be working at the playground again?”

“I’m not sure. I have to talk to the supervisor this week. I imagine I can have the job again if I want it.”

“Well that’s good, dear. You should go talk to them soon and get that settled. Would you like another pancake?”

“No thanks, Mom.”

“How about you, Moe?”

“No thanks.”

Mrs. Morgan stood up and began to clear the dishes.

Toni threw an anxious look in Moe’s direction. Moe nodded encouragement. Toni’s heart pounded. She had rehearsed what she would say, but now she couldn’t remember any of the words she had memorized. She was grateful that she had stuffed the letter in her back pocket. Toni took a deep breath. “Mom, could you sit back down for a minute? There’s something I need to tell you and Dad.”

The concern on her mother’s face was obvious as she set the dishes aside. She glanced at her husband, and then at Toni.

“Sit down, dear. Toni has something to tell us.” He patted the chair next to him. “It sounds important.” Mrs. Morgan sat down, her brow furrowed with worry. Her father turned toward her and smiled kindly. “Go ahead, dear,” he reached across the table and patted Toni’s hand, “we’re listening.”

Toni took a deep breath. “I don’t know quite how to begin...” She looked at her hands as she desperately searched her mind for the words she’d practiced, but they were gone. She felt her parents’ eyes on her as they waited for her to say something, and the uncomfortable silence grew.

Unable to wait any longer, Toni’s mother blurted out, “What is it, Toni? What’s wrong?” Her voice was filled with anxiety.

“Well, I’m ....” Toni studied the pattern on the tablecloth. “Well...it’s just that...”

“Toni,” her father’s gentle voice interrupted. She lifted her head and looked into his eyes, “are you dying?” She heard her mother gasp.

“Oh, God! No Dad!” Her eyes filled with tears.

“Well then, nothing can be as bad as that.” He smiled at her. “Go on, dear, whatever it is, it’ll be okay.

“Well...I’ve given a lot of thought to what I want to say...” Toni struggled to hang on to the tears that were brimming in her eyes. Her heart pounded in her ears and the pressure in her head was building. She decided to try another approach. She took a deep breath. “I wrote you a letter, just to help me organize my thoughts, but since I can’t seem to get started, I’ll just give you the letter and let you read it.” Toni reached into her back pocket and pulled out the crinkled pages. She couldn’t look at her mother, so she handed the letter across the table to her father. He took the letter and carefully unfolded it as her mother shuffled her chair closer.

Toni watched her parents’ faces as the meaning of the carefully chosen words on the page became clear to them. Worry and concern spread across her father’s face. Her mother covered her mouth with her hand and looked like she might be ill any moment. The seconds crawled by as Toni waited for them to finish. She looked at Moe, who smiled reassuringly and squeezed her hand. Finally, her father set the pages on the table and looked up at her, his eyes filled with tears. Toni thought her heart would break! She held her breath as she waited for her parents to say something. Her father spoke first.

“First of all, Toni, I want you to know that your mother and I love you.” He smiled at her through his tears. “Nothing you could do would ever change that. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Toni managed to croak a reply.

“Now, are you sure about this? I’m worried for you; you’re choosing a very difficult path.”

“I’m not choosing, Dad. Why would anyone choose such a difficult path if they didn’t have to?” Out of the corner of her eye, Toni saw her mother pick up the letter from the table. “I know it isn’t going to be easy, but this is who I am. I’m absolutely sure.” Toni stole a glance at her mother, who was now sobbing as she read the letter again. She looked back at her father. Tears trickled down his cheeks, and he looked so sad that Toni wished she could take it all back. Maybe telling her parents had been a mistake; she should have just kept it to herself.

Toni’s mother slammed the letter down on the table, making everyone jump. “It’s that god-damned Lindsay Jones’ fault! I should have seen it. She turned you into a fucking lizzie!”

Toni’s mother never swore, and her words hit Toni like a punch to the stomach.

“Jean!” Toni’s father looked at his wife in disbelief, but she ignored him.

Toni’s head was reeling. She inhaled slowly, trying to catch her breath so she could talk. “It isn’t anybody’s fault, Mom. I’ve felt like I was different than all the other girls ever since junior high. I would have eventually come to this conclusion anyway.”

“No! I don’t believe that. You’re young and easily misled. That fucking dyke put a spell on you! It’s just a big mistake. You just haven’t found the right boy.” Her mother wailed. “What are we going to tell people?”

With a stabbing pain to her heart, Toni realized her mother was ashamed of her. Sobs took over Toni’s body, and she covered her face with her hands; she couldn’t bear to look at the heartache she had caused. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt her

parents. Toni didn't know what to do. She peeked at her father. He had taken off his glasses and was wiping his eyes. "*Please, be on my side,*" she pleaded silently. She desperately needed his support, but she was also aware that she had put him in an impossible position, stuck between his daughter and his wife. Toni's head pounded.

"Jean, calm down." Her father's voice was kind and gentle.

Her mother wheeled around and glared at him. "Don't tell me to calm down, Frank! This is a fucking nightmare!" She turned toward Toni. "Why are you doing this to us? What did we do wrong? We tried to be good parents!"

"You are good parents," Toni sobbed. She knew this would be difficult for her mother, but she'd hoped her mother would at least try to understand. Toni hadn't anticipated the outburst; it was out of character and unexpected.

"This just isn't right, Toni. This is not what God intended. You're just confused. We'll go talk to Father MacKenzie tomorrow; he'll know what to do. He can help get you back on the right track."

Toni felt herself getting angry. "I'm not going to see the priest, Mom. There's nothing wrong with me. I'm gay. That's who I am. I'm sorry that I've hurt you, I never wanted to do that, but you're going to have to accept that this is who I am."

Her mother stood up and looked toward the sky, then raised her hands and began to sob loudly. "Why, God? What have I done wrong that you would punish me like this?" She looked at Toni. "Let us get you some help," she begged. "You're sick, but we could get you some help."

Toni jumped out of her chair, her anger and frustration mounting as the tears flowed down her cheeks. "I am not sick, Mom! I'm gay. You're the one with the fucking problem!" Toni sobbed. "You're not even trying to understand!"

“There is nothing to understand! You are sick!” Her mother pointed her finger in Toni’s face. “You’re a fucking lizzie... and you’re a pervert!”

Moe, who had sat quietly through this whole ordeal, jumped out of her chair and stepped between Toni and her mother. She looked her mother squarely in the eye.

“That’s enough, Mom.”

“What’s this? I suppose you’re one of them, too?”

“Shut up, Mom! Just shut-the-fuck-up!” Anger flashed in Moe’s eyes as she stood toe to toe with her mother.

Her father stepped between his wife and his youngest daughter. He put his hands on his wife’s shoulders and gently pushed her down into the chair. For a moment, Toni had the strangest sensation that she was in the wrong place. Her family didn’t behave this way; she didn’t know these people. She felt oddly detached as she watched the bizarre scene unfold, wondering how it had come to this.

“Moe’s right, Jean, it’s time for you to shut up.” Mrs. Morgan was momentarily stunned into silence, then leaned her head on her hands and continued to sob. He turned toward the girls. “Moe, I’m proud of the support you’ve offered your sister.” He squeezed her shoulder and kissed her on the forehead. “Toni...” He took her face in his hands and kissed her cheek. His face was full of remorse and regret. “Toni...your mother is obviously having some difficulty with your news, and although it may not seem like it at the moment, she loves you very much.” Her mother continued to wail. “I want to be sure you understand that there’s *nothing* you could do that would make us stop loving you.” He looked directly into Toni’s eyes. “Do you know that?” Toni nodded. “You’ll just have to give us some time, Toni.” He motioned his head toward

his wife and lowered his voice to a whisper. “She’ll come around.” He pulled Toni close and kissed the top of her head.

Toni wrapped her arms around her father and hugged him back. “Thanks, Dad,” she mumbled into his chest. She was so sorry to have put him through this, but she was grateful for his support. She wiped her nose on the back of her sleeve and looked at her father through burning, bloodshot eyes. “I’m sorry, Dad.” She stood on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek, then turned and left the kitchen.

“Well, that went well.” Moe sat cross-legged on the end of Toni’s bed. “Mom has flipped her lid! Can you believe the way she carried on? What’s with that?”

Toni sat cross-legged near the head of the bed. “I don’t know. I’ve never seen her act like that before.” Toni looked at the big, old oak outside her window and remembered the time she’d fallen out of the tree and broken her arm. Shortly afterwards, her mother tried to get the tree chopped down. She said it was old and brittle, and not only was it a danger to the children; it might topple over in a storm and go right through the roof of their house. Her father said that was ridiculous, and when her mother insisted, he paid a tree specialist to assess the tree to confirm that it was perfectly healthy. Her father stood his ground, and the tree stayed. Toni was glad; she loved that tree. She hoped her father would stand up for her, too. She turned her gaze back to Moe. “I can’t believe how badly that went.” Tears welled up in Toni’s eyes. “Thanks for coming with me, Moe. It meant a lot to me that you were there.”

“You’re welcome, but I really didn’t do much.”

“Yes, you did! I couldn’t believe it when you stood up to Mom like that. I thought you were going to hit her!”

Moe grinned. “I felt like it.” She was surprised at her reaction, but her mother had crossed the line, and she had felt instinctively protective. She was pleased to have been there to support her sister. She raised her fists and made a menacing face. “It’s a good thing Dad stepped in.” She made a playful jab at Toni. “You probably want to call Lindsay. I’m going to go clean up my room. Are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah, I think so.” Moe’s kindness touched her heart.

“Come and get me if you need anything.”

Choked with emotion and unable to respond, Toni simply nodded.

Moe closed the door behind her, muffling the sounds of her parents still arguing in the kitchen. Toni picked up the phone and dialed.

“Hello?”

At the sound of Lindsay’s voice, Toni began to sob.

“Toni! What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

She tried to speak, but couldn’t get the words out between the sobs.

“Toni, you’re frightening me.” Despite what had happened at the prom the night before, Lindsay loved Toni; she needed to know what was wrong. “I’ll be right over.”

“No!” Toni struggled to catch her breath. “Don’t come here, Lindsay. I’m serious.” She wiped her nose on her sleeve and then thought about how gross that was. “Just hang on a minute.” Toni set the phone down and blew her nose. She took a deep breath and picked up the phone again. “I told my parents that I’m gay, and it didn’t go so well.... I don’t know what I’m going to do. My mother has gone off the deep end, and my father is trying to do damage control. Maybe telling them was a mistake.”

“Oh, Toni, that’s awful. Come and stay here for tonight. My parents are going out, and I have to baby sit Michael. I’ll tell mom you’re going to sleep over; she won’t care.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

There was a long pause on the other end.

“Toni?”

“What about Tom?”

“Oh, don’t worry about him, come on over.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.” Toni hung up the phone and went to her closet. She threw her knapsack on the bed along with her pajamas and some clean clothes for the next day. As she dug around in the closet for her other sneaker, she noticed her gym bag. She pulled it out and sat down on the bed. Holding the bag on her lap, she looked at it for a long time. Finally she set it down. She went to her dresser and began to dig through her drawers, throwing clothes onto the bed. She went back to her closet and found her missing sneaker. Toni began to fill her bag.

When she was done, she sat down on her bed and looked around her room, wondering if she had everything she needed. As her gaze fell on the big oak outside her window, she remembered her journal. She reached under the edge of her mattress and pulled out the book that guarded her most private thoughts and feelings; she couldn’t risk having her mother find that. She ran her hand across the plain blue cover and wondered if she should burn it, but she knew she couldn’t. Toni shrugged off her knapsack and forced the book into the already over-stuffed bag, then pulled the straps back over her shoulders. She picked up her gym bag and opened her bedroom door.

Moe's door was closed and she could hear her parents still arguing in the kitchen. She crept down the hall and down the stairs to the front door. Her heart pounded. She hoped her parents wouldn't hear her. She quietly took her jacket from the closet in the entry, turned the knob and slipped out the front door. Closing the door carefully behind her, she crept down the front steps. As soon as her foot touched the pavement, she began to run.

Once she was around the corner and out of sight of her house, she stopped. Setting her gym bag down on the sidewalk, she leaned over, bracing her hands on her knees as she gasped for air. It was hard to run with two heavy bags. After several deep breaths, she picked up her gym bag and continued to walk. Her life had taken a dramatic twist, and she wasn't sure where she would end up, but she had a plan. Feeling bolstered by a sense of determination, mixed with a little fear and anticipation, she walked with a purpose. For the first time in several days, she felt like she was doing what was best for her.

## 23

Farnham Falls had grown considerably during the twenty years Toni had been away, and although the town maintained its own identity, it had grown into a suburb of the large city where Toni had spent her years as a young adult. Toni looked out the window at the beautiful grounds surrounding Farnham Falls High and couldn't believe that more than five years had slipped by since she'd accepted the principalship.

She looked at the framed picture of the three of them and the backhoe that hung on her office wall. It was one of her favorite pictures. She barely remembered the whirlwind of planning and construction that took place during that first year; it seemed so long ago now. What an adventure it had been!

She looked out the window, remembering how nervous she'd been as she waited for that very first bus load of students to arrive at their brand new high school, and now here she was waiting to greet the fourth group of new students to attend

Farnham Falls High. There had been some growing pains that first year as students from several communities came together to create a brand new school identity, but they'd gotten through.

Toni looked around her office. It was nicely decorated and comfortable; however, she tried to spend as little time there as possible, despite the fact that she often felt overwhelmed with paperwork. She worked hard at building relationships and developing a respectful school community, and so she tried to be out of her office and visible around the school as much as she could, talking with the students and staff. The paperwork always got done eventually, so she didn't worry too much about missing a deadline now and again.

Toni smiled as she reminisced about the journey that brought her to Farnham Falls High. Mary had been a tremendous support, and Toni was grateful for her constant guidance, even though she was now retired. She was glad Mary had pushed; it had been a good journey.

Toni's thoughts were interrupted as she saw the first big yellow bus turn into the driveway, and her heart fluttered a little. She smiled; amazed that she still got the first day jitters. Toni headed out to welcome the wide-eyed newcomers and to greet those who were now old hats as they got off the bus. There was an excited buzz in the air as the students mingled in the foyer before the first day assembly.

"Good morning. Welcome to Farnham Falls High." Toni smiled as students swarmed through the front doors. "Hey, Joey, how was your summer? Did you do much paddling?"

"Made the national team, Miss!"

"Hey, congratulations!"

Joey beamed as he disappeared into the swarm of students.

“Welcome back, Sarah. How did your summer job go?”

“It was great, Ms Morgan. I love working at camp!”

“Glad to hear that, Sarah. It’s good to see you.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Toni noticed a boy being carried along on the edge of the crowd, and something about him caught her attention. She watched him for a moment. She knew she recognized him, but try as she might, she couldn’t think of his name. Unlike the other students who were eagerly chatting with friends, he walked alone, not at all excited to be returning to school. As he drew near to her, she motioned him aside. Smiling warmly, she stuck out her hand. “Welcome back to school. What’s your name?”

The boy took Toni’s hand and shook it tentatively. “Bailey Brown.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Bailey. What grade are you in?”

“Twelve.”

“Oh, so you’ll be graduating this year.”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s exciting! This is a big year for you, then.” Toni smiled. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help you out.”

“Thank you, Ms Morgan.” A subtle, fleeting smile crossed his lips before he slid away on the crest of the crowd.

Toni watched him drift away and wondered if maybe he was just shy, but something about him worried her. She would have to remember to ask Ruth about him later. “Hi Janelle.” Toni waved. “You look stunning today.”

Toni wandered around the foyer, catching up on students' summer news, introducing herself to those she didn't recognize, and greeting each group of students as they spilled off the bus. She loved the first day of school as the kids arrived all decked out in their very best outfits, filled with so much potential and promise. It made her heart swell.

“Good morning, Ms Morgan.”

Toni turned around to locate the speaker. “Well, good morning to you, Ms Campbell. How are things down in the guidance office this morning?”

“Pretty slow so far, but I imagine they'll pick up as soon as students get their schedules and try their best to convince me that they absolutely must change this course or another.” Ruth grinned. “They always try.”

“And I imagine they always will, no matter how many times, or how many different ways we tell them they can't. Any new registrations?”

“Just a few.

Ruth Campbell was one of the few people on staff with whom Toni was 'out' and completely comfortable to be herself. She and Mel had become quite friendly with Ruth and her husband over the past few years, even socializing with them outside of school from time to time.

“How are Mel and the kids?” Ruth asked.

“They're good. I can't believe that Jesse is going into grade four this year, and Lucas is beginning grade two!”

“I know; where does the time go? And how about Mel? We haven't seen you guys since we went to the beach in August.”

“She’s been working really hard on her painting. She’s preparing for an exhibit at the Seaside Gallery coming up in December.”

“That’s marvelous!”

“Yes, but it requires her to have a lot of finished work, so she’s been pushing hard to get things done. Listen Ruth, do you know a boy in grade 12 this year named Bailey Brown?”

“I know who he is. He has a brother, Cory, in grade 11 and there’s another younger brother beginning grade ten this year.

“Do you know anything about Bailey?”

“Not really. I know that he’s a bit of a loner, but he’s a good student and he has decent grades. He made an appointment to see me some time in the spring last year, but then he never showed up. When I tracked him down to find out what happened, he apologized, said he’d been sick, but that everything was sorted out. He was very polite. Why? What’s up?”

“I saw him coming in to school just a few minutes ago, and I called him over to say hello, but something has been bothering me about him.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. I can’t really put my finger on it.”

“Hmmm.” Ruth furrowed her brow. “If I get a chance, I’ll try to check in with him before the end of the week and see if I get a sense of anything out of sorts. I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks, Ruth, I appreciate that.

“Well, I guess I should head back down to guidance and make sure that nobody has upset any apple carts. I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Okay, I’ll see you in a bit.” Toni wandered around the foyer, mingling and chatting with students until the bell rang, and they slowly dispersed, disappearing from the hallways as they filtered into the gymnasium to be directed to their classrooms. Even though they had a pretty good system, there were always a few panicky newcomers who lost their way as they tried to follow their schedule. Toni spent the morning roaming the halls until every last student had been reassured and pointed in the right direction.

\* \* \*

It was the first dance of the year. Toni looked at her watch and nodded for Ruth to unlock the doors and admit the horde of eager students waiting outside. There was always a good turnout for the first dance. The students were required to follow a roped-off path that led them by coat check, shoe check, ID check and finally to the place where Toni greeted each and every one of them as they entered the building. She shook each student’s hand, welcomed them, smiled, breathed deeply, and wished them a good time. In this way, she was usually able to detect that rare student who tried to ignore the no drugs or alcohol rule. After the last student had passed through the check points, she turned to Ruth and smiled. “Not a one tonight!”

Toni wandered through the gym, dancing to the music as she smiled and chatted with students. Everyone was having a good time, and things seemed to be going well until about halfway through the dance when one of the chaperones tracked her down amongst the crowd.

“I think we may have a situation on our hands, Toni. Some students told one of the security guards that there’s someone vomiting in the boys’ bathroom. He went in to check it out, but the student won’t come out of the stall.”

“Oh, dear.” They began to walk. “Do you know who it is?”

“We’re pretty sure it’s Chad Mosher.”

“The hockey player?”

“Yeah. You can smell the alcohol as soon as you walk into the bathroom.”

“He must have snuck it in somehow and drank it here. I didn’t smell anything on him when he came in.” Toni stopped at the edge of the bathroom door. “Chad, its Ms Morgan. I’m coming in.”

“No, no, you can’t, this is a boy’s bathroom.”

“I’m coming in Chad.” The smell of alcohol was strong. Toni smiled at the security guard who stood at the locked stall door. “Hey, how are you?”

“Fine, thanks.” Toni was glad to see that he was a big guy, because so was Chad Mosher. She ducked down and looked under the door. She could see Chad’s feet and legs as he knelt over the toilet bowl. She stood up, pulled off a length of paper towel and moistened it with cool water, then dug a loonie out of her pocket. “I’m coming in, Chad.” She turned the loonie in the slot to release the latch.

“No, you can’t.”

“The security guard is with me. We’re going to get you on your feet and take you to the office. There’s a bathroom down there if you need one, and we’ll get you a bucket.” Toni leaned over and touched Chad’s shoulder. “Here, wipe your face with this; it’ll make you feel a little better.” Toni put a hand under one arm and the security guard got the other while they lifted him to his feet. “Okay, Chad, here we go.”

They half dragged, half carried him the short distance to the office and set him down in a chair. Toni handed him a wastebasket and then sat down herself. “How are you feeling, Chad?”

“Not so good.” He hung his head over the basket.

“You know I have to call someone to come and get you. Are your parents at home?”

Chad lifted his head as tears filled his eyes. “Please Ms Morgan, you can’t call my parents. My dad will kill me!”

“I’m sorry, Chad, I’m required to call. What will your dad do?”

“I’ll be in so much shit; I’ll be grounded for the rest of my life.”

“Well, probably not for the rest of your life...”

“Please, miss...” He was really sobbing now. “I promise I’ll never do anything like this ever again. Please...don’t do this to me.”

“I’m not doing anything to you, Chad. You did this to yourself.”

“Please, don’t call! I’m begging you.”

“I have to call, Chad. Someone has to come and pick you up and take you home.” Toni looked up his phone number on the computer and dialed the number.

“Please don’t!” Chad continued to sob.

“Hello? Mrs. Mosher. This is Toni Morgan at the school. I have Chad here in my office. He’s been drinking and needs someone to come pick him up and take him home. Ten minutes will be fine. Thank you.” Toni hung up the phone and looked at Chad. “Your mother’s on her way.”

“Thanks for ruining my life, you heartless bitch!”

“I think you can thank yourself for that Chad. I’m just going to step outside the door here and give you a minute to cool off before your mother arrives.”

“I don’t need to cool off....”

Toni shut the door before she heard anymore. She was surprised by his foul language. She didn’t know Chad well, but she did know that he was a pretty good student and a star athlete. His parents had high expectations for him as a professional hockey player. Maybe he was under a lot of stress. She peeked in the window at him. He was hunched over, his head in his hands and his body shaking with sobs. She wondered what he would have to face when he got home.

Before long a woman came into the office. Her eyes looked a little red, like maybe she’d been crying, and she hurried over to Toni. “Ms. Morgan?” She stuck out her hand. “I’m Sherry Mosher, Chad’s mother.”

Toni took her hand and shook it warmly. “Thanks for coming so quickly.”

“Chad’s father and I were absolutely shocked to get your call. This is so unlike Chad.” She looked embarrassed and looked away. “We’re just devastated that he would do such a thing!”

“It’s okay, Mrs. Mosher. Kids make mistakes. Fortunately nobody got hurt as a result.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s in my office. He didn’t want me to call, and he’s very upset. I wanted to give him a little space. Come on in.” Toni knocked on the door. “Chad, it’s Ms Morgan. Your mother is here; we’re coming in.” She pushed the door open and invited Sherry Mosher to take a seat beside her son. “Chad, your mother’s here.”

“Don’t you think I fucking know that?”

“Chad!” His mother touched his back. “You can’t speak to Ms Morgan that way!”

“I’ll speak to her however I want. She’s a fucking bitch, anyway!” Sherry Mosher’s jaw dropped, and she was at a loss for words. “I hate this fucking school. I fucking hate it!” His sobs began again.

Toni stood up and looked at Sherry. She tried to smile and spoke as gently as she could. “I think maybe you two need a few minutes together. I’m just going to step out and get a drink of water, and then I’ll be back. Can I bring you a drink?”

“No thank you, Ms Morgan, but please, wait for just a minute.” She turned toward her son. “Chad, you owe Ms Morgan an apology. We didn’t raise you to speak to people that way.”

“I don’t owe that fucking bitch anything.”

Toni glanced at Sherry Mosher and whispered, “I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Besides, we’ve got a fucking dyke running our school!”

Toni stopped in her tracks as she felt every muscle in her body tense. Chad’s words felt like a knife had been plunged into her back, and the next few seconds felt like five minutes. She felt every motion, every breath that she drew into her strangled lungs, every agonizing beat of her own heart. She looked over her shoulder just in time to see Sherry Mosher slap her son’s face. She took a deep breath and closed the door behind her.

Toni leaned against the wall, blinking back tears. The strength of the hate behind his words, even coming from a drunken, incoherent teenage boy, felt like an assault. She was amazed and angered by the power his words had to frighten and intimidate her. She took a couple of deep breaths and walked down the hall to the water cooler,

wondering what she should do. Chad wasn't in any condition to have a sensible conversation about anything, and his mother had already reacted pretty strongly. As much as she might have liked to nail his ass to a wall, she decided that it was probably best to let it go. Toni took a long swallow and a deep breath and headed back down the hall.

She knocked on the door and then went in, glancing toward Chad and his mother, as she sat down in her chair and sighed. "I think it might be best if Chad stays home tomorrow; he can make a fresh start on Monday."

Sherry stood up. "I am so sorry for Chad's behavior, Ms. Morgan. We didn't raise him to treat people this way, and you can be certain that his father and I will deal with this at home. Thank you for calling."

"I appreciate your support, Mrs. Mosher. Thank you for coming in so quickly." Toni closed the door behind them as angry tears stung her cheeks. There was so much power in his hateful words, but she guessed he knew it, and that made her even angrier. What right did that fucking little shit have to assault her with his words? She was tired of being afraid, something had to change. She blew her nose, wiped her eyes and headed back to the dance.

## 24

Toni rounded the corner and saw Lindsay sitting on the front step waiting for her; she looked worried. She hadn't meant to upset her, but she was pleased to know that Lindsay was concerned. Lindsay hurried out to meet her.

"Here, let me help you with that bag." Lindsay took the heavy gym bag. "What have you got in here? It weighs a ton!"

"Just stuff."

"Are you okay?"

"I will be. Did you ask your mother if I can stay over?"

"Yeah, she said it's fine."

The girls dragged Toni's bags up the stairs to Lindsay's room, dropped them on the floor, and then flopped onto the bed. Lindsay sat cross-legged. Toni lay on her back, hugging a pillow. She tried hard to keep her tears in check, but despite a

concerted effort, a tear escaped and trickled down her cheek. Lindsay reached out and wiped it away. She gazed into Toni's eyes, and the love they felt for each other passed between them without a single word. Lindsay leaned over and kissed the damp spot on Toni's cheek. She stretched out on the bed beside Toni, nuzzled her body close and laid her head on Toni's shoulder. The girls held each other as Toni tearfully described the disaster and the devastation that resulted from coming out to her parents.

Toni sat up and wiped her eyes. "I better call home, Lindsay. I snuck out of the house and nobody knows where I am."

Lindsay left and came back with the portable phone. She handed it to Toni.

"Could you dial my number and ask for Moe?"

"Sure." Lindsay sat down on the bed and dialed.

"Hello?" She was relieved to hear Moe's voice.

"Hi Moe, its Lindsay."

"Hi, Lindsay. Just hang on a minute; I'll get Toni for you."

"No, wait! She's here."

"She is?"

"Yeah, she wants to talk to you." Lindsay handed the phone to Toni.

"Hey, Moe.

"What are you doing, Toni? When did you go to Lindsay's?"

"About an hour ago. I just couldn't stay there and listen to Mom and Dad argue. I'm going to stay at Lindsay's tonight. Will you tell Dad where I am?"

"Okay."

"Are they still fighting?"

“No, but I don’t think they resolved anything. I think they just needed to take a break. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. Thanks, Moe. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” Toni hung up the phone and looked at Lindsay. “Thanks for letting me stay here tonight. I just couldn’t stay there with my mother, and I don’t know where else I could have gone.”

Lindsay smiled at Toni. “I’m glad you called.” Then, suddenly shy, Lindsay looked away. “Let’s go see when Mom and Dad are leaving.”

Toni and Lindsay sat on the sofa watching a movie, and Michael lay on the floor. Lindsay’s parents had gone out for supper, but her mother had left lasagna for them, and she’d rented a couple of movies. Toni tried to concentrate on the story, but she was distracted by Lindsay’s closeness. Her mind kept wandering back to the night they’d spent in the tent and the excitement of exploring each other’s bodies. Her whole body tingled with the memory. Her foot had fallen asleep under her, but she didn’t want to move and break the fragile connection where Lindsay’s leg touched hers. Even though their legs barely touched, the exchange of electricity felt like a thousand volts to Toni. She wondered if Lindsay felt it, too.

Michael stood up and stretched. “I’m going to put some popcorn in the microwave before the next movie. Do you guys want some?”

“No thanks.” Lindsay stood up, breaking the connection. “I don’t think I’m interested in the next movie. How about you, Toni? It’s a war movie. Do you want to watch it?”

Toni hadn’t been very interested in the first movie. She stood up and stretched, shaking her numb foot. “Actually, I’m feeling kind of tired. What time is it?”

Lindsay checked her watch. "It's a little after 10 p.m."

"If you don't mind, I think I'd just as soon go to bed."

"Fine with me." Lindsay turned toward her younger brother. "Make sure you turn off the TV and go to bed as soon as the movie is over. And don't forget to turn out the lights before you come up." Lindsay and Toni headed toward the stairs. "Oh, and don't eat everything in sight."

Lindsay closed her bedroom door, and then pulled a pair of pajamas from the top drawer of her dresser.

Toni pulled her pajamas and toothbrush from her knapsack and jumped up in a hurry. "I have to use the bathroom." She hurried down the hall. She couldn't keep her eyes off Lindsay, and she didn't want to be in the room when Lindsay changed. She looked at her reflection in the mirror as she brushed her teeth, wondering how she would be able to sleep so close to Lindsay without touching her. Maybe she should sleep on the floor. Toni walked slowly back down the hall, feeling anxious and uncomfortable about the sleeping arrangements. She knocked on the door and waited.

"Why are you knocking? Just come on in."

"Well, I didn't want to just barge in...."

"Oh, don't be so silly." Lindsay threw a pillow in Toni's direction.

Toni caught the pillow. "Thanks. If you could just find me a blanket, I think I'll sleep on the floor."

"Now you're being ridiculous! Come on, get in bed."

Toni climbed into Lindsay's bed and lay on her back as close to the edge as she could. She wondered if she could sleep that way all night without moving. Lindsay turned off the light and climbed into bed next to Toni. Although they weren't touching,

Toni was very aware of Lindsay's nearness, and her heart began to pound. She concentrated on taking deep breaths. She wanted more than anything to reach over and touch Lindsay's soft skin, to kiss her tender lips. Toni lay very still and tried to focus on her breathing.

"Toni?" Lindsay rolled onto her side and pushed herself up on one elbow. Toni opened her eyes. Lindsay's body lingered over her own, and even in the darkness, Toni could see that Lindsay's face was only inches away. She fought an urge to pull Lindsay close and kiss her. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"You're acting kind of strange."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know, it's like you're shy or something."

"Well, I don't mean to be."

"Oh."

Lindsay lay back down on the bed. Toni felt like she should say something, but she didn't know what. The silence was agonizing. Except for the swoosh of Toni's own heartbeat in her ears, the only other sound was Lindsay's breathing. Toni strained her ears. Was Lindsay breathing heavily, or did it just sound loud because of the silence? Lindsay moved on the bed beside her, and Toni could feel Lindsay's warm breath against her neck. Her heartbeat quickened. Lindsay shifted again and Toni felt the fleeting gentle caress of lips against her neck, or did she? A shudder raced through Toni's body and she gasped. Her mind raced. She tried to lie perfectly still... to control her breathing... waiting ...wondering... Lindsay snuggled close. Still, Toni waited,

desperately afraid to be wrong. Lindsay stroked Toni's hair, and nuzzled against her neck, sending bursts of electricity surging through Toni's body.

Toni's breath was shallow. "Lindsay...what are you doing?"

"Shhh." Lindsay pushed herself up on one elbow and looked into Toni's eyes. She wiped away the tear that slid down Toni's cheek. She traced the outline of Toni's lips with her fingertip, then leaned down and kissed her more tenderly than Toni thought possible. Toni lay still, her body on fire, as Lindsay hovered over her, covering her face with gentle kisses. Finally, the sensations that coursed through her body were more than she could bear. Toni reached up and pulled Lindsay close. They kissed passionately, their bodies moving as one. Any uncertainty that Toni felt moments before was completely forgotten.

Toni peered at the clock. It was nearly 1:00 am. She gazed at the outline of Lindsay's body in the darkness and wondered if she was asleep. It had been an emotionally exhausting day, yet Toni was unable to sleep. "Lindsay?"

"Umm?" Lindsay rolled over and opened her sleepy eyes. She touched Toni's cheek tenderly and smiled. "Kiss me."

Toni's heart swelled. She leaned over and gently kissed Lindsay's lips, then the tip of her nose, her eyelids, her cheeks, and finally her lips again. Toni raised her head and looked into Lindsay's smiling face.

"I love you, Toni Morgan," Lindsay whispered.

"Really?"

"You know I do." Lindsay stroked Toni's cheek.

Feeling encouraged and perhaps a little reckless, Toni forged ahead. “Come away with me, Lindsay. Come away with me to the city.”

Lindsay sat up, her face suddenly cloudy. “What do you mean, Toni? Are you running away?”

“I’m not running away. I’m trying to live my life as honestly as I can, and I can’t do it here. Please, come with me. We can get an apartment together; I’ll get a job....” Toni’s eyes filled with tears. “We can work it out, Lindsay, I know we can. Please... come with me.”

Lindsay looked at her hands. “I don’t know, Toni. Let’s talk about it tomorrow; I’m exhausted.” She kissed Toni’s cheek and lay down, patting the mattress beside her.

Toni laid her head back against the pillow as Lindsay curled up against Toni’s side. A silent tear slid down her cheek; she knew Lindsay wouldn’t come.

\* \* \*

Toni opened her eyes in the dim light of early dawn. She lifted her head and craned her neck to peer at the clock. It was a little after 5:00 am. She hadn’t slept well, but she didn’t feel tired. She watched the rhythmic rise and fall of Lindsay’s belly. As difficult as the past couple of weeks had been, Toni felt like she was finally beginning to understand herself. She was beginning to realize that being different didn’t mean being broken. Things began to make sense. She felt like a crocus, determined to push its way through the frozen earth in order to burst forth and bloom. She looked at Lindsay’s sleeping face. She would forever be in Lindsay’s debt for setting her on the path toward discovering this important part of her identity.

Toni rolled off the edge of the bed, being careful not to wake Lindsay, and tiptoed across the room. She pulled her nightshirt over her head and stuffed it into her gym bag. The shorts and t-shirt she had been wearing the day before hung over the back of the chair. She quickly pulled them on and sat down at Lindsay's desk. Opening the desk drawer very quietly, she found a piece of paper and a pen and began to write.

*Monday, June 25*

*Dear Lindsay,*

*As I sit here and look at you while you sleep, I really don't know exactly how to say all the things I'm feeling. I'm going to miss you desperately, more than I can tell you. You've given me so much. I will always be grateful.*

*I wish things could have worked out differently. I'm sorry if you think I'm running away, but I don't feel like I am. It feels more like an act of self-preservation. I can't stay in Farnham Falls and find the support I need; I'm dying here. I need to be in a place where I can be myself and feel good about who I am.*

*More than anything, I wish that we could be together, but I'm not willing to be your secret fling, and I'm not strong enough to be in your presence without aching for more. I need to sort out my tangled mess of emotions, and I need to put some time and distance between us so I can cool the fire in my heart and move on. I cherish the time we've spent together. You are my first real love, and I will always hold a very special place for you in my heart.*

*I don't know what the future holds for me, but I'm ready to explore, to open myself up to new experiences, and to grow. However, the best experience will always and forever be you...*

*Toni xo*

Toni found an envelope and sealed the letter. She turned it over and wrote Lindsay's name on the front then leaned the letter against the mirror on Lindsay's dresser. She picked up her backpack and wiggled her arms through the straps. As she turned around to find her gym bag, her backpack knocked a book off the desk and onto the floor with a loud bang. Toni froze, her eyes shot toward the bed, and she held her breath. Lindsay murmured and rolled over, but continued to sleep. Toni exhaled slowly. She picked up the book then reached for her overstuffed gym bag and tiptoed to the door. Turning the knob painstakingly slowly, Toni slipped into the hallway. She crept down the stairs and out the back door into the semi-darkness of early morning.

Toni walked down the deserted streets of Farnham Falls, enjoying the tranquility and the solitude. Those few moments just before dawn were her favorite time of day. She felt remarkably composed as she watched the stars fade and listened to an enthusiastic chorus of birds announce the beginning of another new day. She sat down on the bench at the bus stop and watched the sky brighten as the sun painted a hazy mural in the sky. Checking her watch, she anxiously hoped the bus would come along before Lindsay woke up and realized that she was gone.

## 25

Toni tried to remember the last time she had been to see Pam as she climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. She leaned against the wall to catch her breath and thought about Chad. He had come to see her after his suspension to offer a heartfelt apology. He'd been a model student ever since, and although nothing had developed as a result of his outburst, Toni had been feeling anxious and unsettled ever since. She took a deep breath, pulled open the door to the fourth floor, and headed down the hall toward Counseling Services.

“Hi Shawna.”

“Hi, Toni.” Shawna smiled. “Pam’s expecting you. You can go right in.”

Toni knocked on Pam’s door.

Pam spun around in her chair. “Well, hello, stranger!” She stood up and smiled broadly. “Come on in. I haven’t seen you in a while. Can I get you some coffee?”

“No, thanks. I’m trying to limit my coffee to just the mornings, but some water would be nice. I’ve been trying to make healthier choices lately.”

“I think I’ll join you.” Pam filled two glasses from the water cooler in the office. She handed Toni a glass and sat down.

“Thank you.” Toni took a long drink. “I’ve been trying to fit in a little bit of exercise every day, so I climbed the stairs all the way up here to the fourth floor.”

“That’s a long haul, isn’t it? I try to use the stairs unless I’m carrying a lot of stuff; it does get easier. How are you finding the time to fit exercise into your busy schedule?”

“I’m mostly trying to make better choices, like taking the stairs, but I’m also trying to get out for a 30 minute walk a few times a week. So far, I’ve been managing to fit it in.” Toni patted her stomach. “I’m hoping to take off a few pounds.”

Pam patted her own midriff and grinned. “I hear you. So how’ve you been?”

“Well, I’ve been busy as usual, but I’ve been feeling really unsettled lately, and I’m not sure why.” Toni sighed. I had a disturbing incident with a student last week, but that’s pretty much resolved. I don’t think that’s it.”

“What happened?”

“A grade 12 boy got drunk at a school dance, and when I called his mother to come and pick him up he was belligerent and called me a fucking dyke. His mother was terribly embarrassed.”

“That’s awful, Toni! That must have been extremely upsetting.”

“It was at the time...” Tears brimmed in her eyes. “It felt like I’d been assaulted.” She reached for a tissue. “But he was loaded drunk, and he came to apologize the next day. It’s all over with now.”

Well, if that's not bothering you, what do you think it is?" Pam stood up and held out her hand for Toni's glass. "Let me get you a refill." She walked over to the cooler.

"I don't know." Toni sighed and leaned back into the sofa. "Maybe I'm having a mid-life crisis. I'm too young to be entering menopause." She grinned.

Pam chuckled as she fanned herself. "Yeah, I thought so, too."

Toni gazed out the window and wondered what Chad had to face when he got home that night. She had learned at an early age that no matter how well you think you know a person; you can't predict how they will react in a difficult situation. She thought about her own mother and the difficulties they'd had when she was a teenager. "People say that being a teenager is the best time of your life." Toni sighed. "You couldn't pay me enough to be a teenager again." She blinked back her tears.

Pam returned Toni's glass and sat down. "I take it your teenage years weren't so easy?"

Toni dabbed at her eyes. "I grew up in a very loving home. Things were fine until the very end of grade twelve when I told my parents that I'm gay, and then all hell broke loose. I left home as soon as I graduated."

"Is that why you left? Because your parents didn't react well?"

"My mother didn't react well, and my father was caught in the middle. However, I must say that my mother has really come a long way since then. In fact, I think she might even be ready to carry the flag in the Pride Parade." Toni smiled. "It's been a long, hard road, though. I'm pretty sure my dad convinced my mother that if she didn't get over it she would lose me completely, and maybe my sister, too."

"You have a sister?"

“Yeah. Her name is Maureen, but everyone calls her Moe. She’s a year younger than me.”

“I don’t think you ever mentioned her before. Do you have any other siblings?”

“No. Just me and Moe.”

“Were you close?”

“Well, we had our fights, like most siblings, but we were pretty good friends. Being so close in age, we hung around quite a bit. She was a little freaked out at first when she found out that I’m a lesbian, but she got over it pretty quickly and she was my biggest supporter. She was with me when I told my parents, and I don’t think I could have done it without her. She really stood up for me. At one point, I thought she and Mom were going to come to blows!”

“Really? That sounds pretty intense.”

“It was. It was a bad scene, and so unlike our family. I was devastated. I left home that night and never went back. I felt really badly about walking away and leaving Moe to deal with the fallout, but I just couldn’t stay.” Toni’s eyes brimmed with tears. She was surprised at how painful it still was to think about that night. She blinked the tears back, took a deep breath and continued. “The first couple of years away from home were tough. I didn’t speak to my parents at all, and I barely spoke to Moe. Sometimes I would call when I was pretty sure my parents would be out, just to let Moe know I was alright.”

“Did you have a place to go when you left?”

“Not exactly. My parents thought I was staying over night at a friend’s house, which I did, but I got up at 5 am the next morning and caught the 6 am bus into the city. My cousin Katie is just a couple of years older than me, and she had an apartment in the

city; I went there. I don't think it was even 8 am when I arrived at her place. I banged on the door until she got out of bed. She was surprised to see me, but she let me stay. I had to beg her not to tell my parents where I was, though. She finally agreed, as long as I promised to call home and let them know I was okay, which I did. They eventually found out where I was, though. My dad tried to make me come home, but I wouldn't go.

“So you stayed with your cousin for a while?”

“Yeah, it worked out okay for both of us. Katie's room-mate was graduating from university and moving back home, so Katie needed a new room-mate. I slept on the sofa for a couple weeks and then moved into her old room-mate's bedroom. I found a job for the summer to help pay the rent. My parents had already paid my university tuition for the year, so I didn't have to worry about that. It was fun to be on my own, but I had a hard time getting over Lindsay.”

“Your high school sweetheart?”

“Ummm...” Toni gazed out the window. “...my first love. I fell in love with her in high school, and she broke my heart. We had a very intense, very short three week affair. I tried to get her to come to the city with me, but she was afraid to leave, and I couldn't stay.”

Toni looked at Pam, her eyes filled with sadness. “I wrote her a letter a couple of weeks after I left to tell her that I had found a job and a place to stay. Katie agreed to split the rent three ways if Lindsay and I didn't mind sharing a room. I was thrilled! I wrote to Lindsay to try and convince her to join me in the city.”

Toni looked away as she thought about the letter. She remembered how she'd agonized over every word, and written it over and over again. She had been so excited

and hopeful. And now, even so many years later, it still made her a little sad. She still had a copy of the letter, stuffed in a shoe box that was buried deep in the back of her closet.

*July 17*

*My dearest Lindsay,*

*I'm so sorry that I left without waking you. I was afraid you would try to stop me, and I wasn't sure I had enough resolve to go if you'd asked me to stay. I just couldn't stay in Farnham Falls. My mother has lost her marbles, and I'm just not strong enough to be around you without wanting more... I felt like I was dying inside, and the only way I could possibly survive was to get away. I hope you can forgive me for running off.*

*I don't know if being near you or being apart from you is more painful. I've missed you terribly these past few weeks, more than I can ever begin to tell you. Have you missed me, too? I want to hold you in my arms, to feel your warm body next to mine, to feel the tender caress of your lips against my own. There's a gaping hole in my heart and I feel incomplete without you. My days are empty and meaningless...*

*I love you, Lindsay! I want you to come live with me in the city. I've worked everything out. I moved in with my cousin, Katie, who has a big apartment not far from the university. She says we could split the rent three ways if you want to move in with us. You and I would have to share a room, but I didn't think you'd mind. I'm working at a nearby grocery store and saving money. You could get a job there,*

*too. If we pool our money, I'm sure we could pay our share of the rent and still save enough to cover your tuition for second semester. If not, I'll get a second job.*

*I love you, Lindsay, and I think you love me, too. What could be more important than really loving someone, and having someone love you back? Please come, I've been a tangled mess without you. There's nothing we can't work out, as long as we're together. Please come.*

*Love always,*

*Toni xo*

Toni smiled to herself as she remembered the letter. It seemed kind of corny now, but she'd meant every word of it at the time. She returned her gaze to Pam. "I waited anxiously for the mail everyday until it became so sad and depressing that I stopped checking altogether. Then I started counting the days until university classes began in the fall, but she never showed up. I never knew what happened to her until I saw her at my high school reunion.

"That must have been really hard on you."

"It was. I think I might have been depressed. At the very least, I was on a collision course with disaster, and I'm not quite sure how I managed not to crash and burn. I started hanging around at a gay bar, and I..." Toni felt her face get hot. "...I slept with whoever would take me home. I nearly flunked out of my first year of university. I cut classes, drank too much, experimented with drugs, and hung around with some unsavory people.

It got so bad that Katie had to come and bail me out of jail one night. I think that was my wake up call. I realized I was getting in way over my head. I was heading for serious trouble, trouble from which there was no easy escape, and I panicked. I started going to all of my classes, I handed in every assignment, and I went to see the counselor on campus.

The counselor suggested that I check out the campus women's center where I found a community of women who welcomed me, and I finally felt like I belonged. They became the family I desperately missed and very much needed. They were wonderful, strong women, many of whom were lesbians, and they offered me an example of another way to be. It was wonderful to finally be in the company of people who were really happy to just be who they are, and to find that we had things in common besides just being lesbians. If it wasn't for them, I'm not sure I would have been able to make the shift toward feeling positive and healthy about myself. They were confident, proud contributing members of the community, and I realized that I could be, too.

I don't know how I did it, but I managed to pass all my classes, and I cleaned up my act. I did much better the following year, and I decided that I wanted to be a teacher. I worked my butt off to bring my grades up enough in order to meet the requirements for the education program. My grades weren't straight A's, but I was interviewed by a woman who liked that I had a minor in Sociology, and an interest in social justice issues. I'm pretty sure I got into the program on the strength of my interview. So...here I am."

Toni smiled at Pam. She hadn't thought about that period of her life for a long time, in fact, she usually tried to forget about it, but for the first time in her life she began to see the value in having gone through those very difficult times. She had been near rock bottom, and she had recovered. She had discovered an inner well of strength

that she hadn't known existed. As painful as that time had been, it had helped to shape the person she'd become.

“That’s quite a story, Toni. I’d love to hear more, but I’m afraid we’re out of time, and I have another appointment. Are you feeling any better?”

“I am.” Toni smiled. “I think I just needed a tune-up.”

## 26

Toni had dealt with some difficult situations over her 25 years in education, but nothing compared to the fight she'd dealt with earlier in the day. She turned her car onto the lane that led to her home. On most days, she enjoyed the twenty minute drive; it gave her time to make the transition between her job and her family life, but tonight was different. The drive seemed to take forever, and she couldn't stop thinking about the fight. She wracked her brain, wondering what she could have done differently. A boy's life had been threatened, and she couldn't help but feel responsible. She had let her students down.

She pulled up and stopped beside her house. All the lights were out, and as she turned off the ignition and her headlights faded, the darkness felt overwhelming. Toni's feelings of uncertainty and isolation grew.

She quietly turned the key in the front door and slipped inside. She hung her coat in the closet, set her keys on the side table in the hall and went into the kitchen where a small light burned above the stove. A note pinned to the door of the fridge caught her eye. She removed the magnet and sat down at the kitchen table to read it.

*Hey Babe,*

*I'm sorry you had a rough day at work. Things will be better tomorrow.*

*I tried to wait up for you, but I kept nodding off in the chair. There's a plate of supper for you in the fridge, if you want to stick it in the microwave. The kids missed you tonight; I told them you'd give them a kiss when you got in.*

*Check out my new painting in the studio.*

*Don't forget to kiss me, too.*

*Mel xo*

Toni looked at the clock on the microwave; it was 11:45 pm. No wonder Mel had gone to bed. She opened the fridge and took out a beer. Thank God it was Friday. Toni took a long draught from the bottle and wandered toward the sunroom. It was a huge room on the back of the house, and it had enormous windows that provided lots of natural light. When they decided to have children, Mel had given up the studio space that she rented in the city in order to be a stay at home mom. The arrangement had worked out well for Toni and the children, but Mel found it nearly impossible to paint at the apartment. When they bought the house, they turned the sunroom into a studio so Mel would have a space to continue her work. Toni flicked on the light and went to

admire the canvas. She was constantly amazed by Mel's ability to create something of beauty where nothing had existed before, and for a few moments she was able to lose herself in the scene that came to life before her.

Toni set her empty bottle beside the sink and turned out the lights. It was late, and she needed some rest, but she couldn't settle her mind. She knew she would have a hard time falling asleep. Maybe a warm bath would help. She climbed the stairs toward the bedrooms, tiptoeing past the children's rooms to the bathroom where she turned on the taps in the tub. Dropping her clothes on the floor, she lifted her robe from the hook on the back of the door and headed back down the hall.

She tiptoed into Lucas' room first. He would be seven in a few weeks, but he was big for his age and people often assumed he was older. Sprawled sideways across the bed, he lay on his back, clutching his favorite bunny. Toni smiled. She gently nudged him up back toward the center of the bed and pulled the covers around his neck. Leaning down, she gently kissed his forehead.

Tiptoeing across the hall, she pushed open the door to Jesse's room. Jesse would be nine in the summer and was becoming an avid reader. As Toni bent over to kiss her daughter's forehead, she noticed a faint glow coming from beneath the blankets. She reached under and pulled out a fading flashlight, and Jesse's latest pile of library books. Setting the books aside, she turned off the light, kissed Jesse's forehead and headed back toward the bathroom.

Toni quietly closed the bathroom door, and then turned off the taps. She pinned her hair on top of her head, dropped her robe and lowered her body into the soothing, steamy waters of the tub. Leaning her head back, she closed her eyes as she felt the tension in her muscles begin to slip away. There was nothing she could do about the

problems at school until tomorrow. She would try to get some sleep and then go back to the hospital in the morning.

Soaking in the warm water, Toni began to feel drowsy. She pulled the plug and stepped out, wrapping herself in a thick towel. Gathering her dirty clothes, she threw them down the laundry chute, then after patting her skin dry, threw the towel down as well. Turning around to find her nightshirt, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. She had worked hard her entire life to keep her weight down, but she still carried a few extra pounds about which she continued to feel self-conscious. She pulled her night shirt over her head and reminded herself to get to the gym.

Tiptoeing into the bedroom she shared with Mel, she glanced at the clock on the bedside table. It was a little after 1:00 am. Toni removed Mel's glasses, put the book on the table and turned out the lamp. She crawled into bed and pulled up the covers. And then remembering that she hadn't kissed Mel, she rolled over and kissed her on the forehead. In no time at all, Toni drifted off into a fitful sleep.

\* \* \*

"Mommy, Toni." Toni tried to ignore the voice that penetrated her sleepy subconscious. "Mommy, Toni." A small finger pushed one eyelid open, and she looked into the earnest face of her son, kneeling beside the bed.

"Hey, buddy." She reached out and touched his cheek.

"You didn't kiss me last night."

"Yes I did, right there." Toni touched a spot on his forehead. "It's not finished soaking in. I can still see it."

Lucas touched the spot and smiled. "That's not true."

"Well, it's true that I kissed you there. Come here, and I'll kiss you again."

Lucas climbed over Toni and snuggled under the covers between his mothers. Toni covered his face with kisses while he giggled and squirmed. Mel began to stir on the other side of the bed. She pushed herself up on one elbow and leaned over to kiss her partner.

"Hey, hon. What time did you get in?"

"It was around midnight, but I didn't get to sleep until after 1:00 am. What time is it now?"

Mel looked at the clock. "7:50 am."

Toni groaned and pulled the covers over her head.

"Come on, Lucas. Let's go downstairs and make Mommy Toni some coffee. Where's your sister?"

"I don't know."

"Well, let's go find her." The two padded off down the hall.

Toni tried to go back to sleep, but already her mind was racing over the events of the previous day, and she wondered if there had been any change in the condition of the boy who had been stabbed. She knew she would have to address the student body on Monday, but she had no idea what she would say.

Resigned to the fact that she wouldn't be going back to sleep, Toni got up and went to the window. One of the many things she loved about her house was the big, old oak that grew outside her bedroom window. It reminded her of her father. Shortly after they'd bought the house she climbed the tree in order to hang a bird house in the limbs just outside her bedroom window, and a family of wrens had taken up residence. With

her face close to the glass, and her hands cupped around her eyes, Toni tried to peer through the branches to see if the wrens were home, but she couldn't tell. Intent on the birdhouse in the tree, she was startled when a goldfinch flew inches away from her face and landed on the feeder that was attached to the window. She watched the brilliant yellow bird as it nibbled on the seed and then darted away. Sometimes she wished she could fly away, too.

Beckoned by the aroma of fresh coffee, Toni crossed the hallway to the bathroom. She lifted her robe off the hook and slipped it over her shoulders, then headed toward the stairs. On her way by, she pushed open Jesse's bedroom door and peeked in. She saw the gentle curve of her daughter's back under the covers, and thinking that she was still asleep, Toni backed out of the room. As she pulled the door closed behind her it creaked, and Jesse turned toward the noise. "Hi, Mommy."

"Hey, sweetie! I thought you were still sleeping." Toni crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed. She smoothed the hair around her daughter's face, then leaned over and kissed her forehead.

Jesse held up her book. "I was reading." She smiled at her mother.

"Do you want to come downstairs for some breakfast?"

"Not yet. I'm at a really exciting part."

"Okay, then. Come on down when you get hungry." Toni left her daughter's room and headed toward the kitchen. Taking her favorite mug out of the cupboard, she poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down at the table. Sophie rubbed up against her leg and Toni reached down to scratch behind the ears of the friendly black cat.

"What are you doing up?" Mel leaned over for a kiss. "Lucas and I came downstairs so that you could go back to sleep."

“I know. I tried to go back to sleep, but I just couldn’t. My mind is in over-drive.” Sophie leapt into Toni’s lap and curled up into a ball. Toni stroked her silky fur, and the cat began to purr loudly.

“Are you worried about what happened at school yesterday?” Mel sat down.

“Yeah. There was a big fight. One boy is in the hospital, and the other was arrested.” Toni’s eyes filled up with tears.

“Oh, Toni, that’s awful! Will he be okay?”

“I don’t know. He was stabbed. It’s a serious wound. He was still in surgery when I left the hospital last night.”

“No wonder you were so late getting in last night. It’s a good thing they got the boy who attacked him, though.”

“It’s more complicated than that. Remember the boy I told you about a few weeks ago who came to see me because he was being harassed about being gay? It was him; he’s the boy who was arrested.” Tears spilled over and dropped onto Sophie’s fur. “I feel like I should have done something to prevent it.”

Mel pulled her chair close to Toni and held her. “There’s no point looking back, babe, unless it helps you to go forward.” Toni sobbed quietly on Mel’s shoulder, releasing some of the tension she had stored up in her body.

Sniffing, Toni wiped her nose on Mel’s pajama shirt and smiled. “Thanks, hon.”

Mel looked at her shirt and made a face. “Any time.” She picked up Toni’s coffee cup and poured her a refill. Setting the cup on the table, she leaned over and kissed the top of Toni’s head. “It’ll all work out.”

“Yeah, but will it work out well?”

“I’m going to make you some eggs, and then after breakfast I think we should take the kids for a walk in the park. They miss you, and I’m sure you could use some fresh air. After our walk, I’ll bring the kids home, and you can go to the hospital. How does that sound?”

Toni had to admit that she missed her family. Although she tried to balance the responsibilities of her job and her family, it was never easy. There were evenings that required her to stay late, and sometimes things came up on weekends. A bit of a perfectionist, Toni had to remind herself everyday that she had worked hard, and she’d done the best she could. She couldn’t work any harder, any faster or any smarter. Hers was a job that would never be done. Toni watched her partner of 16 years as she began to prepare some breakfast, and was overwhelmed with gratitude. Mel picked up a lot of the slack at home, and was tremendously understanding and supportive; Toni couldn’t have chosen a better person to share her life with. “You know what? That sounds like just what I need.” She smiled. “I don’t tell you this often enough, but I appreciate everything you do to take care of our family. Thanks for being so understanding.”

“Awww, shucks” Mel beamed. “I love you, too.”

“Can I have some more Fruit Loops?” Lucas held his bowl out to Mel.

“But of, course! How else are you going to grow into a big, strong man who takes care of his two old moms?” Mel took his bowl.

“Hey, Lucas, come give this old mom a hug.” Lucas climbed up on Toni’s lap and wrapped his arms and legs around her. He was the most affectionate little boy Toni had ever met. She squeezed his cheeks between her fingers, making his lips pucker up like a fish and kissed him again and again until he was weak from laughter. He

collapsed against her chest and Toni snuggled him for a moment while he caught his breath. “How about running out to the front step and bringing me the newspaper?”

Lucas climbed off Toni’s lap. “Okay.”

“How would you like your eggs?”

“Scrambled, please.”

Lucas returned with the newspaper and threw it on the table. “Can I take my Fruit Loops in the living room? My favorite show is on?”

Toni picked up the paper. “Thanks for getting the newspaper, Lucas. What’s your favorite show called?”

“I forget.”

Toni grinned. “How can you forget the name of your favorite show?”

Lucas shrugged. “Can I go?”

“Go ahead.” Toni unrolled the paper and laid it out on the table. “Oh, no!”

“What?”

“The school is on the front page.” Toni read the headline out loud. **Student Stabbed at Farnham Falls High; Another in Custody.** Toni laid the paper down on the table. “I can’t believe it! How did they find out so quickly?”

“It’s big news, Toni. Lots of people witnessed the fight, and everyone is bound to be concerned. What does the article say?”

Toni opened the paper and began to read.

The community of Farnham Falls is reeling after a 17 year old boy was stabbed in the halls of Farnham Falls High yesterday afternoon, and another was arrested.

Police and emergency vehicles arrived at the school shortly after 1:00 pm yesterday afternoon. One boy was taken to hospital with undetermined injuries and another was taken into custody. Students who witnessed the fight said the wounded boy is a good student and an athlete, and that his attacker is a generally quiet boy who is a bit of a loner.

The motivation for the attack is unclear; however, students claim there has been tension among several groups of students all year, and they aren't surprised that it came to this. Other students seemed to be in a state of shock that such an act of violence could have occurred in the halls of their school.

Parents are shocked, and understandably concerned about the safety of their children. School principal, Toni Morgan, was unavailable for comment. School board spokesperson, Joe Donahue, said the Board's primary goal is the education and safety of all students, and that the incident is under investigation.

Toni set the paper down on the table. "I was unavailable for comment because I was dealing with a crisis! Of course... I wouldn't have spoken to them anyway."

Mel set two plates of scrambled eggs and toast on the table and refilled Toni's coffee cup. Pouring herself a cup of coffee, she sat down to eat. "Have you thought

about how you're going to deal with this on Monday when you go back to school? Are you going to address it with the other students?"

"I'll have to, but I'm not sure how to go about it. Initially I thought I would have an assembly and speak to the whole school, but now I think that Monday may be too soon for that. I'd like to find out more about what led up to the fight and then try to do something to address the causes. My gut tells me that it stems from homophobia. Maybe I'll just give a brief update over the PA on Monday, and I'll let them know that we are looking into the reasons for the fight in order to address it in a meaningful way before the end of the year. That will give me a few weeks to think about it and plan something."

"You have good instincts, Toni. If you think it's grounded in homophobia, it probably is. The school board has policies around sexual orientation, but they've never really been tested. It's time someone made them put their money where their mouth is!"

Toni sighed. "Yeah, but does it have to be me?" Toni wasn't sure this was a battle she was ready to take on. The issue was too personal, and it made her feel vulnerable and afraid, but she also knew that Mel was right. Someone had to take a stand.

## 27

Toni sat next to Mel on the park bench watching her children throw stones into the pond. It was a beautiful day and she should have been enjoying the time with her family, but her mind was elsewhere. She knew that she wasn't really responsible for the fight, but she couldn't shake the persistent feelings of guilt that tugged at her conscience. She understood how painful it was to feel all alone and unsupported, and she couldn't help but feel that she'd let Bailey down. She remembered all too well how desperately alone she'd felt as a gay teenager, the lack of support she'd felt from her mother... the fear. It had taken a long time, more than eight years, but she'd finally found the courage to confront her mother. Toni wiped at a tear she'd slipped out of the corner of her eye. The fight had dredged up all sorts of painful memories from her past... She remembered the day she told Pam about reconciling with her mother.

*Pam handed Toni a glass of water and sat down. "You mentioned that your mother handled the news of your sexuality badly, but that now she's ready to carry the flag in the Pride Parade. How did she go from one extreme to the other?"*

*"Well... it wasn't an easy process. I left home the night I told my parents I'm a lesbian. My mother absolutely flipped her lid; I had never seen her behave like that, and I'd never heard her swear. Well, she swore a lot that day! She yelled at me, called me names, and cried like I'd never seen her cry before. It quickly became obvious that she was ashamed of me, and she said things that no parent should ever say to their child. I know she regrets it, and I've long since forgiven her, but I don't think I'll ever forget how it felt." The pain of her mother's words still lingered. "I was raised in a loving and supportive family, and I felt a great deal of guilt about causing my parents such grief; I didn't know what to do. I was having a hard time standing my ground, and I was afraid that I was going to cave under the pressure, so I left. I hadn't anticipated my mother's extreme reaction, and I hadn't really thought things through. I was lucky to have a cousin in the city. In retrospect though, I would seriously caution any young person who is dependant and still living at home against coming out to their parents, especially if they don't have a back up plan in case things go badly."*

*"Did you have any support?"*

*"Not really. My cousin was cool with it, but she was busy with her own life, and we didn't hang out much. Several months passed before my father finally tracked me down. I came home from work one day and he was waiting in the hallway, so we went out for coffee. He told me that Moe had been pretty distant since I'd left, and he was afraid they were losing both of us. I remember looking at him across the table in the coffee shop as the tears ran down his cheeks. He looked so much older than I*

*remembered and my heart ached for him. He told me that he loved me, and that my mother was coming around; he begged me to be patient with her. He said he'd come to ask me to come home for Thanksgiving dinner. I wanted to, but I didn't feel strong enough to face Mom, so I said no. I know it broke his heart, but he didn't pressure me. He gave me some money, hugged me tightly, and left.*

*Just before Christmas, he showed up again, begging me to come home for the holidays. They had both joined a group called Parents and Friends of Gays and Lesbians, and he said Mom was really trying. I agreed to try, too. My father came and picked me up the day before Christmas, but I didn't stay as long as I'd planned; I ended up leaving the day after Christmas."*

*"Why? Did something happen?"*

*"No...not exactly. In some ways it was really nice to be back home. I was thrilled to see Moe, but things were pretty awkward and tense with my mother. I know she was trying, but she was really uncomfortable around me. She hardly spoke to me at all, and when she did, she stumbled over her words and couldn't look me in the eye. Whenever I came into a room, she went out. I felt terrible for my father. He tried so hard to bridge the distance between us; it was painful to watch. I didn't want to ruin everyone's holiday, so I thanked them for the meals and the gifts, and I caught the bus back to the city.*

*I didn't have much contact with them after that. I went home for a couple of days every Christmas, but I pretty much kept my distance. Every now and then Dad or Moe would come into the city, and we'd go out for supper. I'd send books and pamphlets home now and again, and sometimes I'd even tape things off the TV that I*

*thought might help them understand. I know Dad watched the shows and read the books, but I'm pretty sure Mom didn't.*

*Christmases continued to be awkward, and I stayed for shorter and shorter periods of time, until one year I didn't go at all. My father tried to convince me to come, but I had no desire to be there. I think I was about 26. I had just met Mel that fall, and we decided to spend Christmas together. It was the best Christmas I'd had in a long time." Toni smiled as she remembered.*

*"But you still haven't explained how your mother came around."*

*"Well, I think Dad convinced her that if she didn't try to understand they would lose me completely, and I don't think either of them wanted that." Toni paused. "It was very hard for Mom. She was terribly worried about what others would think, and it took her a while to get over that. She had to 'come out' as the parent of a gay kid, and coming out is always hard, no matter who's doing it." Toni sighed, wondering why she still felt a need to defend her mother. "Of course, I wanted her to embrace me in all my blatant and effervescent gayness, but she just wasn't as excited about it as I was." Toni grinned.*

*"I wrote my mother a letter that spring. Eight years had passed since I first came out to them, and I was tired of trying to be patient and understanding. I figured that eight years was long enough, and it was time for my mother to get over herself. Besides, I was spurred on by the fact that I had fallen in love with a wonderful woman, and I was excited. I wanted to bring her home to meet my family, like any other young person in love, and I was annoyed that I didn't feel I could. I wrote the letter, but I didn't mail it right away. In the end I decided to take it to her in person."*

*Toni gazed out the window. After her last session with Pam she had gone home and dug through her closet, looking for the shoe box stuffed with papers from her past. She found it buried in the back and pulled the bulging box from the clutter. She sat on her bed and slowly lifted the lid, wondering if any demons still lurked there. She spent the entire afternoon reading through copies of letters and journal entries that chronicled her troubled youth, including a copy of the letter and a poem she had written to her mother.*

*Dear Mom,*

*I've been wanting to talk to you for a long time, and I almost worked up the courage on a couple of occasions, but I just couldn't figure out how to begin. So, I've decided to stick with what works for me: putting pen to paper has always helped me sort out my thoughts and feelings, and present them in some sort of coherent manner. So... here goes.*

*Over the years (eight to be exact), I've gone from feeling really angry with you, to just feeling really sad. I'm tired of feeling like I have to walk on eggshells around you, and I think it's time to try to mend our relationship. I often feel anxious around you, and I find it hard to relax and be myself because your unspoken disapproval of who I am feels colossal. You must find a way to accept that I'm a lesbian, and understand that my sexual orientation is not going to change. Ignoring who I am, or pretending it isn't real, won't make it go away, either.*

*Coming out to you as a teenager was the most difficult moment of my life, and when I desperately needed your understanding and support, you were unable to give it. I was fortunate to find a support system elsewhere, and to emerge from that struggle relatively unscathed. The statistics around suicide, as well as drug and alcohol abuse are disproportionately high among homosexual youth. Sometimes I shake my head and wonder how I managed to avoid becoming one of those statistics, and I consider myself extremely lucky. There were some dicey moments!*

*It is a constant battle to feel good about myself when the messages all around me are overwhelmingly negative. I am a good person. I'm kind and considerate of others, I'm a hard worker, and I have an important job that I'm good at. I don't understand why anyone would be concerned about me loving another person when there is so much violence and hate in the world to be concerned about. I find it particularly hard to feel good about myself when I feel like you are so enormously ashamed of me.*

*Sometimes I feel like you have made me responsible for our relationship and that makes me angry. I know you love me, but I don't see you making much effort to know me, or to educate yourself and accept me. As the kid in this relationship, I resent that I have to work so hard to have a relationship with you. You don't accept my lifestyle, and I'm afraid that you won't accept my partner, either. I have fallen in love with a wonderful, kind, generous woman, and I'd like you to meet her, to share in my joy. Isn't that what children do when they find a person they want to*

*share their life with? Melissa and I have been together for nine months, and we plan to spend out lives together; will you ever be able to treat her as my spouse?*

*Sometimes I feel really sad because I miss you. One of the biggest reasons that I wanted to come out to you and Dad in the first place was so I could stop hiding. I wanted to be honest with you, to be able to talk to you and share with you the things that are important to me. Sadly, it didn't work out that way, and now we don't talk about anything, really. I miss you.*

*I've tried to send you books and pamphlets, TV shows, and information about speakers and support groups to help you understand, but I'm tired of working so hard, and I'm not sure how hard you're working to help yourself. Ultimately, this is your problem, Mom, and **you** need to work at it. I don't have a problem. Does it really matter who I love? Some day you'll be dead, or maybe I'll be dead, and what will it have really mattered then?*

*I love you.*

*Toni*

### *Tell Me You Love Me*

*'It will all be fine,' I tell myself, it's love that counts, I'm taught.  
My heart pounds hard within my chest; my words have gotten caught.*

*My voice is gone, I cannot speak. I tell myself, 'Be strong!'  
They've always loved you anyway, and how can love be wrong?*

*With trembling hands and trembling heart I look upon the page  
Of carefully chosen written words; the words I cannot say.*

*I watch your face, the color drains; the meaning becomes clear.  
The silence weighs upon my chest; my heart pounds in my ears.*

*I know you didn't mean to say the words that came so quick,  
But how can I forget the pain of 'unnatural' and 'sick'?*

*Your eyes fill up and overflow. 'Don't tell my friends,' you say.  
I shrivel as I realize that you are so ashamed.*

*I struggle to defend myself, but you don't want to hear.  
It's other peoples' cruel words and judgments that you fear.*

*Defeated, scared, betrayed, alone, I gather up some things,  
And go to friends to ease the pain and soothe the smoldering stings.*

*I sometimes must remind myself there's nothing wrong with me,  
And to be a loving person is the best thing I can be.*

*Years have passed since I left home; I've learned a lot since then:  
That I'm a worthy person... and the value of good friends.*

*I won't beg for your acceptance, you must take me as I am,  
And if that just isn't good enough, then I don't give a damn.*

*I've learned that I must live my life and never mind the hate.  
'Cause one day we will all be dead, and then... it'll be too late.*

*Toni remembered the day clearly. It had been hard to hand the letter and poem to her mother and to stand there watching her as she read. However, as difficult as it had been, Toni believed that moment had been a turning point; they had finally begun to heal their wounded relationship.*

*Toni pulled herself back into the present and looked at Pam with watery eyes. "Mom read the letter and the poem with tears streaming down her cheeks, as I waited anxiously, my heart pounding against my chest. I watched her face intently as the*

*minutes crawled by, until she finally set the pages on the counter and lifted her face to look at me. Her eyes were red and swollen, and she could hardly speak as she pulled me into an emotional embrace, telling me over and over how sorry she was.” By now, tears were flowing freely down Toni’s face, and Pam handed her a box of tissue. Toni blew her nose. She wiped her tears away and looked up at Pam. “I’m sorry. You wouldn’t think I’d still get so upset over something that happened so many years ago.”*

*“It’s okay, Toni.” Pam smiled warmly. “We all need to feel loved and accepted by our mothers, and this was clearly very painful for you. And even though this story ultimately has a happy ending, the memory of the hurt may be painful for a very long time. You should be proud of the hard work you’ve done to heal your relationship with your mother. The fact that you were able to move beyond such a huge obstacle says a lot about both of you.”*

*Toni smiled. “Mom apologized and assured me that there was nothing she wanted more than for me to be happy, and she thanked me for having the courage to keep trying, for not giving up on her. Things improved dramatically after that. I’m not sure if it was because there was a shift in me, or a shift in Mom... probably a little bit of both. I realized there was no point blaming my parents for doing the best they could. Also, I was much less worried about just being myself around my family, and Mom was more relaxed, too. Maybe it was a circular thing, you know? I was more relaxed, so she was more relaxed, so I was more relaxed...” Toni smiled through her tears. Pam smiled and nodded, and Toni thought her eyes looked a little moist.*

*“Mom called me the following week and invited Mel and I to come to dinner. You can’t imagine how nervous I was that night. There were a few awkward moments, but it was a beginning, and Mom was wonderfully warm and welcoming toward Mel.*

*Things continued to improve, and now... well, she's my biggest supporter. Having children really made a difference. She wanted to be a part of their lives, and she is a wonderful grandmother." Toni looked at her watch. "But that will have to be a story for another day. I can't believe how quickly the time goes by when I'm here."*

*"Well, I'll look forward to hearing that story next time, then."*

*Toni stood up and headed for the door then turned back toward Pam. "I'm surprised at how painful some of those things still are, but it feels good to talk about them. It feels like I'm dusting off some things that I packed up and put away in a hurry, and now I'm cleaning out the closet and putting them away properly." Toni smiled. "Thank you."*

*"Well, I haven't done much besides listen. You're doing the work you need to do all on your own." Pam smiled warmly. "I'll see you next time."*

*"Toni..."*

Toni blinked back the tears that brimmed in her eyes. If only she'd been there for Bailey, maybe none of this would have happened.

"Toni, are you okay?"

Toni looked at Mel and smiled. "Yeah, but I need to get to the hospital."

Mel leaned over and kissed her cheek tenderly. "Well, then let's go."

## 28

Toni stood in the hospital lobby as she waited anxiously for the elevator doors to open. She had called the hospital earlier, but the only information they would give her was that the Sean was out of surgery. She couldn't imagine how she would cope if one of her own children was seriously injured. It was too painful to even think about. Tears welled up in her eyes. She had spoken briefly with Sean Keddy's parents at the hospital the night before, but everyone was pretty tense as they waited for news about Sean's condition. She prayed that the news would be good.

When the doors finally opened, Toni hurried inside and leaned against the wall, grateful to have a moment alone. She dabbed at her eyes and took a few deep breaths; however, as she watched the numbers above the door climb, her anxiety grew. She closed her eyes and said a quick prayer. The doors slid open, and Toni stepped out into the corridor, her heart pounding. Forcing her feet to carry her down the hallway, she

walked through the double doors, and past the nurses' station. Finally, at the end of the hall, she found the room number that was written on the scrap of paper she held in her hand. The door was closed, but a small cardboard name tag in a metal frame attached to the door told her she had found the right room. She took a deep breath, raised her hand and knocked.

Mark Keddy squinted into the bright fluorescent lights of the hallway. "Ms Morgan," he smiled. "Come in." He stepped aside.

Toni blinked as her eyes adjusted to the dim light in the darkened room. Colleen Keddy sat in a chair near the head of her son's bed, holding his hand. Sean appeared to be asleep. Although both parents looked ragged and tired, the relief on their faces was evident, and some of Toni's anxiety began to dissipate. "I hope I'm not intruding..."

"No, not at all. We appreciate that you've taken the time to come back again today." Mark brought a chair over close to the bed. "Please, sit down."

Toni sat down next to Colleen. "You look tired."

"I am. We've been up most of the night."

"How is he doing?"

"He was lucky. The knife nicked his large intestine and his kidney, and went into his liver. He was in surgery for a long time, and they had a hard time controlling the bleeding, but he's stable now. The doctor says as long as no infection sets in, he should make a full recovery."

Not realizing that she'd been holding her breath, Toni let out a huge sigh of relief. "That is such good news." Toni looked at Sean, remembering the look of fear and disbelief in his eyes as he lay on the cold tiles, clutching his side. As she knelt beside him on the floor, desperately trying to stop the blood from spilling out of his

body, she had assured him that he would be okay, and she couldn't describe the relief she felt now that his condition was stable. Looking at him lying in the bed, she realized that he was almost a grown man, although she saw the sleeping face of a little boy. "I can't even begin to imagine how difficult last night must have been for you. Thank God he's going to be okay."

Colleen's eyes filled with tears. "It was the worst night of my life. It was touch and go for a while because they couldn't control the bleeding." Colleen's voice became choked with emotion and tears ran down her cheeks. She covered her mouth with her hand and took a couple deep breaths. "We thought we were going to lose him." Toni reached out and touched Colleen's arm as her own eyes filled with tears. "And he isn't out of the woods yet." Colleen reached for a tissue. "The next 48 hours are critical." She blew her nose. "As long as there are no complications and no infection sets in, the doctor said he may be able to go home in a week to ten days."

"He's a strong boy, Colleen. He's athletic and healthy. I'm sure he'll make a full recovery." Toni patted her arm.

Mark pulled a chair over and joined the women at the bedside. "Do you know the boy who did this?"

"Yes. He was arrested at the scene, but he was released into the custody of his parents last night."

"What were they fighting about?"

"I'm not sure what led up to the fight, but it's under investigation. When we have more information, we'll do everything we can to address the causes."

"Is the other boy a trouble-maker?"

“No, he’s generally a very quiet boy, a bit of a loner, actually, and from what I can gather, he’s been the victim of some harassment himself.

“Was Sean involved?”

“I really don’t know, Mark, and I can’t talk to you about it because it’s still under investigation. We’ll know more when the investigation is complete and we have the whole story.”

Mark hung his head. “I’ve heard the kids talk.” He looked at Toni and then looked away. “They say Sean started the fight, and that he’s been picking on this boy for a while. They also say that the boy who stabbed Sean is gay. Is that true?” Mark looked up at Toni, his eyes brimming with tears.

“I’m sorry, Mark, even if I knew, I couldn’t tell you that.”

“The only reason I ask is that last fall, Sean’s older brother told us that he’s gay. It’s been hard for all of us to accept, and I didn’t handle it very well.” Mark looked away. “I’m embarrassed to say that I behaved badly when he told us, and I certainly didn’t set a good example for Sean.” He took a deep breath and hung his head. “If only I could turn back time, I would do things so differently.” His voice was heavy with remorse. “I love my son, no matter who he is, and I want him to be happy. I wish I’d realized that sooner.”

Colleen smiled at her husband and took his hand, as big tears rolled down his cheeks and soaked into his pant leg. “I’m afraid Sean took his lead from me.” Mark lifted his eyes to look at Toni as he swiped at a tear with the back of his hand. The agony in his eyes was overwhelming, and Toni’s heart ached for him. “He has always looked up to his older brother, and he’s been acting out ever since Kevin told us he’s gay. It seems like he’s angry all the time, and I’m afraid that maybe he’s been taking it

out on this boy at school.” Mark paused and took another deep breath. “I can’t help but feel partly responsible.” Mark covered his face with his hands and cried.

Toni reached out and put a comforting hand on his shoulder as his body shook with sobs. As a parent, she understood his pain. As a school administrator, she was relieved that he recognized that Sean wasn’t the only victim, and that his son was at least partly to blame for the events that led to his stabbing. With his support, Toni felt encouraged about finding a meaningful resolution.

Toni looked at her watch as she left the hospital and headed toward her car. It was 2:30. If she hurried, she had just enough time to go through the drive-through and grab a coffee before she met up with the school guidance counselor.

As she drove through town, Toni marveled about how supportive the Keddy family had been, and wondered if she would have been as understanding if it had been her own son lying in that hospital bed. She hoped her visit with Bailey Brown’s family would go as well. Amidst all the commotion yesterday, she’d had only a few moments to speak to Bailey’s parents. She apologized for having to rush off, and asked if she and the guidance counselor could come by their home the next day. She couldn’t believe that was less than 24 hours ago. The Browns were understandably upset, but they had a lot of questions, and they agreed to the visit.

As Toni pulled into the school parking lot, she had an uneasy feeling about the visit with the Browns, and she was glad the guidance counselor was going with her. At one time, she wouldn’t have thought twice about being alone with a student or a parent; but now she seldom went to a family home, and if she did, she always took a colleague. Even at school she was cautious about being alone with students, and she tried to keep

her door open as much as possible. She hated that she felt afraid and cautious, but she was even less certain about the level of acceptance in Farnham Falls than she was in the city. Being a lesbian made her feel vulnerable, and she was acutely aware of how easily someone could make her life miserable if they wanted to.

She pulled up alongside Ruth Campbell's car and opened the door. "Hi, Ruth. Thanks for giving up a Saturday afternoon to come with me. I know how sacred weekends are with your family, and I really appreciate it."

"No problem, Toni." Ruth closed the door and buckled her seat belt. "Things like this don't happen very often. Besides, you never know when you'll need someone to be there to back you up." She smiled at Toni. "Have you heard any news about Sean Keddy?"

"I went to the hospital this morning. He's out of surgery, and he's stable."

"Thank God." Ruth heaved a huge sigh of relief. "I thought I'd stop by the hospital before I go home today. How is his family doing?"

"They're exhausted, but of course relieved that Sean is out of surgery and that his condition is now stable. They seemed pleased that I stopped by. Given the circumstances, I thought they were amazingly gracious. Their older son recently told his parents that he's gay, and the family has had a hard time dealing with it. Apparently Sean has always looked up to his brother, and he's found Kevin's disclosure particularly difficult. Sean's father wants to know what happened, but he also acknowledges that Sean bears some responsibility for the events that led up to the fight. They are really fine people, Ruth, and they want to work with us to try and resolve this mess."

"That's wonderful. It's amazing that they're able to look beyond laying blame so soon. Finger-pointing is such a natural response, but it does nothing to resolve a

problem. It just keeps wounds open and festering, and then they never heal. So, do you think it would be okay if I stop by the hospital?"

"Yeah, I think they'd appreciate the visit."

## 29

Toni pulled in to the parking lot for Counseling Services. She climbed out of her car into the warmth of an early May afternoon and let the sun caress her face. Watching the earth come to life after the dead of winter never failed to fill her with hope and joy, and for a time, everything seemed right in the world.

Every year she marveled at how the crocuses and daffodils pushed their way through the snow, erupting with the first colors of spring. Tulips lined the edge of the building, splashing bold colors against the grey stone background, and the delicate new leaves of a giant maple touched the deep blue sky above. The repeated refrains of nature were a comfort to Toni, reminding her that without the winter, spring would not seem so sweet. She drew in a deep breath, savoring the aroma of damp earth and fragrant flowers as she pushed open the heavy door.

“Toni!” Pam smiled. “It’s nice to see you. Come on in.” Pam shut the door behind them. “How have you been since our last visit? Have you managed to lighten your load a little at home?”

“I did, but it’s just a small thing.”

Pam smiled. “A small thing is better than nothing. What is it?”

“I gave up trying to keep the house tidy all the time, since it’s a losing battle anyway.”

“That’s not so small, especially since women have been conditioned to believe that a tidy house is a very important part of their role. I think that’s a pretty big thing.”

“Well, Mel’s an artist, and she’s always covered in paint, and we have two very busy children who pull things out as quickly as I can put them away. Tidiness isn’t a priority for any of them, so I decided that it shouldn’t be for me either.”

“I think that’s great, Toni. How are you doing with it?”

“I found it really hard at first, and the mess stressed me out, but I’m getting used to it now. I hardly even notice it any more.”

“Then you’ve made some progress.”

Toni chuckled. “It seems kind of backwards to consider being able to live with clutter as progress, but I guess it is. I used to spend a lot of time running around picking up after the three of them, but now Mel and I take a half an hour after Jesse and Lucas go to bed, and we tidy up together. It’s been working out well, and as long as no one drops in unexpectedly during the day, I should be fine.” Toni grinned. “You know, even though I find it hard to let go of things, I think I’ve made an important shift. In the grand scheme of things, it doesn’t really matter if my house is untidy, and I feel good

about letting that go. Besides, it just makes way more sense to tidy up once a day after the kids have gone to bed.”

“That’s excellent.” Pam beamed. “You were skeptical about being able to find something you could let go of, but you did it! Good for you. What does Mel think about the change?”

“She thinks it’s great. Although Mel frequently appears to be in a state of disarray and her studio always looks like a tornado went through, she is actually very organized and knows exactly where everything is. It’s very organized clutter. When we first met, I thought she was a bit of an impulsive scatter-brain, but she only appears that way. She is very steady and dependable. She’s been my rock; I’m lucky to have found her.”

“How did you meet?”

“She has a degree in art education, and she was part of a group that was piloting a program at my school. I agreed to be the school liaison, so we got to know each other through our involvement in that research project. She was at the school a lot, and we hit it off right away. We became very close friends, and we shared a lot of the same passions: for ideas, for education, for art, for social justice work, and as it turned out in the end, passion for each other,” Toni grinned. “We had many rich conversations that often went on long into the night. I don’t think she read any of that as pursuit, but it was definitely on *my* mind. Of course, I didn’t think anything would ever happen between us because she had a live-in boyfriend at the time. We just really enjoyed each other’s company.”

“So how did you end up together?”

“Well, I think our relationship began to change one day when we met for breakfast, or at least that’s when I first became aware of it. I knew Mel had an appointment at 10:30 that morning, but by 10:15 she’d made no sign of leaving, so I asked if her appointment had been cancelled. She said it hadn’t, and that she probably should call to say she couldn’t make it, but she never did. She just didn’t go. I was shocked. It was so unlike her to just blow off an appointment that I began to wonder what was going on. I read it as a sign, and I think that was the moment I began to hope for more. I was so preoccupied with the possibility that she might have feelings for me too, that I don’t know how I even carried on a conversation after that. I wanted to tell her how I felt, but I was afraid. I went back and forth a hundred times before I finally decided to just put it all out on the table. I remember how loudly my heart pounded in my ears. I could feel that my face was all hot and flushed, and I just blurted it out before I had a chance to change my mind again.”

“What did you blurt out?”

“I looked very intently at my cutlery and told her I had a really big crush on her.”

Pam smiled. “And how did she react to that?”

“There was a long silence, and I remember thinking that I’d made a dreadful mistake. I forced myself to look up, expecting the worst, but she was smiling, and then her eyes filled with tears. She said that she was flattered, but she was afraid I would get over the crush and she would lose the best friend she’d ever had.”

“She didn’t mention that she was straight, or that she had a long-term boyfriend?”

Toni grinned. “You’d think she would, but no, those things never came up.”

“Did those things concern you?”

“Yes, of course, but I couldn’t help how I felt, and I didn’t really think anything would happen as a result of my disclosure.”

“Really?”

The tone of Pam’s question made Toni felt a little defensive. “Really. I just needed to tell her how I felt.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. She was my closest friend; I wanted to be honest with her, I guess.” Toni gazed out the window and thought about Pam’s questions. Was truthfulness her only motivation? She looked back at Pam. “Well...” Toni felt her cheeks flush, “...I suppose if I’m being completely honest with myself, maybe I did secretly hope that she felt the same way about me. I may have wished for a relationship with her, but I don’t think I really thought it would happen.”

“Hmmm,” Pam smiled and nodded, but Toni had a feeling that Pam wasn’t convinced. “So what happened after Mel expressed concern about losing your friendship?”

“I assured her that she meant the world to me and that we would always be friends, regardless of anything else. We left it at that, but we continued to spend a great deal of time together, both professionally and personally. We talked about everything under the sun, we went for long walks in the woods, and we even held hands. We were very tender and affectionate with each other, but nothing more. Then the research project took us away on a conference together, and that was it. I’m not sure if it was the beginning of the end, or the end of the beginning, but our very long courtship evolved into a full blown love affair that weekend.”

“How did you make the leap from a friendship to a romance?”

“In retrospect, I think it was a romance all along, we just didn’t call it that. After going out to dinner with all of the other project participants at the conference, Mel and I went back to my hotel room to talk, but she didn’t stay very long. We were just sitting on the bed talking, but she said that being in my room felt really dangerous. She said she wasn’t sure if she was ready to blow her whole life wide open, and then she left.

The next day I tried to tell her that it wasn’t dangerous at all, I just wanted to be close to my friend. That sounds kind of flimsy now, but I honestly felt that way. I would have settled for just holding her, and I would never have done anything she didn’t want me to do.

Later that evening, we went to a reception. I didn’t want to make her feel any more uncomfortable than I already had, so I was trying to be attentive without being overwhelming, but it wasn’t long before I started to feel like *she* was flirting with me. They were subtle things that I couldn’t really put my finger on, and not wanting to be wrong, I just chalked it up to wishful thinking.

However, things took a dramatic turn a short time later when she looked me square in the eye and said, ‘I don’t need one more drink at this reception; otherwise I’m going to follow you back to your room.’ I nearly fell off my chair as I hurried off to get her another drink.” Toni grinned. “We went back to my room and she stayed the whole night, and we blew her life wide open in a spectacular way. She claims that she never pursued me, but in the end, she definitely stood still and let herself get caught.” Toni smiled as she remembered the not so subtle invitation that Mel continued to deny. “When we woke up the next morning, we both knew that everything had changed. It was the end of everything...and the beginning.”

“What happened with Mel’s boyfriend?”

“She eventually left him, but it was a really difficult couple of months. They had been together for a few of years, and he was a kind and gentle man. When she told him that she had fallen in love with someone else, he was crushed. He sobbed and told her how much he loved her. He wanted to know what he’d done wrong. He didn’t care that she had fallen in love with a woman; he just wanted to mend their relationship. He begged her to go to counseling with him. It was really hard on Mel because she did love him, and she didn’t want to hurt him. She tried to assure him that it was nothing he did or didn’t do, but he kept looking for something. He desperately wanted to fix it. She tried to separate from him gently, but there was no way to avoid the pain.

I tried to be understanding about how she had to do things, but I was frightened to death that she might not go through with it, and I pressured her to hurry up. Mel was caught in an emotional tug of war. It was very hard on all of us. It all worked out in the end, though. I don’t know how they did it, but they somehow managed to salvage a nice friendship. Tim got married a few years ago and invited Mel and I to the wedding. He really is a lovely man.”

“Wow! It’s remarkable that they were able to remain friends, and that he doesn’t harbor any animosity toward you. That says a lot about his character. Pam checked her watch. “I can’t believe we’re out of time again. Will I see you again in a few weeks, or have you had enough of me?”

Toni grinned. “I’ll be back.”

# 30

Toni pulled up in front of the Brown's modest home, being careful not to hit the pink tricycle in the driveway. As she climbed out of the car and looked around, Toni noticed the toys on the lawn. "I thought there were only three teenage boys in the Brown family. Does Bailey have a little sister?"

"Yeah. She just started school this year. I think she might have been a surprise." Ruth grinned at Toni. "Bailey's the oldest, and she's the youngest. He has quite a soft spot for her."

"That's a pretty big family these days."

Although the house was not large, it appeared well kept. The lawn had been recently mowed, and the yard was nicely landscaped. A cheerful assortment of colorful flowers bloomed around the front and along the side of the house.

“The Browns are good people. They love their kids, and they work hard to provide a good home. The mom has been in to see me a few times about the younger brother. He had a hard time adjusting to high school, and his grades slipped a bit at the beginning of the year.”

“Did she talk about Bailey at all?” The two women climbed the front stairs.

“Not really. She mentioned that some kids had been picking on him, but she didn’t say why. I asked if she wanted me to talk to Bailey about it, but she said no. Bailey didn’t want her to tell me, and she thought it had stopped, so I didn’t follow up.”

Toni knocked at the door. “Hindsight, huh?”

It’s always 20-20!”

Diane Brown came to the door. Her eyes were bloodshot, and she carried a wad of tissue. She opened the door and smiled weakly. “Ms Morgan, Ms Campbell, please, come in.” She held the door open and stood aside. “Thank you for taking the time to come on a Saturday.”

Toni reached out and took Diane’s hand, giving it a warm squeeze. “Well, we appreciate that you’ve welcomed us into your home. Please call me Toni, and this is Ruth. How are you doing? You’ve had a hard time, are you hanging in?”

Diane’s eyes filled up with tears. “I just can’t believe this is happening. Carl is so angry he can hardly speak, and Bailey hasn’t stopped crying since we picked him up yesterday. I don’t know what we’re going to do.” Tears ran down her cheeks. “I’m sorry.” She swiped at her tears. “Come in and sit down. Can I make you some coffee or tea?”

“No, thank you.”

“Are you sure? I don’t mind making it.”

“Well, okay then.” Toni smiled at Diane, realizing that she probably needed the distraction. .

“How about you, Ms Campbell?”

“Yes, coffee would be great, but please, call me Ruth.”

“Okay.” Diane smiled and went about getting the coffee ready.

“Is your husband home?” Toni asked.

“Yes. He went to check on Bailey. He’ll be right up.”

“How’s Bailey doing?”

“He’s a wreck.” Fresh tears welled up in her eyes. ““He has always been a quiet, sensitive boy, but he’s hardly said two words since we picked him up yesterday, and we don’t know how to help him.” She joined the women at the kitchen table as the coffee began to bubble in the background. “We didn’t even know he had a knife, let alone that he was carrying it to school. We had no idea that things were so bad for him.” Tears spilled over and ran down her cheeks. “How could we have not known?” She dabbed at her tears. “I did notice that he was more quiet than usual, and he has been spending a lot of time alone. He seemed sad, and sullen, and even his little sister, whom he adores, couldn’t cheer him up.”

She stood up and went to the cupboard. “He did tell me and his father that he’s gay.” She took four mugs down from the cupboard. “At first we were shocked and upset, mostly because we know how hard it is to be gay, but we told him that it didn’t matter to us, that we love him no matter what and that all we want is for him to be happy.” She put a carton of milk and the sugar bowl on the table and then filled the four mugs and carried them to the table. “He knew it didn’t matter to us if he was gay. I thought he was just going through teenage stuff.”

She opened a door off the kitchen and called down the stairs. “Carl! Ms. Morgan and Ms. Campbell from the school are here.” She sat down at the table. “I’m his mother... I should have known. I should have tried harder to get him to talk.”

Ruth reached across the table and touched Diane’s arm. “Most teens are pretty tight-lipped around their parents. It’s the nature of the beast. The transformation from child to adult can be ugly and painful, but most teens emerge no worse for wear and turn into fine, well-adjusted young adults.”

“We don’t know how to help him get through this. He has never been aggressive or violent, and it just isn’t like him to carry a knife.” She looked at the women through tear-filled eyes. “I’m afraid he’ll never get over this.”

“Bailey is a kind boy by nature, and he clearly has a loving and supportive family. We will provide whatever support we can through the school, and we believe that if we all work together, we can help the boys and the school community to move beyond this near tragedy and begin to heal. I know that is hard to imagine right now, but if we can learn from this situation and make some positive changes, then it isn’t all bad.

From the school’s perspective, we’re concerned that things are handled in such a way that this type of incident won’t happen again, and that those involved receive the support and treatment they need. It’s not possible for Bailey to be unaffected by this experience, but hopefully, as painful as it is right now, we can turn it into an opportunity to get Bailey some help and support. As far as the police are concerned, they want to work with us to resolve the situation in a way that’s best for everyone. Fortunately, Sean Keddy’s family feels the same way.”

“Oh, dear! I can’t believe I didn’t even ask! Is Sean going to be okay?”

“They think he is.”

“Thank God!” Diane covered her mouth as a fresh stream of tears ran down her cheeks. “Will he make a full recovery?”

“He was lucky. I went to the hospital this morning and spoke with his family,” Toni explained. “The knife nicked his intestine and his kidney, and went into his liver. The doctors had a hard time controlling the bleeding, but he’s stable now, and it looks like he will recover completely.”

Diane closed her eyes. “Thank you, God.” She looked at Toni, her eyes swimming in tears. “I don’t know what we would have done if that poor boy...” Her voice became choked with emotion, and she couldn’t finish. Toni understood; she didn’t want to think about the other scenario, either.

The door to the downstairs opened, and Carl Brown entered the kitchen. Diane jumped up from the table and went over to him. “Ms Morgan was at the hospital this morning, and it looks like the other boy is going to be okay. Go tell Bailey.” Without a word, Carl turned around and disappeared back down the stairs. Diane returned to the table. “Maybe now Bailey will stop crying. Can I get you a refill?”

“Sure. Thank you.” Toni smiled at Diane as she got up from the table to get the coffee pot. She looked exhausted, and Toni noticed that her hand trembled slightly as she poured the coffee. Toni’s heart went out to her.

Diane returned to the table and sat down. “What’s going to happen to Bailey?”

Toni looked at Ruth and back to Diane. “We don’t know.”

The door opened, and Carl returned to the kitchen. Toni stood up and smiled, extending her hand. “I’m Toni Morgan, the principal at Farnham Falls High, and this is Ruth Campbell, our guidance counselor. Thank you for agreeing to meet with us this

afternoon.” Carl shook the women’s hands then sat down in the vacant chair at the kitchen table.

“What did Bailey say when you told him the news?”

Carl looked miserable as he turned toward his wife. “Nothing, he just cried harder.” Carl took a deep breath and blinked, forcing back tears. He looked at Toni and she saw anger flash in his eyes as he took another deep breath. His nostrils flared and his jaw twitched. Toni’s body tensed, and her heart began to pound as she prepared for an angry outburst. Carl’s words were quietly deliberate as he worked hard to control his emotions. “How the hell could you let this happen, Ms Morgan?”

Toni chose her words carefully. “I’m sorry that this happened; I was just as shocked as everyone else. I work hard to create a school environment where things like this won’t happen, but Farnham Falls High is a big school, and I can’t be everywhere at once. My goal is to create a community of learners who work hard and are kind and respectful toward others.”

“Unless the others are gay!” Carl’s voice was filled with anger, but his eyes were deeply sad. “Bailey trusted the wrong guy with his secret, and once the news got around the school, the harassment never stopped. We encouraged him to speak to someone at the school, but he was embarrassed and afraid. When we suggested that one of us could go, he was mortified. Diane and I didn’t know what to do. We didn’t want to make things worse for him, but we couldn’t let things continue as they were. He became sullen and withdrawn...we were so worried.” A tear rolled down Carl’s cheek, and he angrily swiped it away. “We told him that if he didn’t speak to someone, one of us would have to.

A couple days later he told us that he'd worked up the nerve to go and speak to you. He was proud of himself, and he felt good about the conversation. He even started to smile again, but it didn't take long, maybe two weeks, for the sullenness to return. It was like pulling teeth, but he finally told us that even though you had promised him you would look into the problem, nothing had changed."

Carl paused and took a deep breath. He never once looked away, and Toni felt like his eyes were boring holes right through her. "I'd be interested to know, Ms Morgan, what you have to say about that. Did you take our son's concerns seriously? Do you think it is kind or respectful to make empty promises?" Carl's voice was hushed, but the unspoken accusations were loud and clear. "He trusted you, and he believed that you were going to help him."

Toni fought to control her tears. His words hit her hard. She did feel like she had let Bailey down, and her feelings of guilt grew. Dealing with gay and lesbian issues always made her feel uneasy. She was afraid of becoming a target. It had happened before, and it had been almost more than she could bear. She couldn't go through that again. Besides, she had children of her own to think about now, and she didn't want them to get dragged through something ugly.

She wanted to believe that she was cautious out of necessity and self-preservation, but more and more she questioned whether she was just being cowardly. Mel was right, someone needed to take a stand, and why *shouldn't* it be her? Didn't she have a responsibility to be a good role model? She took a deep breath before she began to speak. "You're right, and I'm sorry."

Carl's voice softened. "It's not me that you need to apologize to."

“You’re right; I owe Bailey an apology, too. He did come to see me, and I was trying to deal with the problems that he brought to my attention, although I realize that it may have appeared to him that I wasn’t doing much. In retrospect, I should have checked with Bailey to see how he was coping, and to give him an update. I deeply regret that I didn’t do that. There were many things that contributed to the way I responded, but I don’t mean that to be an excuse. I should have moved more quickly.”

Toni’s heart pounded, and she wished she could tell the Brown’s how deeply and how personally she understood Bailey’s pain. “I believe homophobia and discrimination against gay and lesbian people to be an extremely important issue, and I want to deal with it in a way that is meaningful and has a lasting impact. I’m not yet sure how to do that, and if you have any suggestions, I’m certainly open to ideas.” Toni looked into Carl’s eyes, her heart pounding, as she tried desperately to tell him what her words could not say. “I understand Bailey’s pain, more than you know.”

The hardness in Carl’s eyes softened, and the anger seemed to drain out of his face as his eyes filled up with tears. “I believe you do, Ms Morgan.” Carl returned her gaze. “What are we going to do about it?”

Toni felt the muscles in her shoulders and neck begin to relax, and the relief she felt was palpable. She hadn’t realized she was so tense. The tears she had been struggling to contain finally slid over her eyelids and down her cheeks. “I’m sorry.” Toni dug in her pocket for a tissue and dabbed at her tears. She smiled at Carl. “With your support, I know we can find a meaningful solution.” Carl returned her smile. He had been suspicious of her initially, but she felt that she was slowly beginning to win his trust. She had to make things right. Perhaps she felt a need to make up for her perceived inaction, or maybe it was her own sense of not having done enough, or

perhaps she felt she couldn't let Bailey and his family down again. Whatever it was, she knew she had to somehow find a way to deal with this that would have a powerful and lasting impact. "The Keddy family is also anxious to help resolve this situation. Perhaps we can find a time when all of us can sit down together and talk about where we should go from here."

Carl looked surprised. "The Keddys want to help resolve this problem?"

"Yes. They are very concerned, and they've already acknowledged that Sean was part of the problem." Toni wondered briefly if she should tell them about Kevin Keddy. "Their oldest son is gay, and Sean has had a hard time accepting the news."

"Oh...now things are beginning to make sense." Carl nodded as understanding registered in his eyes.

"Let me speak to the Keddys and get back to you. Is there a time that's best for you?"

"We'll make arrangements to be there whenever you are able to schedule a meeting. Just let us know."

"Okay." Toni stood up. "Do you mind if I go downstairs and speak to Bailey before we leave? I want to tell him I'm sorry, and that we'll get through this together."

Carl looked at Diane, who nodded. "That would be good."

Toni and Ruth went down the stairs into a cozy family room. Off to the left was a door with a sign that read, "Bailey's Room. Enter at Your Own Risk." Toni knocked on the door and waited.

"I'm fine, Mom! Just leave me alone."

"It's Toni Morgan, and the school guidance counselor, Ms Campbell. May we come in for a minute?" Toni heard a loud honk as Bailey blew his nose.

“Come in.”

Toni opened the door. Bailey was sitting up on his bed; his arms wrapped tightly around his knees. His eyes were bloodshot, and the garbage can beside his bed overflowed with tissue. His stereo played softly in the background. “Hello, Bailey.” Toni smiled at him. “How are you doing?”

“Not so good.” Tears welled up in his eyes as he tried to blink them back.

Toni motioned toward the bed. “May I sit down?”

“Sure,” Bailey sniffed.

“Bailey, I owe you an apology. You came to me for help and you trusted me, and I feel like I let you down. I’m sorry that I didn’t act on your concerns more quickly. I want you to know that I don’t approve of intolerance or discrimination under any circumstances, and I’m going to do everything I can to try and make things right. I know we can’t change what’s already happened, but we are all going to get through this, even though it may not feel that way right now.” Toni tried to look at Bailey, but he looked away. “Sean is going to make a full recovery. We’re going to work this out. You must believe me, Bailey.”

Bailey lifted his head and looked at Toni through watery eyes. “I want to believe you....”

Toni’s eyes filled up with tears. “I understand your hesitation, Bailey. Do you think you can give me another chance?”

Bailey twisted a tissue in his hand. “I guess so.”

Toni’s tears spilled over and ran down her cheeks. “I’m not sure that I deserve your trust, Bailey, but thank you.” Her heart pounded. “Let’s make a pact, then.” She glanced in Ruth’s direction and quickly looked back at Bailey. “If you can trust me,

then I think I can trust you, too.” She looked deeply into Bailey’s eyes. “I understand how you feel, Bailey. I know how hard it is to be a gay teenager... I’m gay, too.”

Bailey looked at Toni with disbelief and then began to cry. Toni wrapped her arms around his shoulders and held him, and they cried together.

Bailey passed her a tissue and Toni blew her nose. Wiping her eyes, she stood up and looked at him. “So, we have a pact.” She stuck out her hand. “We have to shake on it to make it official.” Bailey took her hand, and they shook. “We’re going to get through this, Bailey, but I’m going to need your help.” He nodded. “Your parents are worried about you, and they need to know that you’re going to be okay. Are you going to be okay?” He nodded again. Toni smiled. “That’s what I needed to know. You’re fortunate to have such a loving and supportive family... there are a lot of people who care about you. We’ll get through this together.”

A genuine smile spread across his face. “Thanks, Ms Morgan.”

“Thank *you*, Bailey.”

# 31

As Toni thought about how to counsel Bailey through this crisis, she was grateful to be dealing with two very caring, concerned and supportive families. She thought about Mel and their children and how fortunate she felt to have them, even though they'd had their share of difficulties as a result of their unconventional composition. She was reminded of a discussion she'd had in one of her sessions with Pam.

*“So, how are things?” Pam asked.*

*“Busy, as usual. Especially as we get closer to the end of the year.”*

*“Any major crisis at work lately?”*

*“Not lately.” Toni smiled.*

*“I’m glad to hear that! How about at home? Are you learning to live with the clutter?”*

*“Yeah. It’s not so bad. I have a wonderful partner and two terrific kids.” Toni smiled. “I can learn to live with the mess. Would you like to see a picture?” Toni dug in her wallet and pulled out a photo.*

*“They’re beautiful, Toni. The little girl has your smile.” Pam looked up from the photo, her brow furrowed. “Well, I guess I shouldn’t make assumptions. Are you her mother?”*

*Toni pricked at the question. “I’m one of them; she has two.”*

*“Of course.” Pam sounded apologetic. “I just meant that I saw a resemblance.”*

*“I’m her birth mother.” The edge was gone from Toni’s voice. “It’s just that people always want to know who their ‘real’ mother is, as if giving birth somehow legitimizes your role or makes you a good parent.”*

*“You sound a little defensive.”*

*“Well, I often feel like I have to defend my family, and I’m not even talking about the blatant bigots. People make unintentional heterosexist comments all the time, and when we correct their assumptions, they somehow feel they have the right to ask us personal questions, or challenge the validity of our family.”*

*“What do you mean?”*

*“Well, one day when Lucas was a baby, we were all sitting on a bench at the mall. He was smiling and waving at the passersby, as babies do, and a very nice lady stopped. There were the usual comments about how cute he was, but it wasn’t long before one woman asked the inevitable, dreaded question, ‘Which one of you is his mother?’” Toni scowled. “It doesn’t matter how innocuous the question may seem, the*

*only way to answer that question honestly is to reveal very personal details about ourselves to complete strangers.*

*When Mel and I decided to have children we made a conscious decision never to deny who we are in front of our kids, and no matter how uncomfortable it might be, we try very hard to respond in a matter of fact way. However, when we tell people that our children have two mothers, nine times out of ten, there are these huge awkward silences. People don't know what to say. Or sometimes there are looks of confusion, followed by comments like 'That can't be!' or even 'That's not possible, dear, there must be a daddy somewhere.'"*

*"Really, people say things like that?"*

*"You wouldn't believe some of the things people say."*

*"How do you respond to a comment like that?"*

*"I say, 'You're right, he lives in a test tube somewhere.' Sometimes people still don't get it and say things like, 'Well, what do you mean?' and they want you to explain. Sometimes they're horrified when it dawns on them that we're lesbians, and they say really hateful things, and other times they're just really curious, and they want you to tell them all the details. Imagine a complete stranger asking how we got the sperm in there without a penis?"*

*"Did someone really ask you that?"*

*"Yes, and expected an answer!"*

*"That is so inappropriate!"*

*"Most of the time peoples' questions are innocent enough, and they don't really intend to pry, but some people are pushy and insist on knowing who her 'real' mother is.*

*That really bugs me. Usually I refuse to answer and I just say that we are both her real mother.”*

*“That must be very difficult for you.”*

*“It is because our claim to parenthood is challenged all the time. Mel has legally adopted Jesse and is just as much her parent in the eyes of the law as I am, and I have legally adopted Lucas.”*

*“So you each gave birth to one of the children, and the other went through adoption procedures to become the second legal parent to the child for whom you are not the birth mother?”*

*“Yes, that’s right, but that’s another story altogether.” Toni looked out the window and sighed. “Sometimes I get tired of challenging people’s assumptions and trying to educate them. I shouldn’t have to, but if I don’t do it, who will? Most straight people never even notice the privileges they have simply because they happen to be heterosexual in a heterosexual world. They take it for granted that they can safely kiss their partner goodbye on the sidewalk. Or they think we are looking for ‘special’ privileges when all we want is the exact same right they have to choose to marry. If I don’t educate people, nothing will ever change.*

*I feel like I owe it to my kids to try and make the world a more tolerant and understanding place. I kind of feel that way about my students, too, but challenging the status quo puts me in a vulnerable position every time... sometimes I ignore things when I know I should speak up. That’s when I begin to beat myself up. I feel like I’ve let an opportunity pass and another little piece of me shrivels up and dies.”*

*“You mustn’t be so hard on yourself, Toni. Change happens slowly. People like what’s comfortable and familiar, and change usually requires that people move outside*

*of their comfort zone. Most people resist change; that's just human nature." Pam smiled. "Keep that in mind, Toni, and try to be more forgiving with yourself. Small steady steps are much easier to take than one gigantic leap."*

*"I know you're right, it's just that I want the world to be different, and now that I have children, I want it to be a better place today, not in ten years time. I don't want my kids to have to feel the pain of prejudice and discrimination."*

*"You can't protect them from that, Toni..."*

*"I know..."*

*"... but you can give them the tools to deal with it. I suspect your children will grow up to be thoughtful and compassionate people."*

*"I hope so. I just wish they didn't have to deal with bigots."*

*"There will always be bigots in the world, Toni."*

*"Why? People aren't born bigots; they become bigots. If behavior is learned, why can't it be changed? It all comes down to education, and this is the source of my greatest inner struggle." Toni sighed. "I think that one of the most powerful ways I can educate people is just to be myself. If they get to know and like me, and discover that I'm a pretty regular person, they begin to question their preconceived notions of gay and lesbian people. That's when attitudes really begin to change."*

*Unfortunately, that's easier said than done, especially at work, because being open about my sexuality is risky. It's a trade-off; personal comfort and safety versus educating people in order to make the world a better place. If my decisions are ruled by personal safety, I feel like I've copped out. If I choose to try and educate people, I make myself a target for other peoples' fear and hatred. Neither choice is ideal, and I often feel like I've fallen short."*

*“Toni, you’ve set your standards very high. If you don’t take care of yourself, you won’t be any good to any one else. Your personal safety **must** be your first concern. You cannot stick your neck out if the consequences to your life are irreparable or unbearable. You must consider the consequences and decide if the worst case scenario is palatable, if you will be okay **regardless** of how things turn out, before you decide to put yourself in **any** personally risky situations. That doesn’t mean that you may not be afraid, but you must be certain that you will be alright. Educating others must only come after your safety is secured. You are not letting anyone down by taking care of yourself.”*

*“I know you’re right, but I can’t help the way I feel. One day I was digging up my front garden when a man and a woman walked by and stopped to ask me about my plants. They were very pleasant, and we chatted about gardening until a car load of people went by waving rainbow balloons and flags. They wondered what the hoopla was all about, so I explained that they were on their way to the Gay Pride Parade. The woman screwed up her face and said, ‘You mean that was a car load of lesbians?’ They went on and on about all the things that are wrong with being gay. I felt trapped there in my own yard, cringing at every word and feeling like a hypocrite because I didn’t say anything.*

*Finally she started to talk about a show she had seen on television that said gay people could be reformed, and I thought, ‘Here I am in my own yard, these people are walking on my street, and I don’t have to listen to this.’ So I said, ‘Reformed from what?’ She looked at me like I was stupid and said, ‘Well, you know, they can be **normal.**’ I took a deep breath. ‘Do you mean they could give up being gay or lesbian and become straight?’ She smiled at me like I was finally catching on. ‘Yes, that’s*

*right; I saw it on a documentary.’ I gave her a big smile and I said, ‘Well, I suppose gay people could pretend to be straight, just as easily as you could pretend to be gay.’ At first she looked confused, and then she looked frightened as she grabbed her husband’s hand and hurried off down the street. In the end I had a little chuckle, but I felt like I should have spoken up sooner.”*

*“But you did speak up. Focus on your success.”*

*“After Mel and I had children we decided that we should participate in the Gay Pride Parade because we wanted that to be a part of our kids’ experience; we want them to feel proud of who they are and who their family is, and it’s a great opportunity to connect with other families like our own. It’s a very festive event, with lots of balloons and bright colors. We love going!*

*Unfortunately, when you make yourself visible, you may also become a target for other peoples’ insensitive comments. A few years ago we were on the way back to our car after the Parade, and we decided to stop for an ice cream cone. So there we were, sitting on a bench wearing our rainbow shirts and enjoying our ice creams when a group of young women walked by and said, ‘The freaks are out today.’ My stomach churned.*

*I looked down at my beautiful little girl, hoping she hadn’t heard their hateful comments, but she looked back at me with her big blue eyes and a face covered with ice cream and said, ‘What’s a freak, Mommy?’ I smiled at her and stroked her hair as I struggled to suppress the hot angry tears that sprung to my eyes; I didn’t know how to answer.*

*Those girls had no right to pass judgment on me or my family, or put me in a situation where I had to explain their insensitive comment to a three year old. I wracked*

*my brain for an appropriate answer. It took everything I had to keep smiling and tell her that a freak is someone who is different, and that it is our differences that make people interesting and special. Those girls thought they knew something about us, they thought there was something wrong with us, that they were better than us. Maybe one day they will know how wrong they are.” Toni hung her head as a tear slipped out of the corner of her eye and ran down her cheek.*

*“Toni, you can’t protect your kids from all the bigots in the world, and you’ll drive yourself crazy if you try. The best thing you can do is teach your kids how to cope, which you are already doing. Your children will be fine, and they will continue the work of educating people because they see you doing it as a regular part of your life. You are providing them with one of the most powerful learning tools there is, a good example.”*

*“I guess I don’t always feel like I am a good example.”*

*“You aren’t superwoman, Toni; give yourself permission to be human. Relax a little. It’s okay to be less than perfect, and it’s important for your kids to see that. We all make choices that suit the circumstances, and sometimes we make mistakes, but we learn from our mistakes, and we move on. Do the best you reasonably can, nobody can expect more, and don’t beat yourself up over what you can’t do.” Pam smiled. “I imagine that you seldom do anything half way, though. Am I right?”*

*“Pretty much.” Toni suddenly felt exhausted.*

*“Give yourself a break, Toni. Slide now and again.” Pam patted Toni’s hand. “You look tired.” She checked her watch. “It’s a good thing that this was the last appointment of the day; we’ve gone beyond the hour.” Pam smiled as she stood up. “If Shawna has already left you may have to call tomorrow to make your next appointment.”*

*Toni stood up. "I'm sorry to have kept you." She was surprised at how quickly the time had passed.*

*"That's okay. I'll see you in a few weeks."*

*Toni sighed as she waited for the elevator. She was glad to be going home.*

## 32

Toni parked her car beside the house and leaned her head against the head-rest. It was 5:30 and she knew Mel would have supper ready, but she just needed a moment to collect herself. It had been an exhausting day, and she felt both physically and emotionally drained. She wasn't sure if she'd done the right thing by telling Bailey, but it felt right at the time. Ruth was initially concerned that Toni's disclosure might come back to haunt her; however, she had agreed afterwards that it had been a powerful moment. Both women felt that Toni's secret was safe with Bailey. Either way, it didn't matter now. Toni had set the ball in motion, and she hoped it wouldn't roll her over. She stepped out of the car and climbed the front steps to her home.

"Mommy!" Lucas ran toward her and jumped up into her arms, nearly knocking her over.

"Hey, how's my favorite boy? Did you and Mama Mel have a fun afternoon?"

“Yup.” He wiggled out of her embrace and ran off after the cat.

Mel came out of the kitchen. “Hey. I wasn’t sure if you’d make it home for supper or not. We waited, just in case.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I should have called, but I didn’t really have an opportunity.”

“That’s okay. We’re just glad that you’re home, now. How’s Sean Keddy doing?”

“He’s stable, and it looks like he’ll make a full recovery.” Toni smiled.

“Oh, Toni, that’s wonderful news! You must be so relieved.”

“That would be an understatement!”

“How was the rest of your afternoon?”

“Exhausting. I’ll tell you about it later.”

Mel gave Toni a tender peck on the lips. “Well, go wash up; supper will be ready in ten minutes.”

Toni washed her hands and looked at herself in the mirror. She not only felt tired, she looked tired. Leaning over the sink, she splashed cold water on her face and patted her skin dry. Peering at her reflection again, she realized that she didn’t really look any better, but she did feel slightly refreshed.

She headed into the living room and found Jesse curled up on the sofa with her nose in a book. Sliding in beside her, Toni kissed her cheek.

“Hi, Mom.” Jesse’s eyes never left the page.

“Hey, sweetie. How was your day?”

“Good.” Jesse continued to read.

Toni smiled as she watched her daughter’s eyes dart back and forth across the page. “That must be a really good book.”

“It is.” Jesse turned the page and continued to read.

Toni laid her head back against the sofa and closed her eyes. She was just beginning to drift off when Lucas climbed onto her lap and whispered in her ear.

“Mama Mel said to come for supper.”

Toni opened one eye. “Well, I think I’ll be too full for supper...” She pushed him down on the sofa...“after I finish eating this yummy little boy!” She held him down and nibbled on his neck as he squirmed and squealed with delight. Not to be left out of the action, Jesse set her book on the coffee table and climbed onto Toni’s back as they collapsed into a heap of wiggly giggles. “Mel, help me, I’m outnumbered!” Shaking Jesse off onto the sofa next to her brother, Toni tickled them until they begged her to stop. “Mel! Did you let kids in the house again?” She hoisted Lucas over her shoulder and headed toward the kitchen. “You have to stop letting these stray kids into the house!” Toni plunked Lucas onto a chair and grinned at Jesse. “And if we feed them, they’ll just keep coming back. We’ll never get rid of them!”

\* \* \*

Toni sat down on the sofa. Two cold beers were on the coffee table, and Mel was fanning the flames of a crackling fire. They’d shut the heat off a few weeks ago, but it was an unusually chilly night for early June.

Mel put another log in the flames then sat down next to Toni. “Are the kids asleep?”

“Lucas is, but Jesse’s reading under the covers with a flashlight. I pretended not to notice.”

Mel grinned. “Oh well, she can sleep in tomorrow.” Mel reached for the beers and handed one to Toni. “I thought you could probably use a drink. So, tell me about your day. It’s wonderful to hear that Sean is expected to make a full recovery.”

“Oh my God! I was so relieved!”

“What were his parents like?”

“They were really wonderful, and get this. They told me that their oldest son is gay, and Sean has had a really hard time accepting it.”

“Whoa! No wonder he’s acting out.”

“Yeah, they knew he was having a hard time, but they had no idea of the extent of his difficulty, or that he was acting out at school. They’re very concerned, and they know that Sean was a big part of the problem.”

“I bet you didn’t expect that kind of reaction.”

“I was shocked! They’re really lovely people, and they’re willing to do whatever they can to help us deal with the problem.”

“Well, that certainly makes your job easier. How did your visit with Bailey Brown’s family go?”

“Better than I thought. The dad was angry about the harassment that Bailey has had to put up with, and I can’t blame him for that. He was also angry with me because he felt I hadn’t dealt with the situation, and he’s partly right; however, I think I won him over in the end.”

“I understand how that could happen.” Mel smiled and kissed Toni’s cheek.

“You can be pretty charming.”

“Yeah, but here’s the thing, I think I kind of came out to him.”

“What do you mean? How do you ‘kind of’ come out?”

“I dropped hints, I spoke in innuendo, I tried to say things with my eyes.... I can’t be certain, but I’m pretty sure he read between the lines.”

“Well, what did you say?”

“I just said that I understood Bailey’s pain, more than I could say. I know it doesn’t really sound like much, but we had a moment. I’m pretty sure he knows.”

“Wow! That’s a pretty big deal, Toni.”

“Oh, it gets better. Before I left, I went downstairs to speak to Bailey, and I absolutely came out to him.”

“Are you sure?” Mel grinned.

“Of course, I’m sure.” Toni gave Mel a playful shove. “But I can’t stop thinking about whether I did the right thing or not. It felt right at the time, but I’ve been second guessing myself ever since.” Tears welled up in her eyes for the umpteenth time that day. “What if it gets out? What if it hurts our family? Or our kids?” Toni wiped at her tears. “I don’t know if I did the right thing, Mel. I hope so, but I’m so worried.”

Mel wiped Toni’s tears, and kissed her cheek. “I’ve said this before, Toni, you have great instincts.” She turned Toni’s chin until their eyes met. “When you trust your instincts, don’t things usually work out?”

“Yeah, but the stakes are so high! What if my instincts are wrong?”

“Well, we’ll just have to deal with it. Besides, what’s the worst thing that could happen? You’re an awesome principal, and you’re well respected. People will have to dig really hard to find fault with your work.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Your work speaks for itself, Toni. So you’re a lesbian. Big friggin’ deal! A secret loses its power when it’s no longer a secret. I’m proud of you. I think you did a

compassionate and courageous thing. Bailey needed to know that you're an ally, and that you understand what he's going through. You may have saved his life today."

"Do you think so?"

"Well, it's entirely possible considering the trauma he's been through. Whatever happens, we'll get through it together. Wasn't it Nietzsche who said, 'what doesn't kill me makes me stronger'?"

"Yeah. What kind of stupid quote is that? If I don't get stronger, the other option isn't all that appealing."

"Well, I have a strong feeling that everything is going to work out just fine."

"I sure hope so."

\* \* \*

Toni stared at the ceiling and listened to Mel's rhythmic breathing as she slept. She was exhausted, but she couldn't settle her mind enough to sleep. She knew that Mel thought all the gay and lesbian people in the world should just come out, and then everyone would discover that they know and care about a gay person, and society as a whole would get over its homophobia a lot quicker. Toni agreed in theory, but fear is a powerful thing. Someone would have to be the public face that started the ball rolling. Maybe others would follow suit, but who would want to be at the front, leading an army into a firing squad? She admired Mel's 'so-what' attitude about her sexuality, and she wished she could be more like that, but she wasn't there yet.

Toni pushed herself up on one elbow and looked out the window at the full moon. It shone through the leaves of the big old oak and cast crazy shadows on the

floor. The oak tree always made her think of her father, and she wondered how her parents were doing. They'd come a long way since she first came out to them, but she wasn't sure how her mother would cope if she did come out publicly, not that she planned to.

Toni had mixed feelings about the whole "coming out" process. On the one hand, she thought that for many people it was an important step in the process of self-acceptance; coming out was an assertion and celebration of one's identity, and an opportunity to claim one's right to equality. Coming out also made gay and lesbian people visible to one another, and perhaps more importantly, to gay and lesbian youth who desperately needed positive adult role models.

On the other hand, Toni believed that her sex life was nobody's business, and since coming out is essentially a statement about whom you sleep with, why should she have to disclose such personal information to anyone? How many heterosexual people ever had to make a heart-pounding disclosure to their family and friends? "Mom and Dad, there's something I need to tell you ....I think I might be straight."

Toni's friend and mentor, June Forrest, had fallen in love with a woman after the death of her husband, and she had huge political objections to coming out. She insisted that she didn't need anyone's permission to be who she was, and 'coming out' felt too much like 'fessing up'. She lived her life with her partner the same way any heterosexual couple might. She made no attempt to hide who she was, or her relationship, but she absolutely refused to discuss it. She didn't think she should have to. She lived her life how she pleased, and to hell with what anyone else thought; that was their problem. Maybe that was the way to go. Toni knew how important it was to

claim one's right to equality, and sometimes that required standing up and demanding it. There were pros and cons to both arguments. Toni sighed.

She leaned over and tenderly kissed Mel's forehead, then lay back on her pillow. Although she would never say so, Toni knew that Mel thought she had both the opportunity and a responsibility to her students to be a positive role model, and that she *should* be out. She wondered how things might have been different for her if she'd had a positive adult role model when she was in school. Toni really wanted to be that person, but the climate toward gays and lesbians in the school board was more than a little bit chilly.

Granted there were policies in place to protect gay and lesbian teachers, but neither her school board, nor her union, had a very good track record when it came to supporting its gay and lesbian teachers. In fact, Toni was carefully following the case of a young, lesbian teacher in the process of suing the school board over homophobic slurs made about her by several of her colleagues. It was being heard by a Human Rights Tribunal, and the school board seemed to be working hard to cover its collective ass. Toni thought the evidence against the board was overwhelming, and she was optimistic that the courageous young woman would win. She had a huge amount of respect for this young woman who was willing to become the public face for a battle that attacked her in a very personal way; she was fighting for gay and lesbian teachers everywhere.

Toni remembered how afraid she'd been as a young teacher when a parent had started rumors about her own sexuality. Her union had recommended that she drop it, and out of fear, she did. Toni admired this young woman's courage. She had sent a cheque to help cover her legal bills, but maybe that wasn't enough, maybe she should be doing more...maybe she *should* be out. Toni sighed as she stared at the ceiling. If only

she had a crystal ball. Her troubled mind flashed back to an earlier time when a crystal ball might have helped her avoid a huge mistake that nearly tore her and Mel apart. She remembered how she had called Pam in a panic, tearfully pleading with her to squeeze in an extra appointment. Toni tossed and turned for what seemed like hours before she finally drifted off into a restless sleep, memories of her reckless indiscretion percolating through her weary mind.

# 33

Toni had been standing outside the door of Counseling Services for several minutes, reluctant to go in. If she dragged her butt any longer, she'd be late for the extra appointment Pam had been kind enough to squeeze in. She had taken several deep breaths in order to muster her courage, and turned the door knob. "Hi Shawna." She tried to smile.

"Hi Toni. You can go right in."

Toni went into Pam's office and sat down on the sofa, struggling with tears.

Pam hurried to close the door, a look of concern clouding her face. "Toni, are you okay?"

"Yes... well, no." She was embarrassed to tell Pam what she'd done. The tears spilled over and dropped onto her lap. "I've made a terrible mistake."

Pam handed her a box of tissue. "What is it?"

“I don’t think Mel will ever forgive me, and I can’t say I blame her.” She wiped her eyes and blew her nose. She took a deep breath and began. “My 20 year high school reunion was coming up and I really wanted to go...”

*“You go ahead, Toni. I’ll stay home and look after the kids.”*

*“Are you sure?”*

*“I’m sure. I won’t know anyone there, and you’ll have more fun if you don’t have to worry about me.” Mel stood up and went to the oven. “It’ll be nice for you to see your old school mates.” Reaching for the oven mitts, she peered at the lasagna. “Besides, it’ll save us the problem of finding a sitter, and maybe I’ll find some time to finish my painting.”*

*“You won’t get much done on your painting if you’re looking after the kids all weekend. Are you sure you don’t want to come?”*

*Mel set the lasagna on the top of the stove and turned toward Toni. “Really, Toni, it’s not that big of a deal to me, and it’s a whole lot easier if I don’t go. I want you to go and have a good time.” She smiled. “Now, can you go round up the kids please? Supper’s ready.”*

*“Okay, if you’re sure.”*

“I was secretly relieved that Mel didn’t want to come.” Toni looked miserable. “I’m happy with the life we have together, and I wouldn’t change a thing, but even after all these years, I’m still bothered by some things that happened in high school, things that I just can’t seem to shake. I hoped going to the reunion would be an opportunity to reconcile some of those things and put them to rest once and for all. But besides that, I

really didn't want to 'come out' at my 20 Year High School Reunion; I couldn't very well side-step questions about my personal life if Mel was with me....”

*Toni looked around the hotel lobby but she didn't see anyone she recognized. She ordered a drink at the bar, and then headed for a table near the back where she would have a view of the entire room. The schedule of events in her registration package indicated there would be an informal gathering at 7pm. She checked her watch. 7:01. Maybe she was too early.*

*Toni's eyes scanned the room then rested on the silhouette of a man standing at the bar. He took his drink from the bartender and turned around as Toni's heart skipped a beat. She squinted in the dim light. Was that Shane Cooper, her one and only serious boyfriend? She hadn't seen him since she'd left home 20 years ago, sneaking away in the early morning hours without saying goodbye. His hair was beginning to grey, and he had put on a little weight, but she was pretty sure it was him.*

“I had a hard time shaking the guilt I felt about the night Shane discovered me cheating on him with Lindsay Jones. It pained me to think about how deeply I'd hurt him; I needed to tell him I was sorry.” Toni sighed. “High school was difficult for me, but the last few weeks were downright agonizing. If it wasn't for the fact that Shane and Lindsay's names were on the list of those planning to attend, I probably wouldn't have even gone to the reunion. I hoped that seeing them would help me finally settle the turmoil that insisted on churning up out of my past every now and again. While I was wondering about Shane, he noticed me.”

*“Toni? Toni Morgan?”*

*Toni looked up into the somewhat older, but still very attractive face of Shane Cooper. “Shane!” She stood up, blinking back unexpected tears that suddenly filled her eyes. “I thought that was you.” Reaching out, she hugged him tightly, holding on a little longer than social etiquette would allow. “Please, sit down. I’m so glad to see you. You haven’t changed a bit, and you’re just as handsome as you were in high school.” She thought she saw him blush.*

*“Well, thanks.” Shane’s eyes twinkled as he smiled. “You don’t look so bad yourself.”*

*Toni smiled back, and she dared to hope that perhaps he had forgiven her. As she reached across the table and patted his hand, she noticed the gold wedding band on his finger. “I can’t believe it’s really you.”*

*“I can’t believe that 20 years have gone by! It seems like only yesterday.” So, where have the past 20 years taken you, Toni?”*

*Toni looked into his eyes, remembering how they’d talked about getting married. “I went into education. I taught grade six for a few years, and then junior high. After that I went into administration. I’ve been a junior high vice principal at a school in the city for the past few years, but I recently accepted the principalship of the new high school being built in Farnham Falls. We bought a house just outside town near Otter Lake, and we’ll be moving in over the summer.”*

*“Really? You’re moving back to Farnham Falls?”*

*“Well, just outside town.”*

*“Do you have a family?”*

*“Yes. I have two children. Lucas is 4 and Jesse is 6.” Toni quickly steered the conversation back toward Shane. “So, how about you? Tell me all about your life. Where are you living?”*

*“In Farnham Falls.” Shane cleared his throat. “I took over the garage.”*

*“You did?” Toni tried to hide her surprise. “But you won a scholarship to Jackson. I thought you wanted to go into engineering.”*

*“Life had different plans for me.” Toni wondered if she sensed a hint of resignation in his voice. “My father was diagnosed with cancer a couple years after high school. He went for treatments, but he’d already given up, and he went downhill quickly. He was in a lot of pain, and he suffered a lot; it was really hard, especially on Mom. I hate to say it, but it was actually a relief when he died.”*

*Toni reached across the table and touched his hand. “I’m so sorry, Shane.”*

*Shane smiled at her. “I guess Jackson just wasn’t meant to be, but I can’t complain. I have a good life and three wonderful kids.” Shane reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. Flipping it open, he presented photos of three attractive, smiling teenagers. “This is Lily, my beautiful little flower, although she’s not so little anymore. She turned 19 last March, and she’s in her first year of Engineering at Jackson.” Shane glowed with pride.*

*“She’s beautiful, Shane.” Nineteen? Toni quickly did the math in her head, and was shocked to realize that Lily had been conceived in June of the year they’d graduated from high school. “She must look like her mother.” Toni teased, trying to cover up her shock. “Tell me about your other kids.”*

*“This is Little Joe, named after my dad.” Shane’s eyes glistened. “He’s 16, and in grade eleven. And this here...” he flipped over his wallet, “...is Rosie. She’s 12, and she was our little surprise package.” Shane grinned.*

*“Your children are beautiful, Shane.” She handed back his wallet. “And how about your Mom? How is she doing?”*

*“After dad died, she kind of fell apart for a while. I stayed around to help her run the garage. She’s 70 now, and I was getting concerned about her living on her own, so I added an in-law suite last year. She lives with us, and I run the business.” Shane smiled. “How about you, Toni? What does your husband do?”*

*The hairs on the back of Toni’s neck prickled. “I’m not married, Shane...did you forget that I’m a lesbian?” Her words came out harsher than she intended.*

*Shane flushed. “Well...uh... no...how could I forget that?” He looked away, obviously embarrassed, and Toni was instantly sorry that she’d put him on the spot. “It’s just that you’re wearing a wedding ring, and you mentioned you had kids... I thought you must have met a guy...” Shane’s neck was crimson.*

*Toni sighed. “I’m sorry Shane. I didn’t mean to jump down your throat.” Her heart began to pound as she looked around the room. There still weren’t many people around, and they were sitting at a table far off in a dim corner. She decided that now was as good a time as any to tell Shane what she’d come to say. “I wasn’t even going to attend the reunion until I saw that your name was on the list.”*

*Toni looked down at the table and studied her hands. “For all these years I’ve been certain that you must hate me, and I wouldn’t blame you if you did.” She looked up briefly, and then quickly looked away. “I still feel guilty about what happened on prom night, Shane, and I haven’t been able to let it go.” She sighed. “You torment my*

*dreams!’ She tried to smile. “I had to come and tell you how sorry I am about the way things unfolded.”*

*Toni looked at him as tears brimmed in her eyes. After all these years, she hoped he could find it in his heart to forgive her. “I’m so sorry that you got caught in the middle.” She dug in her purse for a tissue. “You were the nicest guy at school, and there was a time when I really did believe that I was in love with you. The last thing I wanted to do was to hurt you.” Toni looked at Shane’s blurry image and realized that he was smiling. “What? Why are you smiling?”*

*“Well, I forgave you a long time ago, but I do take some sort of perverted comfort in knowing that I’ve been haunting your dreams.” Shane’s grin was huge and his eyes twinkled. “Listen, Toni,” Shane leaned across the table as his expression suddenly became serious, “I was really angry with you for a while, and I blamed you for ruining my life...” His gaze drifted far away as he remembered. “... but that was a long time ago, and we were all just kids. It was a hard time, Toni. It felt like my world was crashing down all around me, and I couldn’t do anything to prevent it. I didn’t understand. I thought you were gay because I wasn’t a good enough boy friend, but now I realize that you can’t change your sexual orientation any more than I can change my eye color. I’m sorry for the way I behaved on prom night, and I feel badly that you’ve been bothered by that for all these years.” He reached across the table and took her hand. “I’ve made peace with my mistakes, Toni. I have a good life, and I’m happy. I don’t harbor any bad feelings toward you.”*

*“I’m glad to hear that.” Toni smiled as her tears spilled over and dropped onto the table. She hadn’t expected Shane to be so forgiving, and she was touched by his compassion. “Thank you, Shane. I’m so glad to know that you’re happy.”*

*Shane smiled and the twinkle returned to his eyes. "You can put your mind at ease. I promise not to haunt your dreams anymore."*

*Even after all this time, Toni's heart swelled with affection for the man who sat across the table from her. He was a good man, and she was certain he made a good husband and father. "So, who is the lucky girl who nabbed you for her husband?" She pointed at his ring. "Is it anyone I know?"*

*"Yes." He grinned. "I married Shelley MacKinnon."*

*"No! Tom MacKinnon's twin sister? She chased you for three years and you wouldn't give her the time of day!"*

*"I know, but only because it would have been weird to date my best friend's sister. She's nothing if not persistent. She wore me down!" Shane smiled. "It's hard to believe, but we'll be celebrating our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary this October."*

*"Wow, that's really something to be proud of, Shane. Congratulations!"*

*"Thanks. We had a rough start, but it's been a very good marriage."*

*"How about you? Do you have a partner?"*

*"Yes. Melissa and I have been together for 12 years."*

*"Wow! Are you going to get married now that the law has changed?"*

*"No. We talked about it, and although we're thrilled about the victory for equal rights, it seems kind of silly to get married after being together for so long. We already paid a lawyer to define our relationship in legal terms a long time ago, and a wedding just seems like an unnecessary expense. Kind of anti-climatic at this point in our lives."*

*"And your kids?"*

*Toni pulled her wallet out of her purse and opened it on the table.*

*“They’re beautiful, Toni, just like their mother.” Shane looked up at her and smiled warmly; his eyes danced. “I’m glad things have worked out for you.”*

*“Thank you, Shane.” Toni wondered if he could tell that she was blushing.*

*“Why didn’t Melissa come to the reunion with you?”*

*“She wasn’t all that interested, and it certainly made child care much simpler. Besides, I wasn’t sure that I wanted to explain our relationship to all our former high school classmates. And I had some thing I needed to clear up.” Toni smiled at him.*

*“How about you? Why didn’t Shelley come?”*

*“She’s planning to join me, in fact, I expected her to be here by now. Maybe I should give her a call and see what’s keeping her.” Shane stood up. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll be back.”*

Toni sighed. “I watched him disappear into the crowd and wondered if I could have tried any harder. Shane Cooper is a really good man, as good as they get.” She reached for another tissue and wiped her eyes.

“I don’t understand, Toni. Is that what’s upsetting you?”

“No,” Toni hung her head, “it’s much, much worse.”

# 34

Toni rolled over and noticed that Mel was already up, and so was the sun. As she listened to the birds chirping outside her window, she thought about the Keddy family and marveled at how gracious they'd been in spite of everything. She prayed that Sean's condition had continued to improve; she'd have to call the hospital in a bit and find out. She vaguely recalled that she had dreamed about Bailey, and while she couldn't remember the details of her dream, she was left with a feeling of profound obligation, and she desperately wanted to do right by him. Although not really a believer in the supernatural, she found herself wishing someone could tell her what the future would bring. Maybe she should enlist the services of a psychic.

Shaking her head at her own foolishness, and lured by the aroma of freshly brewed coffee, she poked her head out from under the covers. She lifted her head to look at the clock and then flopped back down on the bed. It was 9:30, much later than she

usually slept, but she didn't feel rested. She pulled the covers over her head and groaned. Pushing the nagging thoughts out of her mind, she climbed out of bed and stretched, resolving not to think about it again and to have a relaxing day with her family.

As she entered the kitchen, she noticed that her coffee was poured, and cereal and toast were on the table. She sat down and smiled quizzically at Mel, who bustled happily about the kitchen, wearing a paint-covered t-shirt and singing.

Mel danced toward her, bent over and kissed her lightly on the head then spun away to stir the eggs. Looking over her shoulder from where she stood at the stove, she smiled at Toni's puzzled expression. "I've been up since 6:00. It's such a beautiful day, I thought that if I got some work done on my canvas before everyone else got up, we could do something fun together today. So, I got everything ready for breakfast before I started to paint, and when I heard the water running in the bathroom, I just turned on the coffee and poured the eggs into the frying pan." Mel set a plate of steaming hot eggs in front of Toni.

"Thanks." Toni smiled.

"You're welcome." Mel returned to the counter for her own eggs and coffee and joined Toni at the table. "Did you sleep well?"

"No, not really. I had strange dreams, and I kept waking up."

"You have a lot on your mind."

"Thanks for letting me sleep in, I must have needed it...and thanks for making breakfast; you're so sweet."

“And don’t you forget it!” Although Mel was being playful, Toni felt a twinge of guilt as she was reminded of a significant indiscretion several years previous in which her memory had indeed become quite cloudy.

Toni leaned over and kissed Mel’s cheek. “You’re so good to me; how could I ever forget how fortunate I am?” She smiled. “Where are the kids? They’re so quiet.”

“I told them that you were really tired and that they had to play quietly until you woke up, but that we would do something all together later on. They’ve been really good. Jesse’s reading a book, and Lucas is building a huge Lego city.”

“You’d never even know they were here, they’re so quiet. How did your painting go?”

“Great! I can’t do any more until it dries, so the rest of the day is ours. I was thinking this might be a good day to get the canoe out. We could pack a picnic and have lunch on the island.”

“That sounds wonderful.” Toni smiled at Mel. She was looking forward to spending a quiet, relaxing day with her family, and she couldn’t think of anything more pleasant than a Sunday afternoon paddle on a sunny day in June.

\* \* \*

Mel jumped out into ankle deep water and guided the canoe to shore. Holding the bow between her knees, she steadied the boat while the kids climbed out. Toni followed. Placing her paddle across the gunnels, she made her way to the bow and jumped out onto dry land.

“How come you’re the only one who didn’t get their feet wet?” Mel gave Toni a playful push toward the water.

“I guess I’m just more skilled than you, besides, that water is cold!” Grabbing the handle at the bow, Toni helped Mel lift the canoe up onto the beach, and then hoisted the strap of the cooler bag over her shoulder.

“Can we go explore the island?” Lucas danced around, eager for an adventure.

Toni looked at her watch. By the time they had packed their lunch, tied the canoe to the roof of the car, and drove to the canal, it was almost 11:30 before they actually put the canoe into the water, and now it was almost 1:00. “Aren’t you hungry?”

“No, not really. Can we go? Please? Just for a few minutes?”

“Mel, why don’t you take them down the path and I’ll get lunch ready. Don’t be long, though; come back in about ten minutes.” Toni smiled as she watched them scurry off down the path, talking excitedly. She must remember to tell Mel what a great idea this was. She hadn’t thought about work since she’d called the hospital after breakfast. This was just what she needed.

Toni looked around for a place to set up their picnic. There was a small sandy beach near the water but no shade, so she spread the blanket a little further back on a grassy area under some trees. It had turned into a scorcher of a day, and after baking in the sun while they paddled, she was glad to find some shade. She unpacked the cooler, and then lay back on the grass to wait for the others. The breeze off the water was refreshing, and she hadn’t felt so relaxed in days. She closed her eyes and was just beginning to doze off when the musical jingle of laughter, dancing on the wind, tugged at her sleepy mind.

“Toni, look what I found!” Lucas’ excited voice pulled her out of her sleepy state. She opened her eyes and peered into the face of a small frightened snake, its frantically flicking tongue barely inches from her nose. Toni screamed and scrambled to her feet. Lucas, who had been squatting near her head, fell over backwards on the blanket, and the small, scared serpent slithered off through the grass. Lucas began to cry. As Mel and Jesse giggled nearby, Toni kneeled down to help Lucas up.

“I’m sorry, Lucas; come here.” She wiped the tears that ran down his cheeks. “I didn’t mean to scream, but you really startled me. She clutched her pounding heart. I wonder who was more scared, me or the snake? Did you see how fast his little tongue was flicking? That means he was nervous.”

“I wanted to know if I could keep him.” Lucas sniffed.

“Snakes are wild creatures, honey, it wouldn’t be very nice of us to take it away from its home. Besides, maybe it has a family here somewhere who would miss him.”

“But what about the snakes in the pet store?”

Toni sighed as she thought about how to explain. “Well, that’s a little different. Those snakes are born at the pet store, so they don’t know what it’s like to live in the wild; in fact, they may not even know *how* to survive in the wild. Besides, I don’t think our cat would like a snake very much.”

“Yeah, I guess so, but it sure did feel cool. Its skin was really soft.”

“Maybe we can look it up when we get home and see what kind it was.”

“Okay.” Lucas smiled. “I’m hungry now, can I have my lunch?”

“Of course you can.” Toni smiled and kissed his forehead. She looked at Mel and Jesse who were trying hard to stifle their laughter, and grinned. “Come on, you two.”

After lunch Toni gathered up their garbage and packed everything back in the cooler while Mel slathered the kids with generous amounts of sunscreen. They sat on the blanket, watching the kids dig in the sand and throw pebbles into the water.

“What a great day, Mel; this was a really good idea.” Toni lay back on the blanket and looked at the deep blue sky through the verdant green of new leaves. She watched a small white cloud drift aimlessly across the cobalt background.

“You look more relaxed than you have in days.”

Toni rolled onto her side, pushed herself up on one elbow, and set her chin into the palm of her hand. She watched Mel watching the kids, and her heart swelled. As she studied Mel’s profile, she noticed the small lines around her eyes that crinkled when she smiled, and the deep dimple in her left cheek. Toni reached out and tugged on Mel’s t-shirt. “I really love you.”

Mel grinned. “Yeah, I know,” she pushed Toni back onto the blanket, “but I love you more.” She leaned over and kissed Toni tenderly as the sparks flew between them.

Toni’s heart pounded. She opened her eyes and looked up at Mel with a devilish grin. “Let’s go home and put the kids to bed.”

“Right now?” Mel laughed. “At 3:00 in the afternoon?”

“Why not? If we make them paddle all the way home, they’ll be so exhausted by the time we get there they’ll be begging us to let them go to bed.”

Mel giggled. “You know, they probably will be tired after our big adventure. I bet we could get them to bed early...” Mel wiggled her eyebrows suggestively and nudged Toni’s shoulder.

Toni smiled. “That sounds like a plan.” She laced her fingers together behind her head and watched another small cloud scuttle across the azure sky as she listened to the kids laugh and splash in the water. Toni sighed. It was a perfect day.

\* \* \*

Toni flopped down on the sofa next to Mel. “Do you need any help?”

“No. Lunches are made and the kitchen is cleaned up.”

“Wow! You’re good!”

Mel grinned. “How did you make out with the kids?”

“It took me a while to get Lucas into bed. He pretended to fall asleep on my shoulder as I carried him up the stairs, so I had to drop his floppy body onto his bed and pull his clothes off. Then I had to stuff his floppy limbs into his pajamas while he pretended to snore and tried not to giggle.” Toni smiled. “He’s so cute. I’m pretty sure that he’s down for the count, though. Jesse’s in bed reading, but I don’t think she’ll last long. Her eyes looked pretty heavy.” Toni looked at her watch. “Can you believe it’s only 7:00? I’m pooped.”

“Me, too, and my shoulders are beginning to ache.” Mel rolled her shoulders forward and stretched her neck from side to side.

“I’m sure we’ll both be sore tomorrow. Turn around, and I’ll rub your muscles.” Mel turned her back toward Toni who massaged her sore shoulders. “I had a lot of fun today. We need to do things like that more often.” Lifting Mel’s hair, Toni kissed the sensitive skin on her neck. “The kids are in bed...” She nudged Mel’s shoulder and winked dramatically.

Mel grinned at Toni's exaggerated advances. "I'm so sore and tired, Toni. Is it okay if we reschedule?"

"Sure, if I know in advance I can shave my legs." Toni grinned. "I'm pretty tired, too, and I probably should try to get a good sleep before I have to head back to work and deal with the mess from Friday."

"Have you decided what you're going to do?"

"No. I've been all over the map about it. What do you think I should do?"

"I can't tell you what you should do, Toni. That's a decision you have to make."

"I know, but I'm interested in your opinion."

"Do you *really* want to know what I think?"

"Of course, I do."

"Well... I think you should be out. I think you have a responsibility to all of your students to be the wonderful person you are and to show them that it's okay to be gay. You're well liked, and hugely respected. I think you're in a position to have a huge impact on the way a lot of people think. You say that you want to make a difference..."

"I do, but..."

"Well? Here's an opportunity staring you right in the face. Walk your talk, Toni. Your actions speak way louder than your words."

"It's not that easy, Mel." Toni began to feel defensive.

"Just make a decision, Toni, and then do it. I think you owe it to all the other gay and lesbian kids in the school, especially since the stabbing, to take a strong stand against homophobia, and what a more powerful way than to make it personal? They'll listen to you."

“It’s not that simple. It’s a decision that has huge personal implications...”

“Maybe, but you know it’s the right thing to do. Besides, times have changed, the climate is right. Gay and lesbian people everywhere are claiming their right to equality, except for teachers. It’s like schools are still in the Dark Ages; people think that gay and lesbian teachers are going to convert their children, and teachers are held captive by their fear. I have so much respect for that young woman who is suing the school board. It’s time that someone in education made a public stand. Imagine if every gay or lesbian educator came out and stood behind her? If we’re going to change attitudes, then schools are the places to do it. Those young people are our future.”

Toni could hear the exasperation begin to creep into Mel’s voice, as her own level of frustration began to rise. Even though she’d asked for Mel’s opinion, she couldn’t help feel like Mel was judging her, and her hackles rose. She was torn about how to handle the situation, but deep down, she believed that Mel was right. Young people needed strong, positive, gay and lesbian role models, but she didn’t think she had the courage to do it, and she was her own harshest critic. “Stop pushing me, Mel. You have no idea what it’s like for me at school. Your professional community has always been supportive; the art world is full of gay and lesbian people.”

“So is the world of educators, you just have a harder time finding each other. I think you should organize a board wide coming out day for teachers.”

“Now you’re being silly.”

“I’m being absolutely serious! Do it as a show of solidarity for that young woman who has the courage to stand up and fight for all of you. Imagine what an impact that would have! It could transform the school environment, especially for gay and lesbian students and teachers. It might be stressful and revolutionary at first, but

equilibrium would eventually return, and the climate will have changed dramatically.

Who's the author of that quote you have hanging in your office? 'Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.'"

Toni scowled. "Margaret Mead."

"Walk your talk, Toni."

"Stop saying that! And stop fucking judging me! I'm not you! I've been out since I was 18 years old, and I'm out in every other aspect of my life *except* work. My professional community is full of homophobes, and the public is afraid of gay and lesbian people in education. There are huge risks associated with being out at work for me. You have no idea what that's like."

"You're right; I don't." Mel struggled to keep her cool. "But how will things ever change if nobody is prepared to take a risk?"

"Somebody will; I'm just not sure it needs to be me."

"If everyone said that, nothing would change. Someone has to be first, and you're in a position to make a difference."

"I'm not prepared to be a martyr for my job!"

"Then be a martyr for all the gay and lesbian kids who need you, and if you can't do that, then think about our own kids. Make the world a better place for them."

Toni snapped her head around, anger flashing in her eyes. "I do think about our own kids! I think about them every fucking day! How hard do you think it would be for them to have their mother publicly dragged through the mud? What will happen to them when all their friends find out that their parents are dykes? Have you thought about that?"

“Stop yelling at me, Toni!” Mel tried hard to keep the tone of her voice even. “You asked for my opinion. Don’t get mad at me because you don’t like it. It might be hard for the kids at first, but they would come to realize how important it is to stand up for what’s right, even when it’s hard to do.” Mel took a deep breath. “You would be a living example of what we try to teach our kids about how to live well in the world. Your family would be proud of your courage.”

Hot, angry tears slid down Toni’s cheeks. “Well, I’m just not as brave as you, and not nearly as fucking good. I’m not prepared to put myself, or our children, through that, and if that makes me a coward, then I guess I am. Besides, as the only consistent breadwinner in this family, who would pay the bills if I lost my job?” She saw Mel wince and knew that her words had hurt.

“That wouldn’t happen.”

“You don’t know that, and I’m not prepared to take that risk, Mel. I’m not prepared to risk becoming a sacrificial victim just to further a cause. If you’re so fucking good, you be the martyr.” Toni saw the pain on Mel’s face, and she knew that she was being mean, but she couldn’t stop herself.

Tears welled up and spilled over Mel’s eyelids as she fired back. “Well, you’re a pretty good risk-taker when you want to be, or have you forgotten about your 20 year high school reunion? You were a pretty good fucking risk-taker then! Maybe I should ask Lindsay Jones how good you are at taking risks!” Mel stood up and stormed through the kitchen into her studio, slamming the door behind her.

Toni felt like she’d been hit in the stomach. They’d gone from flirting to fighting in under fifteen minutes, and she had alienated her greatest ally. She felt pulled

in so many directions...she didn't know what to do. She lay her head down on the sofa and cried.

# 35

Toni lifted her head and looked at Pam with swollen eyes. She took a deep breath. “Lindsay Jones was my first true love. It broke my heart to leave her behind in Farnham Falls, but my mother’s reaction to me coming out left me feeling like I had no other choice. I tried desperately to get Lindsay to run away with me, but she wouldn’t go. Over the past 20 years I’ve often found myself thinking about her and wondering...”

“Wondering what?”

“I don’t know...” Toni looked down at her hands. “...what if, I guess.”

“Are you happy in your present relationship?”

“Completely.” Toni looked up, and then quickly looked away. “I guess it’s just because things with Lindsay never really felt finished. I sometimes wondered how my

life might have been different if she'd come with me..." Tears spilled over and ran down her cheeks.

*Toni watched Shane disappear into the crowd and realized that the room had filled up while they were talking. She wondered if Lindsay had arrived yet and her heart fluttered in anticipation. She stood up and wandered toward the bar as her eyes scanned the faces in the crowd. She had thought a lot about what it would be like to see Lindsay again, and what she might say, but now that it was imminent, she wasn't so sure. "Corona, please." The clock behind the bar indicated that it was nearly 8:30. Lindsay Jones was never late for anything, and Toni anxiously hoped that she was still planning to attend.*

*Perching on a bar stool, Toni studied the faces in the crowd, trying unsuccessfully to match her 20 year old teenage memories to the aging adult faces that milled about. She knew many of the names on the list of attendees, but if she hadn't bumped into Shane, she might have wondered if she was in the right place. Perhaps she should get up and walk around.*

*Toni turned to pick up her beer and out of the corner of her eye, noticed a tall, attractive woman enter the room. Peering through the darkness, her heart fluttered as she sat back down on the stool and watched Lindsay Jones glide into the room. Time had been good to her. Of course, she had always been beautiful in Toni's eyes, but now many heads turned as she entered the room. She was stunning, and Toni was breathless.*

*Lindsay appeared to be alone, and although Toni would never admit it, she was secretly pleased. Toni watched her smile and nod, stopping briefly to talk with several people as she made her way toward the bar. Toni's anticipation grew as she followed*

*Lindsay's progress, until finally Lindsay looked in her direction and their eyes met. A smile spread across Lindsay's face, and she waved enthusiastically as she hurried toward Toni.*

*Toni waved back, surprised at how quickly her heart went from a gentle trot to a full-out gallop. She took a deep breath.*

*"Toni!" Lindsay approached with her arms open wide. Toni stood up, hoping Lindsay wouldn't notice the thundering in her chest as they embraced. She had imagined this moment many times, but she was unprepared for the intensity of her reaction. Unexpected tears sprang to her eyes and she felt suddenly overwhelmed as 20 years of unanswered questions and regrets bubbled to the surface. Toni smiled at Lindsay through her tears as she sat down on her stool. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me."*

*"It's okay." Lindsay smiled. "I'm so glad to see you."*

*Toni dabbed at her eyes. "It's wonderful to see you too, Lindsay. You look amazing. You haven't aged at all!"*

*"Thank you, Toni, but I'm just really good at concealing the wrinkles. You don't look so bad yourself." Lindsay grinned, and Toni did notice several small lines around her eyes. She leaned over and softly kissed Toni's cheek before she sat down.*

*Toni's cheek tingled where Lindsay's lips brushed against her skin. Her hands were clammy, and her heart pummeled her chest. She took a deep breath. "Thanks." She turned away, suddenly shy and at a loss for words. Toni picked up her bottle and drained the last of her beer as she desperately wracked her brain for something to say. Eager to fill the silence, she opened her mouth and said the first thing that popped into her mind, but even as she heard the words tumble off her tongue, she would have rather*

*choked. "Can I buy you a drink, pretty lady?" She felt her face burn and was once again grateful for the dim light.*

*"Sure." Lindsay beamed. "I'll have the same as you."*

*Toni motioned for the bartender as she raised her bottle and held up two fingers. She could feel Lindsay's eyes on her, but she couldn't meet her gaze. What a dumb thing to say; she wanted to crawl under her stool and hide. She felt like she was 18 years old all over again. The bartender set two Corona in front of them. Thankful for even the smallest of distractions, Toni reached for her bottle, but Lindsay held her arm. Raising her own bottle, Lindsay looked Toni in the eye. "To old friends."*

*Lindsay's gaze was intense, and Toni wondered what the hell was going on. Was there still something between them, or was that just in her head? Toni raised her bottle. "To old friends." She smiled at Lindsay and then quickly looked away, wondering what she was getting into.*

*Lindsay set her drink on the counter. She reached for Toni's hand and gave it a quick squeeze. "I can't believe it's really you, after all these years." She smiled broadly. "So, what keeps you busy, Toni?"*

*"Well, I'm the vice-principal at a junior high school in the city, and that keeps me moving so fast I can hardly keep up." She neglected to mention Mel or the kids.*

*"Really? A vice-principal? I thought you hated school?"*

*"Yeah, that's kind of ironic, isn't it? But I didn't really hate school, I just hated that I didn't feel like I belonged. Now, I work very hard to create a school environment where no kid will have to feel the way I did." Toni smiled. "It can be an exhausting job, but something keeps me going back every September."*

*Lindsay stood up. “Do you want to take our drinks and go sit over there?” She pointed toward a small vacant table on the edge of the room.*

*“Sure.” As they walked toward the table in the corner, Toni took the opportunity to collect herself. She felt like a silly, tongue-tied teenager. Struggling to contain feelings that felt dangerously close to the surface, she took several deep breaths and felt a little more in control by the time she sat down.*

*Lindsay smiled at her in the dim light. “This is much better.” She leaned across the small table, and took Toni’s hands, looking deeply into her eyes. “I can’t tell you how glad I am to see you.” Lindsay’s voice was thick with emotion.*

*Toni eyes brimmed with tears as the shaky hold she had on her own emotions slipped away. “I’m glad to see you, too, Lindsay.” Toni looked down at their hands. “To be honest, the only reason I came to the reunion was because I hoped I would see you.”*

*“Really?” Tears filled Lindsay’s eyes as she squeezed Toni’s hands. “That’s why I came, too. I’ve thought about you so many times over the years, but I couldn’t find the courage to track you down.”*

*Tears spilled over Toni’s eyelids and ran down her cheeks. “Why?” She reached for a napkin to wipe them away. “Why were you afraid to contact me?”*

*Lindsay leaned back in her chair. “I cried for days after you left, Toni, but I was so afraid...I wasn’t strong like you.” Lindsay wiped away a tear that slid down her cheek. “My parents sent me to a psychiatrist again, and then they sent me away to university. There was no way they were going to let you and I go to the same university, and they didn’t care that they would lose their deposit.*

*I was so depressed; I flunked my entire first year. My parents were really mad at me for wasting their money, but I didn't care. I skipped classes, I wasn't eating; I hardly left my room. The girl across the hall reported me to student services and then people started to come around to check on me. They said they would contact my parents and send me home if I didn't go see the counselor, so I went. I didn't want to go, but it ended up being a good thing. I saw the counselor every week for the next three years. She saved my life. I had given up, but she helped me realize that there is absolutely nothing wrong with me. I got back on track at school, I got my head straight, and I never went home, not once, during my entire four years at university. My parents came to see me a few times, but I refused to see them, so they stopped coming. I saw them in the audience at my graduation, but I didn't speak to them."*

*"Do you speak to them now?"*

*"Not very often. They don't agree with my lifestyle 'choice,' and they can't seem to get it through their heads that trying to force me to be someone I'm not was killing me. Our relationship is very distant. It's taken me a long time to get over that. Sometimes it makes me sad, but I have my own life now...." Lindsay looked away as her eyes once again brimmed with tears.*

*Toni reached across the table and took her hands. "I wish I had known."*

*"I wanted to contact you, but I didn't know how." Lindsay studied her hands for a moment and then looked up as she wiped at her tears. "That's not true. I'm sure I could have found you if I had tried. I thought you probably hated me for being such a coward, and I was afraid to find out. I just couldn't bring myself to look for you, and I didn't want to know that you had moved on without me. I was a real mess, Toni; it was*

*all I could do to pull myself out of the hole I was in and try to get well. I didn't have much energy for anything else."*

*"I never hated you..."*

*"There's more. My parents agreed to pay for my university only if I agreed never to see you again. It was emotional blackmail, but I didn't have the guts to stand up to them. I was embarrassed about my lack of courage...I sold out, and I was ashamed." Tears streamed down Lindsay's face. "You were so brave, Toni; I just couldn't face you."*

*Toni reached across the table and tenderly touched Lindsay's hand. "Let's get out of here." Both women wiped their eyes and tried to pull themselves together enough to leave the room without drawing curious looks from the people they had to pass by. They slipped out a side door and into the hallway.*

*"Now what? Toni smiled.*

*"Are you staying in the hotel tonight?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Me, too. I have a bottle of wine in my room..."*

*Toni smiled. "I could use another drink."*

Toni wiped her eyes and blew her nose. "I told myself that we still had a lot to talk about, and we couldn't continue to cry in the middle of the reunion, but I knew what I was doing.... My heart pounded furiously against my chest as we rode the elevator to the fourth floor." She looked at Pam sheepishly. She took a deep breath and continued.

*“I bumped into Shane before you arrived.”*

*“You did?”*

*“Yeah, he looks good.” Toni smiled. “You’ll never guess who he married.”*

*“Who?” The elevator stopped and the doors slid open.*

*“Tom MacKinnon’s sister, Shelley.”*

*“Really? I guess her persistence paid off. Is Tom here?” Lindsay slid her key in the door.*

*“I didn’t see him, but Shane said he was coming.”*

*“So where did Shane go?”*

*“Shelley was supposed to meet him, but she was late, so he left to find out what was keeping her.” Toni looked around the room. Besides the bed, there was only one chair next to a small table. A bottle of wine was chilling in the ice bucket.*

*“Have a seat.” Lindsay pointed toward the chair. “I’ll get some glasses.” Lindsay went into the bathroom and came out unwrapping two small glasses. She set them on the table and poured the wine. Smiling, she handed a glass to Toni.*

*Toni raised her glass. “To burying the past.”*

*“I’ll drink to that.” Lindsay sat down on the edge of the bed.*

*“So what did you do after you graduated from university?”*

*“I took a job in Australia.”*

*“Australia! No wonder we never ran into each other.”*

*“I thought it would help to have a fresh start in a place where I didn’t know a single soul.”*

*“Did it?”*

*“Yes and no. I had no history there, no family, no expectations about who I should be, and I learned to live with myself. I had a few relationships, one that was pretty serious, but none of them was you.” Lindsay looked down at her hands. “I never stopped thinking about you, Toni.” She took a deep breath and sighed. “Not coming after you has been the biggest regret of my life.” Tears welled up and spilled over, trickling down her cheeks.*

*Toni stood up and sat beside Lindsay on the bed. Lifting Lindsay’s chin, she wiped her tears then put her arms around her and pulled her close. Lindsay leaned against Toni’s shoulder and continued to cry. “Shhh.” Toni smoothed Lindsay’s hair. Tears filled her own eyes and they held each other.*

*After their sobs subsided, Lindsay sat up and looked into Toni’s eyes. She tenderly stroked Toni’s cheek, sending electric shocks rocketing through her body. Toni’s breath was shallow, and as Lindsay gently pushed her down onto the bed, Toni wondered if Lindsay could hear the words she couldn’t say. Toni’s heart threatened to burst right through her chest. Lindsay gazed at her intently, then brushed a strand of hair away from her face before she leaned down and ever so gently, kissed her forehead. Toni’s skin tingled. As Lindsay’s tender kisses moved toward her lips, fire raced through Toni’s veins. She briefly wondered what the hell she was doing in a hotel room with Lindsay Morgan, then threw her arms around Lindsay’s neck and kissed her back.*

Toni reached for another tissue. Her head pounded. She couldn’t believe she had allowed herself to be enchanted by what might have been. Fresh tears spilled over and ran down her cheeks. She looked at Pam through watery eyes. “I came to my senses and left before things went much further, but I’m afraid it wasn’t soon enough.”

“Why? What happened?”

*Toni rolled over and looked at the clock. She had tossed and turned all night, agonizing over what she should tell Mel. After watching several minutes tick by, she finally decided to get up and shower. She had planned to meet Lindsay for breakfast, but she knew she couldn't go. She sat down to write a note.*

*My dearest Lindsay,*

*It was wonderful to see you again; you are even more beautiful than I remember. Over the years I've often wondered what my life might have been like if things had worked out differently for us, but last night I realized that I have many things to be thankful for, and I'm perfectly happy with my life the way it is.*

*I'm sorry to stand you up for breakfast, but I need to go home and spend some time with my family. I hope you find the happiness that you deserve.*

*Love always,*

*Toni*

\* \* \*

*Toni looked at her watch as she pulled into the driveway, wondering if Lindsay was eating breakfast alone. She felt badly about standing her up, but she was glad to be home. She closed the door behind her and dropped her suitcase in the hallway.*

“Toni? Is that you?”

“Yes.”

*“You’re early. It’s not even 9:30. I wasn’t expecting you back from the reunion until suppertime.”*

*Toni walked toward the sound of the voice and found Mel covered in paint in her studio. “Is it a crime to want to spend time with my family?”*

*“Mommy!” Lucas came barreling toward her. Toni braced herself for the impact as he flung himself through the air into her arms. Kissing his neck and making him giggle, Toni held him tight while he squirmed.*

*“I sure missed you.” She set him down. “Did you miss me?”*

*“Nah!”*

*Lucas laughed as Toni chased him around the kitchen table until he escaped into the hallway. Catching her breath, she leaned against the door frame to the studio. “I thought you could probably use a break from the kids. Did you get much painting done?”*

*“Actually, I did. The kids were pretty good.” Mel stepped away from the canvas. “What do you think?”*

*Toni was always amazed at Mel’s talent. “It’s beautiful, Mel, just like you.”*

*Mel turned around and looked at Toni. “What’s gotten into you?”*

*“Nothing. You are beautiful, even with that little smudge of paint on your cheek, and I missed you.”*

*“Well I missed you, too.” Mel carefully leaned toward Toni and puckered her lips. “I don’t want to get any paint on you.”*

*Toni smiled and puckered back. “I can think of worse things.”*

*“Let me wash my hands at least.” Mel shrugged off her painting shirt and hung it on a hook. “Why don’t you put on some coffee and then you can tell me all about the reunion.”*

*Toni set a mug in front of Mel and sat down.*

*“Thanks.” Mel smiled. “So, how was the reunion?”*

*“Fine.” Toni concentrated on her cup, blowing on the steaming liquid.*

*“You sound like Jesse whenever I ask about her day at school.” Mel raised her cup and took a sip. “Did you have fun? Were your old buddies there?”*

*“Yeah. Shane was there, and Tom.”*

*“Did Lindsay show up?”*

*“Yeah” Toni felt her face burn as she raised her mug and took a sip. Her heart pounded. Even if she wanted to tell, she didn’t think she could bring herself to say the words.*

*“How was that?”*

*“It was fine. It was nice to see her. She’s been living in Australia for a few years, but she’s back now.”*

*“I bet she didn’t age well at all.” Mel smirked.*

*Toni looked up and grinned. “No, not at all. She has wrinkles everywhere. Besides, she could never hold a candle to you.”*

*“Good answer, Toni Morgan! So, why did you leave early?”*

*“I saw everyone that I wanted to see, and I didn’t have any desire to go on the sightseeing trip. Been there, done that. Besides, I missed you guys, and I thought maybe we could spend the afternoon together.”*

*Mel stood up and took her mug to the sink. "Sounds good to me." I'll round up the kids and we can make some plans."*

"Did you tell her?"

"No." Toni sighed. "I wanted to, but I was afraid." She hung her head. "All the way home, I went back and forth in my mind, playing out different scenarios, weighing the pros and cons, but by the time I pulled into the driveway, I decided there was nothing to be gained by telling her; it was in the past, nothing would come of it, and it would only hurt her. I'd convinced myself that not telling was the kindest thing I could do."

"So, how did she find out?"

"She didn't find out until a couple of weeks later."

*"Mel? It's getting late. Are you coming to bed?" Toni headed down the hall toward the computer room. "Mel? Where are you?" She rounded the corner and saw Mel sitting at the computer, tears rolling silently down her cheeks as she stared at the screen. Toni's heart leapt into her throat and she hurried to the computer. "What is it, Mel?" Dread filled her heart as she looked over Mel's shoulder and read the words on the screen.*

Dear Toni,

I haven't stopped thinking about you since the reunion. I tried, but I just can't get you out of my mind. My heart races every time I think about the feel of your soft lips against mine...

I've spent my whole life trying to figure out what it is that I've been searching for, and when I saw you at the reunion, I realized that it's you; you are what has been missing from my life.

As much as I wish it wasn't so, I know that you've moved on, that you have a family and a new life. I just needed to tell you how sorry I am that I didn't have the courage to snap you up when I had the chance.

All my love,

Lindsay

*Toni spun Mel's chair around and fell to her knees, as fear clutched her heart and tears streamed down her face. "Mel, you have to believe me... nothing happened."*

*"Don't fucking lie to me, Toni, of course something happened. You obviously kissed her, and who knows what else."*

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

*"What's to understand? Did you kiss her or not?"*

*"Well, yes, but that's all..."*

*Anger sparked in Mel's eyes. "Isn't that enough? You fucking kissed her!"*

*"Yes...but, nothing **else** happened."*

*"And you expect me to believe that?"*

*"You have to believe me, Mel. It was just a kiss..."*

*"A kiss isn't nothing, Toni! You cheated on me!"*

*"No, Mel... I left. That's why I came home early. I wanted to tell you, I was going to tell you, but..."*

*“But what, Toni? That was two fucking weeks ago! When were you planning to tell me?”*

*Toni sat back on her heels and hung her head as tears streamed down her face. “I wanted to tell you the morning I came home early from the reunion. I tried....I just couldn’t say the words. I was afraid you would never forgive me, and I knew how hurt you would be...I’m so sorry, Mel.” Toni looked up at Mel, pleading with her eyes. “Nothing happened, Mel. We were talking, and Lindsay began to cry. I hugged her, and then she kissed me. I went back to my room after that.”*

*“Did you kiss her back?”*

*“Well, sort of...”*

*“How the hell do you sort of kiss someone?”*

*“Okay, I did... but I realized what a huge mistake I was making, and I left. Please Mel, I’m telling you the truth...nothing else happened.” Sobs wracked Toni’s body. “I’m so sorry.” She laid her head on Mel’s knees, wrapped her arms around Mel’s legs and cried. For several long and agonizing moments, Mel said nothing. Except for a few muffled sobs, the silence was relentless.*

*When Mel finally spoke, her voice had softened “I believe you’re sorry, but how will I ever trust you again?” Mel lifted Toni’s chin. “How did you even let yourself get in that situation? Where did this kiss happen?”*

*Toni hung her head. “In Lindsay’s hotel room.”*

*Fresh tears welled up in Mel’s eyes, and the anger returned to her voice. “Well what the fuck were you doing in her hotel room?”*

*“I don’t know, Mel.” Toni eyes stung. “I got caught up in the moment.” She tried to find the words to explain. “Things with Lindsay never really felt finished.... they*

*were just left hanging...” Toni took a deep breath and continued. “... and even after all these years...every now and then... I found myself still wondering about what might have been.” She saw Mel wince and knew her words had stung, but she was trying to be honest. She hurried on. “I needed to see Lindsay so I could finally put that period of my life behind me, but I swear to you... it’s finished now. I know I don’t love her....” Toni looked up at Mel, with swollen eyes and a tear-stained face. “It’s you I love. You have to believe me. That’s why I came home.... Please, Mel, you have to forgive me.”*

*“I don’t know if I can....” Mel stood up, and left the room, sobbing quietly.*

Toni lifted her tear-stained face and looked at Pam. “Mel isn’t speaking to me, and I’m afraid I’ve lost everything I ever wanted. I don’t know how to fix it,” Toni dropped her head into her hands and sobbed.

# 36

The sun squeezed through a crack in the blind and caressed Toni's forehead with a long, thin golden finger. She arched her back and stretched in the speckled sunshine that skipped across the bed. Opening one eye, she looked at the clock. 5:26 am. She had four minutes before the alarm would attempt to rouse her for work. She reached out and turned it off so as not to disturb Mel.

Rolling over, Toni's heart sank as she realized that Mel's side of the bed remained undisturbed, and she remembered the fight they'd had the night before. Lying back on her pillow, she looked at the ceiling. Why hadn't she just left well enough alone? She understood Mel's politics and how she felt about being out. Why had she insisted that Mel voice it?

She towel dried her hair, and then used the towel to wipe the steam off the mirror. Looking at her hazy, haggard reflection, she wondered if things could get any

worse. She wished Mel hadn't brought up the reunion.... She sighed. What a mess she'd made.

Dressing for work, Toni tried not to think about the problems she had created at home; she needed to focus on the things she had to do in order to follow-up from the fight at school on Friday. She began to run through the list in her mind: get in touch with Sean's family and get an update on his condition, check in with Bailey's family...*she wondered where Mel had slept last night...* follow up with the police...*would Mel ever forgive her?...* sit with the school guidance counselor to discuss how they were going to respond to the fight as a school community.... *she hoped Jesse and Lucas hadn't heard them fighting...* Toni shook her head and tried to focus. She certainly didn't need to have problems at home to deal with on top of everything else. So much had happened; it was hard to believe the fight between the boys was only two days ago.

As she crept down the hall past Lucas's room, she noticed that his covers were off and his favorite teddy was on the floor. She slipped into his room. Gently tucking the well-loved bear in beside him, she pulled the covers over his shoulders, and her heart swelled with love for the small sleeping boy.

Tiptoeing past Jesse's closed door and down the stairs, Toni was surprised to hear the coffee percolating, and she realized with a twinge of tenderness that Mel must have turned it on some time during the night. Creeping through the kitchen, she peered into Mel's studio and saw that she was asleep on the ragged old sofa at the back of the room. They didn't fight often, but when they did, it seemed that they frequently dragged the fight through several days, speaking only when absolutely necessary, until it finally blew over. Toni took a mug out of the cupboard and poured a cup of coffee. Neither of

them was very good at eating crow, and things were seldom resolved in a way that felt finished. Toni knew that wasn't a healthy way to fight, and she vowed to do things differently this time. Besides, she knew in her heart that she owed Mel an apology. Skipping breakfast, she poured a second cup of coffee for the car and quietly slipped out the front door.

Cruising down the highway toward school, Toni tried to focus on the problems she would have to deal with when she arrived, but Mel's words kept ringing in her ears. *You were a pretty good fucking risk-taker at your 20-year reunion!* She had been excited to attend her reunion, but a moment of reckless indiscretion had become one of her greatest regrets.

Toni was surprised to see the sign for Farnham Falls High School just ahead, and she was shocked to realize that she couldn't remember anything about her drive to work! Her mind had definitely been elsewhere, and as she pulled into her parking spot, she was grateful to have arrived safely. Toni climbed out of her car and walked toward the building.

As she passed the message sign at the edge of the parking lot, Gandhi's words called out to her: *You must be the change you wish to see in the world*, and then Mel's words joined the persistent chorus, *Walk your talk, Toni*. She pulled the heavy door open and tried to focus on the things she needed to do at work as the words of her favorite Robert Frost poem invaded her thoughts. *Two roads diverged in a wood and I, I took the one less traveled by....* Toni sighed; she knew which way she wanted to go, but she wasn't sure if she was ready to take the less traveled path.

Toni dropped her bags in the chair next to her desk and stood by the window. Pretty soon the students would be spilling off the bus and into the building, looking for some answers. She had decided that the best thing to do at this point was simply to provide them with an update on Sean's condition, and to let them know that the school was working on a plan to deal with the concerns arising from the fight. They would hold a school-wide assembly during the final week of school. She wasn't sure yet what that would look like, but she wanted the time to try and plan something meaningful.

Toni sat at her desk and dialed Ruth's extension in the guidance office, getting her voice mail. "Hi Ruth, its Toni." She looked at her watch. "It's 7:10; can you give me a buzz when you get in?" Opening her day planner, she looked over her list of things to do and added a few more. After she spoke to Ruth she would call the Keddys and the Browns to set up a meeting for today or tomorrow. Toni stood up and walked toward the window. As she waited for the phone to ring, her mind wandered back to the fight she'd had with Mel, and she wondered how she was going to fix the mess she'd made.

It wasn't too long before her thoughts were interrupted by the phone. Glancing down at the call display, she picked up the receiver. "Good morning, Ruth. When you get settled, can you come over to my office and talk with me about how to address the student body with regard to the fight on Friday? Also, I wanted to check with you before I call the Keddys and the Browns. I'd like to try and arrange a meeting sooner rather than later. Does either today or tomorrow work for you?"

"I agree that sooner is better than later. Go ahead and arrange the meeting. I'm pretty sure that either day is fine. I'm just going to grab a coffee, and I'll be right over. Can I get you a coffee while I'm there?"

“Sure, thanks.” Toni hung up the phone. She needed to talk with Ruth, and then get an update on Sean’s condition before the first bell and morning announcements.

“Good morning.” Ruth breezed through the door and handed Toni a steaming cup of coffee. “Can you believe only two days have gone by since the fight?” She sat down next to Toni and sighed. “I think I’m ready for vacation.” She smiled. “How about you?”

“Only 9 days, 7 hours and 12 minutes left! Not that I’m counting.” Toni grinned.

“You look tired. Are you okay?”

“I am tired. I haven’t been sleeping well, and I can’t seem to settle my mind. I haven’t stopped thinking about everything that has happened, second guessing my reactions, worrying that I could have handled things better, you know...just me doing what I do.” Toni sighed. “Unfortunately, on top of everything else, Mel and I had a huge fight last night.”

“Oh, Toni, is everything okay?”

“Well, you know, I’ve been preoccupied, not sleeping well, edgy, and as a result, everyone’s fuse is a little short. We’ll be fine.”

Or would they? She thought they had put the reunion incident behind them, but clearly that wasn’t the case. She didn’t know what else she could do to make Mel understand how sorry she was. She had resisted going to couple’s counseling because it meant admitting that she was responsible for creating a problem so big they couldn’t handle it on their own. Apparently she had fooled herself into thinking they had gotten past it, but more than three years had slipped by since the reunion, and as much as she

desperately wanted to forget about it, it was clearly still very painful for Mel. Maybe they did need some help.

“Toni?”

“Yes?”

“I was saying that you must take care of yourself. Don’t let this job swallow you up whole, because if you aren’t paying attention, it will. You have a family and children who need you; they should be your first priority.”

“I know you’re right, Ruth. It’s just that I feel like I’m partly to blame for the fight. I feel like I let Bailey down, and Sean too, for that matter.”

“There’s no point beating yourself up over what you can’t do, Toni; this is an impossible job. You can’t be everywhere at once, and you can’t be everything that everyone needs you to be. You do the best you can with what you have, and that’s all anyone can reasonably expect from you. You’re a wonderful administrator, and you do more than most.”

Toni looked at Ruth with moist eyes. “Thank you, Ruth. I’ll try to keep things in perspective. It’s just that I’ve never had to deal with a student being attacked and seriously injured in my school. It’s been a very emotional few days.”

“Well, let’s try to learn something from this situation and see what we can do to make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

Toni smiled. “Now that sounds like a plan.” She reached for a tissue and dabbed at her eyes. “I thought I’d give the students an update on Sean’s condition and let them know that we’re working on a plan to respond to the fight. Do you think that’s okay for now?”

“Some students will be frightened by the violence, and I think we need to address that right away. They’ll also be very anxious to know how Sean is doing, but as long as they know we’re dealing with the situation and that it’ll be addressed before the end of the year, I think that should be fine for now.”

“Do you have any suggestions about how to help the students feel the school is still a safe place to be?”

“Regardless of Bailey’s reasons for carrying a knife, I think the students need to understand that bringing a weapon to school is a crime, and that it’ll be treated as such.” Ruth furrowed her brow and chewed on her lip. “What if we hired a security guard to be in the hallways from now until the end of the year?”

“I’m not sure that’s necessary, Ruth. While it’s a serious incident, it’s just one incident, and it’s not really indicative of what’s going on at the school on a daily basis. I wouldn’t want to give parents or students the impression that we’re not in control, and I really don’t think security is required.”

“You’re probably right.” Ruth grinned. “A security guard might be a little over the top. However, we should ask staff to be more visible in the hallways during class changes and such.”

“Agreed.”

\* \* \*

Toni climbed into her car, leaned her head back against the headrest, and closed her eyes. It had been a long day, but they’d made some headway. Sean’s condition continued to improve, and the police department was willing to work with them to come

up with some sort of meaningful restitution for Bailey. Also, the meeting with the two families had gone well, despite the fact that it had been emotionally exhausting. Toni was deeply moved by each family's willingness to set aside blame and work toward a solution; they had the beginnings of a plan.

Toni dug in her purse for her keys. She felt drained, every last drop of energy wrung from her body. She dreaded the thought of having to go home and face Mel, and wondered if she would still be getting the cold shoulder. She had called shortly after 5pm to say that she would be late, and the chill in Mel's voice had traveled right through the phone and made her shiver.

She looked at the clock on the dash as she turned the ignition; it was nearly 7pm. Lucas would be in bed and perhaps asleep by the time she got home; Jesse would probably be hiding under the covers reading with her flashlight. It seemed so long ago since she had tiptoed out of the house while everyone slept. Toni backed her car out of the parking lot and drove by the message sign at the edge of the driveway as Gandhi's words tugged at her conscience once again. *You must be the change you wish to see in the world.* She'd have to remember to change that message tomorrow.

As Farnham Falls High School disappeared in Toni's rear-view mirror, she was glad to have the 20 minute drive between work and home. It gave her an opportunity to reflect on the day, and get her head focused on her family. She took a deep breath and tried to relax as she waited at the intersection for the light to change.

Toni signaled onto the ramp and headed for the highway. She thought about what she would say to Mel. She'd been unkind, and she owed Mel an apology. However, they also had to talk about the reunion. If only she could turn back time, she would do so many things differently. It was obvious that Mel still harbored some

unresolved feelings about the incident, even though she claimed that she had forgiven her. Why hadn't she just told Mel the truth in the first place? In the end, it would have been a million times better than finding out the way she did.

Toni pulled into the driveway and realized that besides an apple at lunchtime, she hadn't eaten all day. She was suddenly ravenous. Setting her bags in the hallway, and hanging her coat in the closet, she listened to the sounds of her house. All was quiet.

She headed toward the studio, certain that she would find Mel there. Painting was an expression of Mel's feelings, a necessary emotional release that came out on her canvas. Toni stood quietly in the doorway and watched Mel work, as tears welled up in her eyes and slid down her cheeks. She was terrified by the thought of how badly she'd almost screwed things up. She had a wonderful life, and she loved Mel more than she could ever begin to tell her.

Mel turned around. "I didn't hear you come in. I saved you some supper." She turned back toward her canvas. "It's on a plate in the fridge if you want to stick it in the microwave."

"Thank you." Toni sniffed.

Mel turned around again and realized that Toni was crying. Concern clouded her face and she set down her brush. "What is it, Toni? Is Sean okay? Did something happen?"

"Sean's fine. In fact, I met with both families today, and that went really well."

"Thank God! You frightened me for a minute. Well, what is it?"

"I'm sorry about the things I said last night. I asked for your opinion, and I was nasty when I didn't like what you had to say."

Mel wiped a tear from Toni's cheek. "Thank you, Toni."

"But it's more than that. I haven't been able to stop thinking about what you said about the reunion." Toni hung her head. "I was desperate to put it behind us. I just wanted it to go away, to forget about it and move on, but we never really dealt with it." She looked at Mel. "I'm so grateful that you were willing to try and find room in your heart to forgive me, but that was more than three years ago, and it's obviously still very painful for you. If you still want to go to counseling, I'll go."

Silent tears trickled down Mel's cheeks. She reached out and gently touched Toni's face. Looking deeply in her eyes, she smiled, then leaned in and kissed her tenderly, lingering for just a moment. "It's okay, Toni. I owe you an apology, too." Mel sighed. "I was angry with you. I threw the reunion up in your face because I knew how much it would hurt, and that wasn't fair. I really have forgiven you."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure, Toni, and I'm sorry that I used it to hurt you. Let's declare the reunion forbidden ammunition when it comes to fighting."

Fresh tears welled up in Toni's eyes and spilled over as Mel reached out and pulled her into a tender embrace. Toni laid her head on Mel's shoulder and sobbed, grateful for Mel's compassion and generosity. She wasn't sure she could have been as forgiving.

# 37

Toni sat at her desk wondering if there was anything at all she could have done to have prevented the fight. She desperately wished she had acted on Bailey's concerns more quickly; not that wishing would make it so.

Two weeks had passed since the fight and the assembly would be held at the end of the day tomorrow. She was struggling to prepare some notes. She had rolled a lot of things around in her mind over the past few days, but she wasn't having much luck getting anything down on paper, and as she looked at her scribbled notes, she realized that it was probably going to be another late night. She wanted her comments to be meaningful and insightful. She wanted to say something that would have an impact on the students, something that had a powerful message and that they would always remember. She looked at her many rejected attempts and sighed; she was having a hard time composing what she wanted to say. She stood up and walked to the window,

watching the sun set behind the trees. She still hadn't changed the message on the sign; maybe Gandhi was trying to tell her something. *You must be the change you wish to see in the world.*

Toni went back to her desk and sat down. Only two more days until school was out for the summer. She couldn't wait. It had been a difficult year, but the past few weeks had been excruciating. She looked at her notes and sighed. She intended to make a few comments, provide an update on the boys' situations, and introduce the plan they had come up with to address the problem of intolerance that seemed to be growing in the school. Her comments didn't need to be long.

As part of the plan, she and Ruth, along with input from the Brown and the Keddy families and a few others, decided that it would be a good idea to host a school-wide student conference on diversity to be held near the end of October for the coming school year. So far the school had already confirmed workshop speakers on a number of topics related to tolerance including gay and lesbian youth, a holocaust survivor, a Canadian Muslim, a physically handicapped person, a person living with mental illness, and a homeless person. Attendance would be required, and all participating students would receive credit for completing an assignment that would be counted toward their Career and Life Management credit.

In addition to the student conference, they had plans to form a student coalition that would be composed of students chosen to represent the various groups within the school. This diverse group of students would brainstorm ideas, hold on-going discussions about how to live well together and get along, and consult with the administration from time to time. Ruth had agreed to be the staff advisor. She believed

that if the students were part of the solution, they would meet with a great deal more success.

Toni was pleased with the work they had done toward addressing the problems in only a few short weeks, and she liked what they had come up with so far. Now if only she could have an epiphany. She closed her eyes and prayed for some divine inspiration to flow through her hand and out the end of her pen. After several moments of waiting patiently for a revelation, she opened her eyes and decided that the only way she was going to get anything done was through plain old sweat and tears. She picked up her pen and began to write.

\* \* \*

Toni looked out over the faces of the people in the crowd as they watched the video and listened attentively to a Michael Jackson song called *Man in the Mirror*. The song talked about making the world a better place by first making changes to the person we see in the mirror, and the video was a touching collection of images that chronicled senseless acts of violence and desperate poverty, as well as tremendous acts of peace and humanity. Toni noticed a number of students wiping their eyes.

As the last few notes drifted away, a stark, black and white silhouette of a scarecrow was projected against the wall with these words below:

***Matthew Shepard***

***Dead at the age of 22***

*Tied to a fence and beaten to death in an anti-gay hate crime.*

*Mistaken for a scarecrow by a passerby.*

Toni walked across the stage to the microphone. “Matthew Shepard was brutally beaten to death simply because he was gay. He wasn’t much older than some of you, and this senseless crime didn’t happen so long ago. If we are going to make this world a better place, each and every one of us has to begin with ourself. What can **you** do to make our school and the world a better place?

I’d like to welcome all of you to this very important assembly today. I know that many of you have been concerned about Sean Keddy who was stabbed in a fight here less than three weeks ago. Sean is recovering well. He wanted to be here today, but he is still a little sore, and his doctors felt it would be best for him to take it easy. Both he and his parents have been overwhelmed with the tremendous outpouring of concern and support they’ve received from so many of you. She looked down at the Keddys sitting in the front row next to the Browns and smiled.

Bailey Brown has been charged with carrying a concealed weapon, and assault causing bodily harm. However, due to extenuating circumstances, and the fact that Bailey was also a victim of harassment, Sean Keddy and his family have chosen not to pursue charges. Both Bailey and Sean will participate in a restorative justice program, and Bailey has already been to the hospital to apologize.”

Toni looked down at her notes. “In the fall, we will hold a school wide conference to encourage tolerance and diversity. We will also create a student coalition

whose task it will be to consider the growing problem of intolerance in our school and to consult with the administration about solutions, but we'll talk more about that in the fall.

It deeply saddens me to hear students call each other names, and it reminds me just how much we have *not* learned about prejudice and hate. I once had the opportunity to listen to a survivor of the Holocaust talk about unspeakable things. It was extremely disturbing to hear him speak about the appalling acts of cruelty that were committed against him and his family, but what shocked me more than anything else was the message he ended with: 'Hate no one, because we know where hatred leads.' If that man could find it in his heart to forgive, then anyone could. If the stain of the Holocaust on human history isn't enough to convince you that we should all take a stand against hatred, then all you have to do is turn on the evening news. Understanding difference and valuing diversity is as much about the survival of the human race as it is about compassion. We are all different, and it's our differences that make us interesting and beautiful. It's our differences that make us human."

Out of the corner of her eye, Toni noticed Mel and the kids standing in the wings, and her eyes suddenly filled with tears. Mel knew that she was feeling anxious about the assembly, and Toni was touched that she had come to lend her support. She was grateful for Mel's forgiveness and generosity, and for the beautiful family they had created together. She smiled at her children then looked out over the crowd as a tear escaped and ran down her cheek. She smiled at Bailey sitting in the front row with his little sister on his lap, his brothers on one side and his parents on the other.

She took a deep breath and looked back down at her notes, but the words that had been haunting her for the past few weeks interrupted her train of thought once again.

*You must be the change you wish to see in the world.* Toni took a deep breath. Who

was she to argue with Gandhi? She looked toward her own family standing in the wings and motioned for them to join her on stage. She took Mel's hand, and then turned toward the crowd. "It's time for me to walk my talk." A strange hush fell over the room.

Mel gave her hand a squeeze. "We're right beside you."

Toni's heart pounded harder than it had in her entire life. "I'd like to introduce you to my family." She blinked back her tears. "These are our children, Jesse and Lucas, and this is my spouse of sixteen years, Melissa Edwards." As she looked out over the sea of faces, she locked eyes with Chad Mosher and grinned. Her secret was out, and it had lost all of its power! No student would ever intimidate her with that information again.

The silence was interrupted by the clatter of the door as a lone student entered the gym. Toni peered toward the back of the room. It was Sean Keddy! A murmur went through the crowd as Sean gingerly made his way up the center aisle. He stopped in front of Bailey and extended his hand. Bailey rose and shook his hand, and then the two boys sat down side by side. The Keddys, and then the Browns began to clap, and soon it seemed that everyone in the whole auditorium was clapping and cheering. Toni was overwhelmed as tears streamed down her face.

\* \* \*

Toni was worried. She stood by the window wondering how long it would be before someone from the school board contacted her about what she had done at the

assembly. She wondered what the fall-out would be. Had she made a huge mistake?

Her thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door.

Ruth stuck her head in. "It's time for you to go home, Toni. You've had a pretty big day. Go spend some time with your family."

"Hey Ruth, can you sit for a minute?"

Ruth dropped her bag and sat down. "There's no point worrying about it, Toni, it's already done."

"Do you think I made a mistake?"

"I don't think you made a mistake; I think you did a courageous thing today, but that doesn't mean it won't come back to bite you in the ass."

"I didn't plan to do it, but it's something I've been struggling with for a long time. It seemed right at the time."

"Well, there's nothing to be gained by worrying about it, and maybe nothing will happen, but if it does, we'll deal with it then and we'll get through it together. Besides, the school board isn't going to want any more negative publicity, especially a human rights issue. The safest place for you to be is in their face. Now go home."

Toni smiled. She loved Ruth and her no nonsense approach to things. Toni felt very lucky to have had some truly wonderful women in her life. "Thanks, Ruth. I'm going to leave shortly. There are just a couple of things I need to finish up."

Ruth gave Toni a hug. "You're one of the bravest women I know."

Choked up with emotion, Toni squeezed her back.

\* \* \*

Toni gathered her things, set the alarm, locked the doors and headed toward her car. As a teenager, there were times when she would have given anything if she could have been straight. But now, she had come to realize that being a lesbian was an integral part of who she had become, and that she had benefited tremendously as a result. As a relatively privileged white woman, it gave her a more intimate understanding of what it meant to be marginalized and oppressed, and she was better able to relate to others. She was more open and empathetic, less judgmental. She felt that she was kinder and more compassionate, and a much better educator as a result. Toni realized that she finally felt comfortable in her own skin and that being a lesbian was a gift she wouldn't trade even if she could.

As she pulled out of the driveway she looked in the rear-view mirror and smiled. She had finally changed the message on the sign:

*The highest result of education is tolerance.~ Helen Keller*

## References

- Abram, D. (1996). Philosophy on the way to ecology. *The spell of the sensuous* (pp. 31-73). New York: Vintage Books.
- Allport, G. W. (1979). *The nature of prejudice*. New York: Perseus Books Group.
- Atkinson, R., & Flint, J. (2001). Accessing hidden and hard-to-reach populations: Snowball research strategies. *Social Research Update*, 33, University of Surrey: United Kingdom [On-Line]. Retrieved April 11, 2004 from [www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/sru/SRU33.html](http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/sru/SRU33.html)
- Blumenfeld, W. J., & Lindop, L. (2003). *Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender youth suicide* [On-Line]. Retrieved Sept. 26, 2003 from [http://www.outproud.org/article\\_suicide.html](http://www.outproud.org/article_suicide.html)
- Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. (1998). Data analysis. *Qualitative research for education* (pp. 157-186). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bochenek, M., & Brown, W. A. (2000). *Hatred in the hallways: Violence and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students in U.S. schools* [On-Line]. Retrieved Feb. 1, 2004 from [www.hrw.org/reports/2001/uslgbt/](http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/uslgbt/)
- Brown, B. (1999). *Lost bodies and wild imaginations: Expressing the forbidden tales of childhood sexual abuse through artful inquiry*. Doctoral dissertation: Department of Education, University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada.
- Canadian Teachers' Federation, & Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario. (2002). *Seeing the rainbow*. Ontario: CTF & ETFO.

- Cole, A. L., & Knowles, J. G. (2001). Qualities of inquiry: Process, form and “goodness”. In L. Neilsen, A.L. Cole, & J.G. Knowles (Eds.), *The art of writing inquiry* (pp.211-219). Great Tancook, Nova Scotia: Backalong Books.
- de Freitas, L. (2004). Reclaiming rigor as trust: The playful process of writing fiction. In A. Cole, L. Neilsen, J.G. Knowles & T.C. Luciani (Eds.), *Provoked by art: Theorizing arts-informed research* (pp. 254-264). Great Tancook, Nova Scotia: Backalong Books.
- DeJean, W. (2004). Gay male high school teacher: A taxonomy of fear. *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice*, 17 (3), 19-23.
- Dunlop, R. (1999). *Boundary bay: A novel as educational research*. Doctoral dissertation: Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, Canada.
- Dunlop, R. (2002). A story of her own: Female *bildungsroman* as arts-based educational research. *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, XLV111 (3), 215-228.
- Ferfolja, T. (1998). Australian lesbian teachers—a reflection of homophobic harassment of high school teachers in New South Wales government schools. *Gender and Education*, 10 (4), 401-415.
- Filax, G. (2003). Queer in/visibility—The case of Ellen, Michel, and Oscar. In S. Books (Ed.), *Invisible children in the society and its schools* (pp. 147-170). Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates.
- Filax, G. (2006). Politising action research through queer theory. *Educational Action Research*, 14 (1), 139-145.
- Fine, M. (1994). Dis-stance and other stances: Negotiations of power inside feminist research. In A. Gitlin (Ed.), *Power and method: Political activism and educational research* (pp. 13-35). New York: Routledge.

- Fisher, J. (1999). *Reaching out: A report on lesbian, gay & bisexual youth issues in Canada* [On-Line]. Retrieved Feb. 1, 2004 from <http://www.egale.ca/index.asp?lang=E&menu=1&item=191>
- Gitlin, A., & Russell, R. (1994). Alternative methodologies and the research context. In A. Gitlin (Ed.), *Power and method: Political activism and educational research* (pp. 181-202). New York: Routledge.
- Glesne, C. (1999). Finding your story: Data analysis. *Becoming qualitative researchers* (pp.130-154). New York: Longman.
- Grace, A. P., & Benson, F. J. (2000). Using autobiographical queer life narratives of teachers to connect personal, political and pedagogical spaces. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 4 (2), 89-109.
- Grace, A. P., Hill, R. J., Johnson, C. W., & Lewis, J. B. (2004). In other words: Queer voices/dissident subjectivities impelling social change. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 17 (3), 301-324.
- Greene, M. (2001). Resistance to mere things: Art and the reach of intellectual possibility. In *Variations on a blue guitar* (pp. 122-130). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Griffin, P. & Ouellett, M. (2003). From silence to safety and beyond: Historical trends in addressing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender issues in K-12 schools. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 36, 111-114.
- Hansman, G. P., *Education and queer youth* [On-line]. Retrieved Feb. 1, 2004 from <http://www.galebc.org/main.htm> Link: Resources
- Harbeck, K. M., & Uribe, V. (1992). Addressing the needs of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth: The origins of PROJECT 10 and school-based intervention. In K.M.

- Harbeck (Ed.), *Coming out of the classroom closet: Gay and lesbian students, teachers, and curricula* (pp. 9-28). New York: The Hawthorne Press, Inc.
- Hetrick, E. S., & Martin, A. D. (1988). The stigmatization of the gay and lesbian adolescent. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 15, 163-183.
- Hunter, J., & Schaefer, R. (1987). Stresses on lesbian and gay adolescents in schools. *Social Work in Education*, 9 (3), 180-190.
- Jennings, K. (Ed.). (1994). *One teacher in 10: Gay and lesbian educators tell their stories*. New York: Alyson Books.
- Jennings, K. (1996). *Understanding the experience of openly gay and lesbian educators* [On-Line]. Retrieved July 24, 2003 from <http://www.qrd.org/qrd/www/orgs/glstn/issues.that.gay.teachers.face>
- Keen, S. (2006). A theory of narrative empathy. *Narrative*, 14 (3), 207-236.
- Kissen, R. M. (1996). *The last closet*. New Hampshire: Heinemann.
- Khayatt, D. (1992). *Lesbian teachers: An invisible presence*. Albany: State University Press of New York
- Lenskyj, H. (1991). Beyond plumbing and prevention: Feminist approaches to sex education. In J. Gaskell & A. McLaren (Eds.), *Women and education* (pp. 283-298). Calgary: Detselig.
- Mathison, C. (1998). The invisible minority: Preparing teachers to meet the needs of gay and lesbian youth. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 49 (2), 151-155.
- Mathison, C. & Gallego, M. A. (2002). School stories: The power of narrative in teacher education. *Reading Online* [On-Line]. Retrieved on Aug. 25, 2006 from <http://plinks.ebscohost.com.www.msvu.ca:2048/ehost/detail?hid=101&sid=2b543165-9675-4553-9d06-faff12fdaf59%40sessionmgr4>

- National Education Association Task Force. (2002). *Report of the NEA task force on sexual orientation* [On-Line]. Retrieved on Feb. 1, 2004 from <http://www.nea.org/nr/02taskforce.html>
- Neilsen, L. (1998). Notes on painting ghosts and writing the poetry report: Some things I know but not for certain. *Knowing her place: Research literacies and feminist occasions* (pp. 260-287). San Francisco: Caddo Gap Press.
- Neilsen, L. (2002). Learning from the liminal: Fiction as knowledge. *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, XLVIII (3), 206-214.
- Norum, K. E. (1998). *Hearing voices: All of them* [On-Line]. Retrieved on Feb. 1, 2004 from [www.coe.uga.edu/quig/proceedings/Quig98\\_Proceedings/norum.html](http://www.coe.uga.edu/quig/proceedings/Quig98_Proceedings/norum.html)
- Norum, K. E. (2001, April). *The story behind the story*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, WA. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 454 213)
- Plummer, K. (2001). The call of life stories in ethnographic research. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland & L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of ethnography* (pp. 395-406). London: Sage Publications.
- Rofes, E. (1989). Opening up the classroom closet: Responding to the educational needs of gay and lesbian youth. *Harvard Educational Review*, 59 (4), 444-452.
- Saks, A.L. (Ed.). (1996). Viewpoints: Should novels count as dissertations in education? *Research in the Teaching of English*, 30 (4), 403-427.
- Sharkey, J. (2004). Lives stories don't tell: Exploring the untold in autobiographies. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 34 (4), 495-512.

Sivertsen, W. D., & Thames, T. B. (2003). *Each child that dies: Gays and lesbians in your schools* [On-Line]. Retrieved on Sept. 26, 2004 from

[http://www.outproud.org/article\\_each\\_child.html](http://www.outproud.org/article_each_child.html)

Sumara, D. & Davis, B. (1999). Interrupting heteronormativity: Toward a queer curriculum theory. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 29 (2), 191-208.

Usher, R. (1996). Textuality and reflexivity in educational research. In D. Scott & R. Usher (Eds.), *Understanding educational research* (pp. 33-51). New York: Routledge.

Van Manen, M. (2002). *Hermeneutical phenomenology* [On-Line]. Retrieved on April 10, 2004 from <http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/inquiry/5.html>

Widdershoven, G. A. M. (1993). The story of life: Hermeneutic perspectives on the relationship between narrative and life history. In R. Josselson & A. Lieblich (Eds.), *The narrative study of lives* (pp. 1-20). California: Sage Publications.

Wikipedia. *Heterosexism* [On-Line]. Retrieved on July 3, 2006 from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heterosexism>

Wikipedia. *Homophobia* [On-Line]. Retrieved on July 3, 2006 from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homophobia>

## **Sexual Orientation and Educational Leadership: Stories Seldom Shared A Review of the Literature**

Although there is a dearth of information written specifically about the lives and experiences of lesbian administrators, there is a good deal of literature that speaks about the widespread and insidious effects of heterosexism<sup>2</sup> and homophobia<sup>3</sup>, as well as the chilly climate that exists in academic institutions, for students and teachers who identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. It is not a big stretch to imagine that lesbian administrators struggle in similar ways in order to work successfully in a climate that is frequently harsh and intolerant of those whose sexual orientation is other than heterosexual. In fact, because the administrator's position involves a relative claim to power within the structure, the contradictions administrators experience between their personal and professional lives are likely to be even more intense.

### **Gay and Lesbian Youth**

In Western culture, heterosexuality is assumed to be the norm (Khayatt, 1992; Sumara & Davis, 1999), and although some degree of categorization is necessary for orderly living (Allport, 1979); this presumption of heterosexuality contributes to an environment where those who depart from the norm are frequently considered abnormal or deviant (Filax, 2006; Grace & Benson, 2000). Young people are bombarded with these messages from the time they are very young. They have internalized what is considered to be socially acceptable gender behavior even before they enter school, and

---

<sup>2</sup>Heterosexism: the assumption that all people are heterosexual; the assumption that heterosexuality is normal or better; institutionalized practices that enforce these assumptions (Wikipedia, 2006).

<sup>3</sup>Homophobia: fear of homosexuality; discrimination against homosexuals; hatred or disparagement of homosexual people, their lifestyles, behaviors and culture (Wikipedia, 2006).

to step outside these narrowly defined roles brings swift and painful reminders of how they are expected to behave. This policing of sexuality and gender behavior forces many people quickly back into line (Ferfolja, 1998; Filax, 2006; Grace & Benson, 2000).

When gay and lesbian youth begin to realize that they are attracted to someone of the same sex, they must face the dilemma of how to assimilate everything they have been taught about what is socially acceptable behavior, and their emerging sense of themselves as people who do not fit that picture. As Kevin Berrill says, these young people are “growing up in a society that teaches them to hide and hate themselves” (cited in Blumenfeld & Lindop, 2003, para.4). Many gay and lesbian youth choose to hide or deny their identities; however, this takes a tremendous toll on a young person’s sense of self-worth. To deny one’s self, to be silent in the face of prejudice, is to participate in one’s own bashing (Sivertsen & Thames, 2003). Research conducted by Dr. Gerald P. Mallon led him to conclude that “[f]or many, verbal harassment causes as much hurt as physical violence because it profoundly damages self-esteem” (cited in Bochenek & Brown, 2000, Part IV, para. 24). Junior high school may be excruciatingly painful for gay and lesbian youth as they try to negotiate the world of adolescent hormones without being found out, and at the same time, struggle to develop a positive sense of self.

At a time when social interactions and acceptance among peer groups becomes paramount, gay and lesbian youth may withdraw from school activities out of a fear of being discovered. Rejection is difficult for most people to handle, but may be devastating for adolescents who lack the experience and skills to cope with it. As a result, gay and lesbian youth find themselves in a difficult situation where they must lie

in order to conform to the pressures of their peer group, or risk being discovered, ostracized, ridiculed, harassed, or worse. Most youth are not confident enough in their sense of self to challenge their peer group or the power of social norms.

Gay and lesbian youth may take extreme measures to hide their identity from others including dating members of the opposite sex, becoming pregnant, and being among those most fervently opposed to others who are identified as homosexual (Harbeck & Uribe, 1992, Hetrick & Martin, 1988, Hunter & Schaecher, 1987, Lenskyj, 1991; Rofes, 1989). Damien Martin (cited in Hunter & Schaecher, 1987, p. 82) says, “the socialization of the gay adolescent becomes a process of deception at all levels....” In fact, the fear of rejection is so strong, that many gay and lesbian youth who are still dependent on their families for their physical, emotional and financial security, are unable to risk sharing their true identities with those people who are responsible to nurture and protect them (Filax, 2003; Hetrick & Martin, 1988; Harbeck & Uribe, 1992). This requires the gay or lesbian adolescent to develop a split personality in a sense, and to invest a good deal of energy in keeping up appearances. As Uribe and Harbeck (1992) say,

while many minority groups are the target for prejudice (beliefs) and discrimination (actions) in our society, few persons face this hostility without the support and acceptance of their family, as do many gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth ( p.13).

Gay and lesbian youth may distance themselves from both family and friends if they are afraid to be honest about their feelings, and for many, the social isolation becomes profound.

Becoming invisible creates a unique problem for gay and lesbian youth. In most cases, they are raised by heterosexual parents who do not prepare them to be homosexual. Furthermore, there are very few openly gay or lesbian adults to provide positive images who might be able to help prepare queer youth as they learn to manage the prejudice and discrimination they will experience as a result of their sexual orientation. Contributing to this invisibility is the fact that gay and lesbian issues are virtually non-existent in the school curriculum. The Canadian Teachers' Federation says, "Sexuality education should include information and discussion about sexual orientation, homophobia, and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation" (Fisher, 1999, para. 80). However, sexual orientation is considered perhaps one of the most controversial topics for discussion in schools, and if it is discussed at all, it is often relegated to health class and the discussion of sexually transmitted disease (Filax, 2003; Griffin & Ouellett, 2003). Although the personal lives of many heterosexuals who made significant contributions to society are frequently mentioned in class, gay and lesbian people who have contributed to literature, science, medicine, politics, or mathematics, are conspicuously absent (Mathison, 1998). Barrett says that in Canada, schools have been slow to introduce adequate discussion of gay and lesbian sexuality in the school curricular, and those who attempt to do so often encounter strong opposition from organized groups from the religious right (cited in Hansman, 2004, on-line, para. 6).

As a result, gay and lesbian youth will essentially struggle in a vacuum, against all odds, to develop a positive sense of identity. Heterosexism, homophobia and discrimination

work together to prevent gay and lesbian students from identifying each other and finding support among themselves, as well as making it difficult to ensure that they receive instruction from teachers who are sensitive to their needs.

In addition to the fear of rejection and the lack of positive images, gay and lesbian adolescents frequently experience a hostile school environment where they are subjected to verbal, physical and sexual harassment, threats and violence (Bochenek & Brown, 2000; Filax, 2003; Fisher, 1999; Grace & Benson, 2000; Griffin & Ouellett, 2003; Hansman, 2004; Harbeck & Uribe, 1992; Hetrick & Martin, 1988; Hunter & Schaecher, 1987; Lenskyj, 1991; Sivertsen & Thames, 2004).

Lesbian, gay and bisexual youth are nearly three times as likely as their heterosexual peers to have been assaulted or involved in at least one physical fight in school, three times as likely to have been threatened or injured with a weapon at school, and nearly four times as likely to skip school because they felt unsafe, according to the 1999 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey (cited in Bochenek & Brown, 2000, Part III, para. 8).

Unfortunately, the harassment doesn't only come at the hands of their peers, in some cases, the attitudes and actions of teachers and administrators contribute to the difficulties that gay and lesbian youth experience. As one young person said in a Human Rights Watch interview,

It's one thing to see kids talking about being gay in a negative sense. It's another thing to see an adult, a person you respect, talking negatively. Once you see a role model degrading you, it tears you apart (cited in Bochenek & Brown, 2000, Part VII, para. 45).

Due to a legitimate fear of being harassed or hurt, many gay and lesbian youth are understandably reluctant to seek help, isolating themselves even further. They are left to

adjust to an identity that is viewed negatively by others, with few positive role models, without accurate information, and without a support system, during a time in their lives when they are going through tremendous change (Uribe & Harbeck, 1992). Is it any wonder that so many lesbian and gay youth are at greater risk for suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, verbal, physical and sexual abuse, truancy, school dropout, homelessness, prostitution, STDs, and rejection by family and friends (Blumenfeld & Lindop, 2003; Bochenek & Bicklen, 1998; Filax, 2003; Fisher, 1999; Harbeck & Uribe, 1992; Hetrick & Martin, 1988; Hunter and Schaecher, 1987)?

At a time in their lives when peers and social acceptance are more important than almost anything else, it is no surprise that the school environment is an enormous source of stress for many gay and lesbian youth.

## **Teachers**

Similar fears make it difficult for lesbian or gay teachers to be open about their sexual orientation in order to provide the kind of positive, understanding role models that many queer youth so desperately need. For the most part, teachers grew up during a time when public opinion was even more hostile toward gays and lesbians (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003), and teachers also fear harassment. Although times have changed, anti-gay harassment is alive and well, and negative stereotypes and myths are still prevalent (DeJean, 2004; Grace, Hill, Johnson & Lewis, 2004).

Perhaps one of the most immobilizing myths is the belief that gays and lesbians are predatory in nature and that they recruit children into a life of immorality (Jennings, 1996). In addition, as Lenskyj (1991) points out, a white teacher who speaks out against

racism is not going to be labelled 'black'; however, *any* teacher who speaks out against homophobia will, in all likelihood, be suspected of being gay. Whether one is gay or straight, such fears often allow homophobia to go unchallenged. In a yearlong study conducted in an Iowa public high school, gay students reported hearing "an anti-gay comment every seven minutes" and that "teachers intervened only 3 percent of the time" (cited in Bochenek & Brown, 2000, Part IV, para. 1).

Although teachers may be understandably fearful about challenging homophobia, the messages that this lack of intervention sends to students are clear. Ignoring inappropriate comments provides tacit approval for the behavior, sends a message to *all* students that it is okay to hate, and may contribute to a climate that allows verbal abuse to escalate into physical abuse (Mathison, 1998). Gay and lesbian youth may feel that they are unworthy of protection and that their teachers are not willing to defend them or to make their schools safe.

The lack of mentors and advocates caused by this hostile school environment has serious implications for gay and lesbian youth (Grace & Benson, 2000). However, a hostile work environment also has some serious implications for gay and lesbian educators. Many gay and lesbian teachers report a desire to be "out" in their schools; on the other hand, many express fear that doing so will negatively affect their careers (Kissen, 1996; Jennings, 1994). Teachers are aware that legislation and policies do not completely protect them. If the school administration is not supportive, their work may come under heightened scrutiny, and they may become the victims of harassment at the hands of colleagues, students and parents. Sometimes the harassment is subtle, and other times, as is David Bruton's experience, the harassment is frighteningly overt.

My classroom windows were shot out and broken with stones and pop bottles several times, and on one occasion, a dead 'possum was thrown through the broken window. *Bruton's a faggot. Fire Bruton!* was spray-painted on buildings, parking lots, sidewalks, and ten school buses that made their rounds with the graffiti intact. Several small buildings and a truck were set on fire and burned (Jennings, 1994, p.180).

Teachers who are closeted frequently find themselves paralysed by fear in the face of harassment, anti-gay attitudes, comments and jokes, and their silence makes them participants in the homophobia that is so pervasive in our communities and our schools. This can lead to feelings of shame, as well as a great deal of anxiety and pressure. It may also lead gay and lesbian teachers to feel guilty about the kind of role model they could be for all youth, if they had more courage. As Pat McCort says in One Teacher in Ten,

...by not being fully, publicly identified as a lesbian, I was maintaining my comfort at the expense of the young--the very group I had spent my adult life working for and with. My fear, my privatization helped keep the fear, misinformation, prejudice, and homophobia alive among these adolescents, whether they were straight or gay. I was not out enough (Jennings, 1994, p. 55).

Similar to the experience of gay and lesbian youth, many gay and lesbian teachers feel that it is necessary to maintain a professional identity at work that is separate from their personal identity outside of school (DeJean, 2004; Grace, Hill, Johnson & Lewis, 2004). For many teachers, this creates a conflict between their need to feel safe, and their need for authenticity (Grace & Benson, 2000). In fact, the need to feel integrated and whole causes some excellent teachers, like Teri Gruenwald who is quoted below, to leave the profession altogether.

Sometimes I wonder how long I'll be able to continue teaching. I live two lives: one in the classroom, and one at home. And at times, the distance between those two lives seems insurmountable. It is a chasm so deep that I fear it will swallow me up. I worry that I may be forced to choose between being a teacher and living my life (Jennings, 1994, p.155).

A good deal of energy and planning goes into hiding, including being constantly aware of what is said and to whom, not giving away too much personal information, and changing pronouns when speaking about friends and partners. As a result, many feel that they are frequently on guard, and are fearful that they will let something slip. As one gay teacher comments,

It's like you're always one decision away from disaster. That's what you feel like. You feel like, one person getting this information, the wrong person, could destroy my life.... It's one thing for people to think I'm gay, but for them to have that confirmation, there's a difference (Kissen, 1996, p.51).

This can create a high degree of anxiety for many teachers (Ferfolja, 1998), which may even lead to physical ailments brought on or exacerbated by stress. In order to avoid detection, many gay and lesbian teachers choose to isolate themselves from their colleagues. They do not participate in staff social functions, which may lead them to feel a lack of connection to the staff, and that no one really knows them. The nature of teaching in our public school systems requires that teachers work primarily in isolation, and if gay and lesbian teachers are unable to develop honest, open relationships with their students or their colleagues, they are likely to feel completely and utterly alone.

Without a doubt, the self-worth of gay and lesbian teachers is battered by the prejudice and discrimination that exists in our society and which is reproduced in our schools, creating a hostile environment for anyone who deviates from socially sanctioned behaviors with regard to gender and sexuality.

Despite these difficulties, many gay and lesbian teachers are working, at significant personal and professional risk, to bring about positive changes in our school communities. Unfortunately, gay people who speak out against homophobia, or in defence of gay rights, are often accused of having an ‘agenda,’ while members of other minority groups who speak out for their civil rights are not. Nevertheless, the result is that the belief in an ‘agenda’ may limit the effectiveness of gay and lesbian individuals to act as advocates on their own behalf. For this reason, and because of the personal risk involved for gay and lesbian individuals, it is important that heterosexual allies speak up and advocate for those who cannot.

Heterosexuality does indeed carry ‘a different kind of power’ in a heterosexist world. By exercising that power--speaking out against homophobia, letting lesbian and gay colleagues know they are valued, challenging stereotypes wherever they appear--straight allies can hasten the day when their gay and lesbian colleagues will be free to speak out for themselves (Kissen, 1996, p. 150).

Although heterosexuality does provide some measure of protection for allies, those who speak out in defence of gay and lesbian rights also run the risk being labelled and targeted by homophobic attitudes and behaviors, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Fortunately, as a group, teachers are hopeful people. They look toward a better future, toward making things better for the youth with whom they come into contact each day. The same is true for gay and lesbian teachers who choose to put themselves at risk in order to advocate for their gay and lesbian students; they are motivated by hopefulness, by the desire to make the school climate less hostile than the one they experienced as struggling gay youth.

## **Educational Leaders**

There is very little research available to date on experiences specific to gay and lesbian administrators in the public school system.

Many school boards now have policies that prevent discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation; however, it is up to the school community to ensure that those policies are upheld and enforced. Educators have an obligation to ensure that all students are treated equitably, that they feel safe, and that their ability to learn in a safe environment is not compromised. Unfortunately, all the initiatives in the world will be ineffective without a strong leadership team.

A school administrator is in a position to set the tone and affect the climate of a school in a way that moves toward safety and respect, and that does not tolerate hate. However, given the high degree of hostility that still exists toward homosexuals in our society, it is not surprising that many educators are reluctant to intervene on the behalf of gay and lesbian youth. This is risky behavior for *any* teacher for fear of becoming a target him or herself, but intervention may be impossible for a gay or lesbian educator for whom disclosure could be devastating. When policies are breached, there must be immediate action that sends the message to all that hateful behaviors will not be tolerated.

Policies offer gay and lesbian teachers a small measure of protection if they are enforced, but they do not insulate them, or their heterosexual allies, from things such as verbal harassment, vandalism, intense scrutiny of their pedagogy, and alienation from

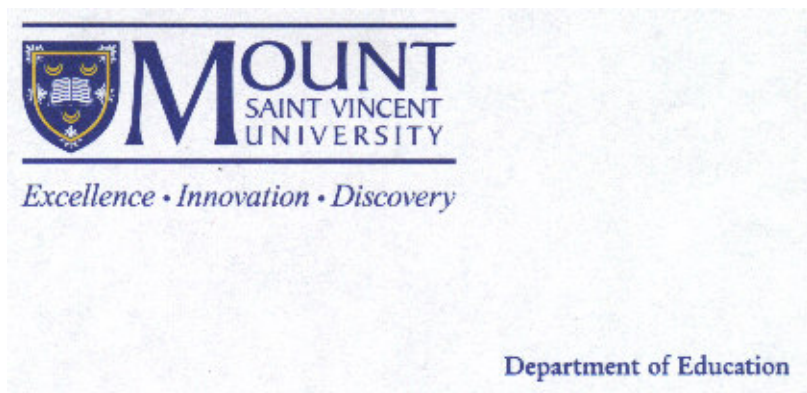
the school community. Many gay and lesbian teachers are still fearful of losing their jobs, regardless of whether policies exist to protect them.

Although gay and lesbian administrators may have greater sensitivity toward the needs and challenges of queer<sup>4</sup> students and staff, they are subject to the same fears and social pressures as others, and while their position offers them an opportunity to facilitate change, they too, may be understandably reluctant to act. However, Elie Weisel (cited in Siversten & Thames, 2003, para. 5), a survivor of the Holocaust, cautions us about the dangers of silence and inaction, “Take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”

Challenging hegemony will always be risky work, no matter who is doing it. A commitment to creating an environment where others are treated with dignity, where diversity is valued and celebrated, and where equity and social justice are available to all, requires that individuals, particularly those in positions of power, assess this work to be necessary and the risk to be worthwhile.

---

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the use of the word “queer” see Grace, Hill, Johnson & Lewis, 2004.



May, 2004

### **Letter of Information and Invitation**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Your name was raised as someone who may be interested in participating in a qualitative research study about the lives, experiences and obstacles faced by lesbian educational leaders working in Nova Scotia..

As a lesbian teacher and aspiring administrator, this study meets personal and professional goals. As a result of this work, I hope to gain some valuable insight and experience from women who are doing the same kind of work I plan to do, so that I may be as prepared as possible to deal with the obstacles. I also hope to identify some allies and begin to build myself a support system. In addition, this project will help me to complete the final requirements for my Master of Arts degree in Educational Leadership at Mount Saint Vincent University.

There has been a small amount of work written about the lives and experiences of lesbian teachers; however, I was able to find next to nothing about the experiences of lesbian administrators. Many of us understand what a difficult place the world can be for someone who is affected by gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender issues, but the public school system is often brutal. As a result, many of us understandably choose to remain invisible, yet the fear that keeps us silent also makes it difficult to support and learn from one another. I would like to try to interrupt that silence.

It is my goal to interview five women who identify themselves as lesbians, and who have worked in an educational leadership role in Nova Scotia. I would like to

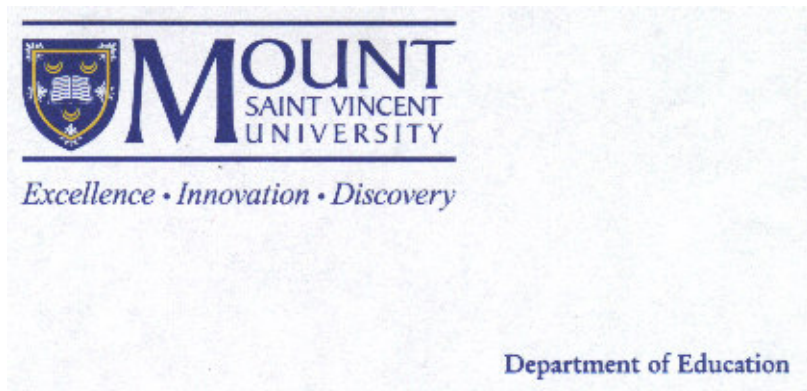
learn about your life and your experiences as a lesbian educator, and how your sexuality impacts your experiences of leadership. I will then create a **fictional work**, either in the form of a collection of short stories or a novel, based on the true stories collected from the five women interviewed. Your participation in this study will be completely anonymous, unless you choose to be acknowledged. Tape recorded interviews will be erased after they are transcribed and a copy of the transcript will be sent to you so that you may check for accuracy, clarify, add or delete information.

I will be calling you within the next two weeks to ask if you are willing and /or able to participate in this study. Please feel free to call me before then at [REDACTED] if you have any questions or concerns. I understand that this may be a very personal and sensitive topic for some, and for others there aren't enough hours in the day. I would be thrilled if you are able participate, but certainly understand if you are not able to at this time.

If you choose to participate, please read and sign the following consent form.

Sincerely,

Sue McKay



**May, 2004**

### **Interview Consent Form**

I agree to participate in a research study about the experiences of lesbian educational leaders, being conducted by Sue McKay, a master's graduate student in Educational Leadership at Mount Saint Vincent University.

I understand that Sue will interview me and will ask me questions about my experiences as a lesbian and as an educational leader, and about how my sexuality impacts my experiences of leadership.

I agree to allow the researcher to tape record my interview. I understand that I may refuse to answer any question in the interview and that I may withdraw my participation in this study at any time.

I have been informed that an individual, who will be employed with my permission, to complete this task, will transcribe the recorded interviews. Such person will be required to sign an Oath of Confidentiality. If I am uncomfortable with this, Sue will transcribe the tapes herself.

I will be provided with a draft copy of the report. I will have an opportunity to read, verify, comment on and contribute to the report if I wish. If I do not wish for certain information to be used in the report, it will be removed.

The audio recordings will be stored in a secure location. Other than myself, only the researcher and/or transcriber will hear the audiotapes or read the transcripts. These recordings will be returned to me if I want them, otherwise they will be destroyed when the research is complete.

The information gained from this study will be used to better understand the lives, experiences, and obstacles faced by lesbians working in a leadership role, particularly in the field of education.

I understand that the results of the study will be fictionalized and may be published. I also understand that the researcher will not report any information that will identify me or disclose my participation in this study, unless I choose to have my participation acknowledged.

I understand that if Sue McKay wants to use the material in ways other than have been described here, I will be asked for permission at that time.

I understand that there will be two different interviews and that each interview will last no longer than 90 minutes.

If I wish further information about this study, I may contact Dr. Lorri Neilsen, Thesis Supervisor, at 457-6156.

To speak with a person removed from this study contact Dr. Stephen Perrott, Chair of the University Research Ethics Board, at 457-6337.

I have read the information provided and I understand the purpose of the project being conducted by Sue McKay.

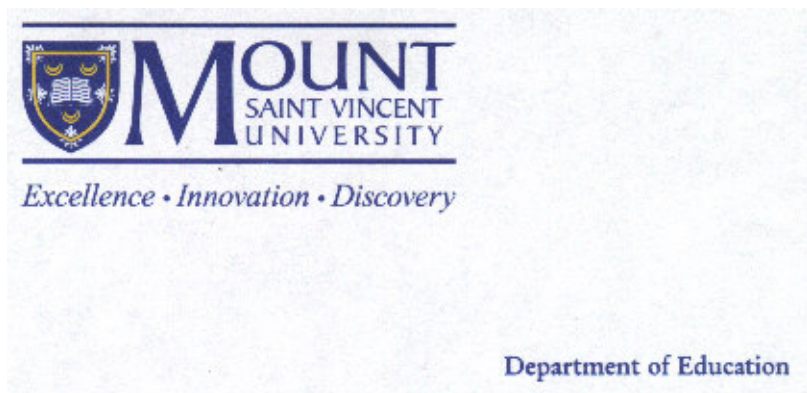
I agree to voluntarily participate in this project and I understand that I may withdraw my participation at any time, in which case I will retain ownership of the material.

I (wish /do not wish) to have my participation remain anonymous.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ (please print)

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_



## Proposed Interview Questions

I am suggesting a series of interview questions to be used as a guide to help frame our discussions and provide some consistency between the interviews. However; they are just that, guidelines. I hope that you will feel free to discuss other issues that you feel may offer some insight into your experiences of being a lesbian administrator in the Nova Scotia public school system.

### **QUESTIONS:**

#### **Background**

1. Please tell me about yourself by providing a brief biographical sketch (age; level of education; years and type of experience in education system; family history such as number of siblings, socio-economic status, religious affiliations, citizenship, raised in a rural or urban community).
2. Tell me about the process involved in recognizing your own sexual identity and how that has impacted your life.
  - a) Describe how you first came to realize that you were attracted to other women.
  - b) If this realization occurred while you were still a student, tell me about the relationship between your sexual orientation and your school experiences as a student.
  - c) With whom are you “out”? Tell me about the process involved in being “out” with family and friends.

#### **Present Experiences**

3. Describe your experiences as a lesbian educator in the public school system.
  - a) How does your sexual orientation affect your life as an educator? Tell me about the relationship between your sexual orientation and your experience as a teacher/administrator in the school system.

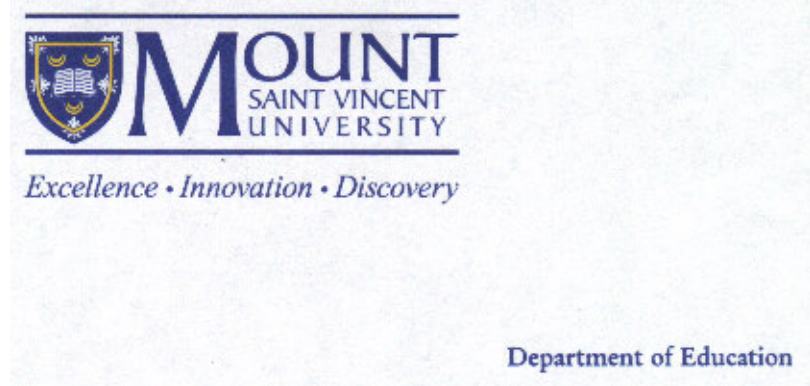
- b) Tell me about how you balance your personal self with your professional self. How would you describe these selves (integrated, fractured...)?
  - c) How do you handle innocent references and/or inquiries about your personal life with students, parents, teachers, administrators?
  - d) Tell me about your relationships with the people with whom you work. Are you “out” to your colleagues? If so, how did this occur?
  - e) If you are not “out” among your colleagues, do you avoid work related social functions because of your sexual orientation? If so, do you feel this affects your ability to develop meaningful relationships with your staff?
4. Describe any experiences where you feel you were discriminated against due to your sexual orientation.

### **Meaning of your Experiences**

- 5. In what ways does your sexual orientation affect, negotiate and/or regulate your leadership? Are there things that you do well, or not so well, as a result of your sexual orientation?
- 6. Do you feel that your sexual orientation enhances your ability to be an effective leader or inhibits it in any way? If so, how?
- 7. What can be done to make the education system safer for lesbian administrators?
- 8. What is the most important thing you could say to a lesbian planning to go into educational administration?

### **Other**

- 8. Are there other issues with regard to being a lesbian administrator that you would like to discuss?



## Additional “Prompt” Questions

1. In what ways are you able to maintain a positive self-identity in the midst of largely negative social beliefs and prejudice toward homosexuality?
2. Did your sexual orientation influence your choice of careers in any way?
3. Has any member of the school community (student, parent, teacher, administrator) ever directly confronted you about your sexual orientation? If so, how did you respond? In retrospect, would you respond any differently now?
4. If not, have you thought about how you might respond if you ever are confronted?
5. If you are not “out” at school, what things do you do, if any, in order to conceal your sexual orientation?
6. Do you feel it is important to be a positive lesbian role model? Is the climate right? Would the School Board be supportive?
7. In what ways do heterosexism and homophobia impact your daily life?
8. Do you feel able to be an advocate for gay & lesbian students and/or teachers, or do you feel constrained by your own sexual orientation?
9. What do you think can be done to make schools safer for gay & lesbian students and staff?