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Two Paths, One Heart

A Memoir

By David Allen Hulet

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Creative Writing

School of Critical Studies

College of Arts

University of Glasgow

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The people depicted in this memoir are how I remember (or mis-remember) them and may not be an exact representation of who they are (or were). Names have been changed to protect those I care about (and some I do not).

Mary Karr says in *The Art of Memoir*, “The best memoirists stress the subjective nature of reportage” (14). So let me echo her words: some of the depictions here are, unfortunately, subjective; I do not possess a perfectly photographic memory, or a complete archive.

I have done my best to be as truthful as possible throughout. However, I have followed Mary McCarthy, author of *Memories of a Catholic Schoolgirl*, when she said: “Many a time in the course of doing these memoirs, I have wished I were writing fiction. The temptation to invent had been very strong, particularly when I remember the substance of an event but not the particulars. Sometimes I have yielded as in the case of conversations.... They are mostly fictional.... Only a few single sentences stand out. Quotation marks indicate that a conversation to this general effect took place, but I do not vouch for the exact words” (qtd. in Karr 18).

CHAPTER 1 – RELEASE.....	1
CHAPTER 2 – HOMECOMING.....	7
CHAPTER 3 – SANDCASTLE.....	16
CHAPTER 4 – ESCAPE.....	19
CHAPTER 5 – TRANSITION.....	29
CHAPTER 6 – BREAKDOWN.....	36
CHAPTER 7 – PRECIPICE.....	46
CHAPTER 8 – ASHER.....	50
CHAPTER 9 – PEEKAY.....	54
CHAPTER 10 – THERAPIST.....	60
CHAPTER 11 – RUBY.....	65
CHAPTER 12 – BISHOP.....	69
CHAPTER 13 – DIRTY.....	75
CHAPTER 14 – SORRY.....	81
CHAPTER 15 – UNCONDITIONAL.....	86
CHAPTER 16 – SECRETS.....	96
CHAPTER 17 – LETDOWN.....	101
CHAPTER 18 – TOBI.....	108
CHAPTER 19 – LIKE ME.....	113
CHAPTER 20 – TORN.....	122
CHAPTER 21 – DESERT RECKONINGS.....	127
WORKS CITED.....	154

CHAPTER 1 – RELEASE

“I officially release you from service as a full-time missionary for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.”

President Collins’ voice drifted to me across his cluttered office, but the space between us could have easily spanned the continent. I’d just returned from spending two years serving the people of California. I hadn’t wanted to come back, but I’d served as long as the Church allowed. My final morning as a missionary, I told myself I wouldn’t cry. I read my scriptures and prayed like it was any regular mission day, only there were no investigators to teach. To some that word might make missionary work feel complicated, invasive, almost sinister. But for us, an investigator was simply any non-member interested in learning more about the Church.

President Collins asked about my experiences teaching the Gospel, what I learned, how my testimony – a statement of knowledge something is true based on a spiritual witness received by the Holy Ghost – had grown, and I held myself together as I answered. Now that he’d released me, though, I had to take off my badge.

As I reached up toward my breast pocket, my father was probably standing next to me; he may even have put his arm on my shoulder, but like President Collins, he could have been hundreds of miles away. My heart definitely was.

The black plastic badge was cold as I cradled it in my palm. My name stared back at me, etched in white block letters: ELDER HANDLEY. “It’s really over,” I managed to say, unable to look at anything but the badge. My breath turned ragged, one hand springing to cover my mouth as if somehow that’d be enough to hold in everything I was losing.

Yes, I could still do missionary work, but no longer acting directly as an emissary of Jesus Christ. No longer set apart, literally and figuratively, from the world and its worries, responsibilities, and difficulties. Just a *regular* Mormon. That difference was everything.

On the way home, my father likely wanted to comfort me, but didn’t know what to say. I stared out the window. Florida in October was meant to be vibrant and green, the foliage varied and tropical; blue sky peppered with puffy white clouds. The plants were trying to be green, but

were muted, discolored from rain, or heat, or both; like somebody had forgotten to repaint them for my homecoming.

“What will you do now?” my father asked. Reality. *I was a returned missionary. What would I do now?* His question wasn’t a bad one, but what could I answer?

Turning to look at my father, engage with him eye to eye, failed; his eyes were fixed on the road ahead. So I looked ahead as well. Two months until school started again; two months until I could leave Florida for Utah.

“I haven’t really thought about it.” I’d spent all my time the last few weeks reflecting, pretending my mission was my entire life – nothing had existed before and nothing would exist after. I wanted that to continue; I wanted my mission to continue. “Keep trying to live like a missionary, I guess.”

My father nodded. He knew what lay behind that answer. Read scriptures. Pray. Attend church. Gospel basics at their best. But also the shift from temporary full-time mission to the larger, eternal one. My Mission President, President McConnell, had been clear on that point: “Elder, you’ve done great work here. But you have a new mission now. Find a wife.” My mission companion needed to be replaced with an eternal companion. Wherever I was going, the next steps in my life weren’t meant to be taken alone.

For that to work, I needed a girlfriend. My family moved to Florida when I left for Brigham Young University in 2001; I’d never lived here. Many missionaries left and came home to wards they’d lived in and attended their whole lives. For me, today was the first time I’d met President Collins. He met me, released me, and then watched me try not to fall apart. Florida offered me nothing. I didn’t know any girls to have lunch with, let alone date.

I kept turning the badge over in my hands. I rubbed my thumb along the hard edges, pressed the corners; traced the letters with my fingers. The van’s tires hummed on the highway.

The sound took me back to San Jose and my last drive with Elder Adams. We’d slipped away while some of the other outgoing missionaries were doing exit interviews.

He was driving, hands firmly on the steering wheel, positioned at two and ten like we were trained. Elder Adams was always the picture of obedience; he wavered in nothing. He glanced over at me with a smile and said, “Remember our first day in the Missionary Training Center?”

I laughed, shaking my head. “Feels like a lifetime ago.”

“I was so stinkin’ nervous.”

“Same,” I agreed.

Elder Adams stuck to the residential streets near the Mission Home, driving for driving’s sake. I remember thinking how different the houses were from the Latino neighborhoods where our investigators lived. This place was too middle-class and too “white.” Perfect flower-beds, immaculate lawns. Whenever we came to these neighborhoods, I felt like I was in another world, completely separate from the one where the people I taught existed. Here the power imbalance was palpable, both socially and economically. If we saw a Latino here, they’d be hired cleaning help or yard workers.

“So, what did you and President McConnell talk about?” Elder Adams asked, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“How I can’t believe this is ending. I cried.”

Elder Adams adjusted his glasses. “Don’t remind me, Elder. I’ve cried enough today as it is.”

“Me too,” I said with a laugh.

“President told me to stay strong.”

“Yeah, but that part’s obvious.”

“Well, yeah. He gave five ways.”

“Let’s have ‘em.” Elder Adams kept glancing between me and the road. If he’d been able to take notes and drive at the same time, he probably would have.

“Pray, study, attend church, go to the temple, and serve – hold a calling.” Elder Adams was nodding. I continued, “President said don’t get lax.”

“He said that to me too. I think, it’s just... he doesn’t want us to lose this, you know?”

“Definitely,” I agreed. “1 Corinthians 13:11.” Elder Adams nodded and grinned and we quoted the scripture together, word for word. “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.” That scripture was drilled into us over and over in the Missionary Training Center (MTC).

The humming car tires sustained us during the lulls in our discussion. For Mormons, the mission was held as a cultural rite of passage, especially for young men. Young women could go

if they wanted, but young men were expected to serve. Our entire church upbringing focused on preparing us to be missionaries.

Then the day arrived and suddenly there were all these changes. Having a companion who had to go everywhere with me (except to the bathroom), the radical shift from “normal” life to one of strict, regimented structure, complete with an entire handbook of rules. The transition wasn’t easy, but Elder Adams was my first MTC companion, and together we’d gotten there. Though it wasn’t easy to live perfectly, we tried our best to be obedient.

But one day I woke up and what was once weird and difficult had become easy and natural. My companion was my best friend; someone I could rely on in difficult times. The routine became second nature. I got to the point where I was fine with doing missionary work for the rest of my life. Worldly concerns like finances, rent, or having a job, took a backseat to teaching investigators and helping them draw closer to Jesus Christ. Everything was for the good of the Saints: serving members, strengthening testimonies, even learning and growing myself.

We’d spent years prepping, two years doing, and now we had to go home and face the rest of our lives. Reality.

I broke the silence. “Oh yeah, and President said I’m supposed to get married.” I rolled my eyes.

“Girls. Geeze,” Elder Adams said, tightening his fingers on the steering wheel.

“I know.”

“Lock your heart, Elder!” Elder Adams jabbed a finger at the roof. “You’re not released yet.”

I broke into laughter. “I know, I know. And stay away from porn.”

“Obviously.” Elder Adams gave me a mock-stern look. I rolled my eyes again.

Our silence held until we parked the car back at the Mission Home. “I’m not ready.” Elder Adams sighed, taking the key out of the ignition and crumpling back in his seat.

I pressed my lips together. “I don’t think we ever will be, Elder,” I replied. “I feel sort of the way I did when I got ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood, only this time I know it’s coming. Tomorrow is a whole new ballgame. We’re going to be ripped from our worry-free life and thrust into the world where we can’t hide behind our badges. I mean, the spirit can be the same; nothing has to change there, but we have to be careful.”

“Definitely.”

“Satan will hound us. He wants us, especially as returned missionaries, to fall. Nothing better than destroying one of God’s elect, right? President told me to watch myself because Satan isn’t going to let up. I know that so well. The past comes back to haunt you.”

Elder Adams looked at me.

“I’ve seen Satan’s adeptness firsthand on my mission. Now we have this pearl and we have to continue to value it.”

“Not give it up for lesser things.”

“Right.” This wasn’t just about losing structure and companionship; this was about facing new problems, my family, the world and its vast iniquity. Everything was changing. Conversion was a lifelong process, not one that ended with the mission. Release promised a new beginning, and anticipating the coming transition, we were asking, ‘How converted to the Gospel of Jesus Christ am I?’ Sure, obedience and commitment shone easily enough from the safety of the mission field, behind the protection of the badge. But what about afterwards? This was about how long we would stick to keeping the commandments and fulfilling our covenants, sacred vows made to God in order to return to Heaven. Satan was stronger out in the world and he’d work tirelessly to pull us away from the Church into inactivity or sin.

Our drive reinforced wanting to take our “new” selves with us. No going inactive. Keep the faith and continue to walk in righteousness; oh, and also get married. That was important now too. I missed Elder Adams so much.

* * *

“You should get a job,” my father’s voice was like a jolt.

I frowned. Florida was a pause, nothing more. I hadn’t fully come home from my mission yet, but an equal part of me already wanted to be in Utah; making plans for the new semester, receiving a calling at church, asking girls out left and right.

“I dunno. Who would hire me for two months? That’s not long enough to do anything.”

I reached up for the notebook in my breast pocket. The little blue spiral-bound was my main resource whenever I wanted to remember something later. Except the pocket was different now. It was still in the same place, stitched with the exact same ‘v’ shape as before; it still held

my missionary handbook. None of that had changed. But now when my fingers brushed the front edge they met cotton instead of plastic.

CHAPTER 2 – HOMECOMING

Three days later, on October 22nd, I was in the kitchen washing dishes, and my brother Carter, came in. He seemed fiery, hot-tempered, and full of nervous teenage energy.

“Hey,” he demanded, “how do I look?”

Mid-scrub, I paused to take in what he was wearing. Blood-red shirt and black pants, paired with a crimson and gray tie, rounded off with a 70s-style suit jacket.

“Lookin’ sharp,” I said with a smile.

He turned to look at his reflection in the glass sliding doors that went out onto the patio. He adjusted his hair and I laughed. “Come on now. You’re fine. Lady-killer, I’m sure.”

“Please.” He turned to glare at me.

“Have fun tonight, yeah?”

“Will do.”

Late that evening, he phoned to say he was staying at a friend’s.

The next morning, we hadn’t heard from Carter and his phone was going straight to voicemail. I wondered where he was, but not for long because I was supposed to give a talk in the Spanish Branch; a separate, smaller congregation that met in a chapel about an hour south of the ward my parents attended. The branch was all Spanish-speakers and I was excited because I knew it would be like being on a mission again and that stories from my mission were the best way to connect to this branch.

As soon as I put pen to paper, memories overwhelmed me. I quickly lost myself in reliving moments from my mission like the day Elder Marlin and I were flipping through the drop list in our Area Book, trying to see if there was anyone listed worth re-contacting. That sometimes proved more effective than simply knocking doors on any old street. We were serving in Central San Jose and found a record listing “a young, sweet couple desiring baptism, yet facing obstacles” – for example, they weren’t married, which meant they were living in sin, but couldn’t get married until one of them got a divorce. Not the easiest thing to sort out so they could be eligible for baptism, but we decided to give it a shot. They’d moved, but we engaged

with the people living at their old address. Cyndi, a twenty-two-year-old Americanized Mexican girl, complete with highlights and a pierced lip and her slightly overweight fourteen-year old brother, Nico.

“Look, I’m just on my way out right now, but please come back. We’re always open to hearing about God and building faith,” she told us.

“What makes you say that?” I prompted.

She bit her lip, debating whether to go into it with us or not. “I’m just thinking of my brother, Efrain. He’s been going through some really hard times, ya know? He’s losing a lot of faith in God. We all are, I think. Fighting. We’re fighting, but it’s hard to stay afloat when the ocean’s raging.”

We set a return appointment, but Cyndi wasn’t there when we arrived. Nico opened the door. “So, we gonna do this or what?” he asked, ushering us inside.

We got out the movie *Finding Faith in Christ*. Before we put it on, I asked Nico, “Do you want to invite your mom to come watch?”

“Nah, she’s sleeping.”

The phone rang at that moment, and I heard her answer it. I looked at Nico with a wry smile. “Would you mind inviting her now?”

He went reluctantly, and shook his head when he got back. We started the film and about three minutes in, his mother, Violeta, joined us. When it ended, we asked them how they felt.

“Gracias por haberme invitado, hermanos.” Violeta opened up to us, grateful she’d come out to watch. “I was in bed, just trying to sleep, I don’t know... We have so many problems right now; I didn’t want to think about them anymore. Just sleep. But since I came out here, I feel better now...peaceful.”

“Hermana, this is the spirit speaking truth to your soul. What else is affecting your family?”

Apparently, Efrain was out on the streets, no one knew where. Violeta watched his daughter most of the time, but recently got in a fight with Efrain’s girlfriend and she took the baby and left. Efrain disappeared. Violeta was separated from her husband and had a restraining order against him, but the kids missed him and wanted him to come back, a point of particular tension for Cyndi. And that was only the beginning of their problems. Satan was hard at work in this family.

Their home was blessed in the closing prayer I offered, and I prayed for each family member specifically by name. “Lord, please guide Efrain back home.” Violeta wiped tears from her eyes as we stood to leave, and thanked us again.

“I was praying the same thing in my heart with you.”

Violeta came running out to us the next morning when we went back to check on them. “Hermanos! No van a creer! Efrain came home last night.”

Joy swept over me. Direct, unquestionable answer to a humble prayer offered by a servant of the Lord. This was his work. *No unhallowed hand can stop the work from progressing.* We taught her about Joseph Smith and gave her a Book of Mormon right then and there. Holding the Book of Mormon in her hands, Violeta declared, “I think I’m going to find this book interesting.” She asked if we had any other movies, so we left some with her saying we’d be back the next night to pick them up.

Violeta was watering the lawn when we arrived. She thanked us for the movies, she’d thoroughly enjoyed them. “Hermana, how can we be of service to you?”

“Que?”

“How can we help out? Wash your dishes? Clean your bathroom?”

She smiled, and waved a hand at us. “Por favor, that’s what I get paid to do, mijos.”

“At least let us wash your windows,” I piped.

She smirked. “Boys, it’s far too late to do something like that. Do it in the morning,” she joked.

I played along. “Okay, we’ll be here at nine-thirty.”

She shook her head, still laughing. “Just don’t wake me up!”

We showed up at ten in the morning, to be sure she was away at work. Nico was home. “Guys, this isn’t necessary, you know?”

We smiled and kept scrubbing. We had a soda and sat down to meet Efrain. He had some questions about prophets, but didn’t seem overly interested or receptive.

Next day we stopped by to check on Violeta’s reading in the Book of Mormon.

“Thanks for your service, Elderes. When I got home from work Nico came to me and said ‘Mom, they came back and washed the windows.’ And I said, ‘What? But I was joking!’ ‘Mom,’ he responded. ‘They’re dumb Americans. They don’t understand well enough to know that.’” Elder Marlin and I laughed heartily.

“Yes,” I explained, “we understood perfectly, but came anyway because we wanted to show you we’re here to help you any way we can. Plus, it gave us an extra opportunity to serve, which is one of our purposes as missionaries.”

Violeta expressed to us her great love for the Book of Mormon. “In the morning when I get up, I always start by reading. I only mean to do it for a bit, but every time I pick it up I never want to put it down. This book has brought me peace. Thank you.”

We invited her to church and she agreed to come along. Efrain said he knew exactly where it was. Sunday morning, we phoned to make sure she was still coming and she said she was getting ready and would see us soon. Church started and she hadn’t arrived. We phoned Nico again and he said she’d left a half hour ago. So where was she?

Two days later, sitting in her living room, Violeta told us the story. “I got there right on time at eleven o’clock. But the service was nearly over. I thought it a bit odd and rude that you not only gave me the wrong time, but then didn’t even come yourselves. The Pastor started cracking jokes after the service, but they had a breakfast which I enjoyed. When I got home, Nico came to me and said, ‘Mom, you went to the wrong church. Los Elderes called three times looking for you.’

We kept visiting her throughout the week and made sure she had a member meet her so she got to the right church on Sunday. But her husband didn’t think he liked the idea of her listening to us and Cyndi took his side. She had her beliefs and she didn’t feel she wanted to change. The family was starting to split down the middle. A war seemed imminent. Not at all what we intended, or wanted. When we taught Nico about the Book of Mormon earlier that week, Efrain listened in and commented, “I’m involved in an indigenous cultural religion. If you try and talk to me about your beliefs, you’re disrespecting my culture and my religion.”

We mostly stuck to teaching Violeta. She loved church. She felt the spirit so strongly from the testimonies shared that she cried. She asked the Lord to let her know something about her granddaughter. We went to visit after church with the intention of committing her to baptism. But when we arrived she was busy. Her oldest daughter’s family had come over from East San Jose and Efrain’s girlfriend had also appeared with the baby.

“Elderes, I’m content and at peace. I know that I am a child of God, he knows me, and he hears my prayers.” It didn’t matter to her what Cyndi, Efrain, or her husband, said. She wasn’t hurting anyone or doing anything wrong, and she felt like she was becoming a better person, so

she wanted to continue. In our next lesson, she bore testimony herself of her love and appreciation for the teachings of the Book of Mormon. We committed her to baptism.

“Really? I can do that already?”

“Violeta, if you believe it to be true, desire repentance, want to be baptized and it’s done with the proper authority, you could get baptized tomorrow.” We weren’t able to baptize her the next day, but soon after. Violeta’s baptismal service was a wonderful experience. We felt the spirit during the hymns and talks, and our hearts were touched with her decision to come unto Christ.

A week later, when we were talking to Nico, he said, “I feel good about what my mom did. I want to do it too.” So we committed him to baptism as well. Violeta’s conviction for Christ only grew. By taking the steps to become a strong, faithful member of the Lord’s Church, she hopes to bring harmony and union to her family. We promised Violeta that by setting the example for her family, they would realize the blessings of the gospel for themselves.

We’d watched *Finding Faith in Christ* with Cyndi earlier and she said she hadn’t really felt anything at all, which surprised me. She seemed closed off to spiritual things. But then one day when we were teaching Nico, his mom had left some enchiladas for us and we asked if we could bless the food before we ate it. “Yeah, sure,” Nico replied.

“Nico, will you say the prayer for us?”

After he did, Cyndi exclaimed, “I feel...weird.”

“Yeah?”

“I dunno... something like inside.”

My eyes grew wide. “You felt the spirit!” I exclaimed.

“What?! But...” she protested. “I didn’t even close my eyes!”

“Doesn’t matter!” The Lord had touched her heart. She had a taste of the spirit and there’s no turning back from that. “Look at the changes in your mom. The gospel changes people, for good. This can help your family. Do you remember when we first met? All the problems your family was facing? And now look...”

Before I got moved to a new area, Cyndi was reading the Book of Mormon and told me she was thinking about baptism, she just wasn’t sure when.

“Elderes,” Violeta said, “Thank you for showing me the way and bringing the gospel to us.”

“Thank you for saving my family,” Cyndi said as we waved our goodbyes.

“Don’t thank me, I’m simply an instrument in the hands of the Lord, bringing the truth to those who are searching for it. Violeta was definitely searching.”

I got permission to return to the area to see Nico’s baptism a week later. Violeta was ecstatic to see me again, and was overjoyed to see her son following her example. Cyndi was progressing as well. She told us she was still reading and that she wanted to get baptized; I committed her on the spot. Cyndi, Violeta’s husband, and even Efrain all eventually got baptized. California – my mission – mattered so much because I got to take part in these families’ struggles to come closer to Christ and overcome their trials and temptations.

* * *

Violeta’s story was only one example I shared in my talk. The branch members came up to me in a steady stream afterwards to congratulate me.

“Felicidades, Hermano.”

“That talk was great! I can tell you had a good mission.”

“Can you please come speak in our branch every week?”

“Hermano, hay que venir de nuevo. Te queremos aqui con nosotros.”

I thanked them all, wishing I could stay and enjoy their friendship, and love. But I was expected at another meeting.

The High Council, a group of twelve high priests set to minister, teach, and supervise over a large geographic area consisting of multiple wards – also called a stake – was waiting for me to give my missionary report. Speaking to the High Council was a ‘Ritual of Return’ more than anything else, a way of welcoming back the missionary and recognizing the sacrifices he made during his time in the mission field.

I was nervous, but my parents seemed even more so. I couldn’t be sure if this was sentiment for me, or if there was something else going on. My mother kept smiling, but seemed distracted, like she wanted to be somewhere else. Once I started speaking, I warmed to my

subject quickly and forgot about my parents and my nerves. “My mission changed lives, including my own...” I spoke in-depth about my first Christmas away from home and the difficulties that brought. I’d never been away from my family before, and mission rules restricted outside contact so missionaries could stay focused on their work. I couldn’t just call home. My companion was sick. We weren’t working often, either, and being cooped up in an apartment wasn’t helping my spirits. There were only so many *Ensign* articles you could read in one day before you’d go crazy. But President had encouraged us to really try and get into the true spirit of Christmas; when we did go out, I was trying to keep that close at hand. The tree at the relatives of some members was only about a quarter decorated, and there weren’t any presents under it. Christmas was in four days; something was definitely up.

I asked why it was so sparse. “Hermana, que pasa con tu arbol? Los decoraciones? Y los regalos? Porque no hay?”

“My husband’s been having trouble finding work. We can barely pay our rent to keep this roof over our heads, let alone buy decorations or anything else.”

We went to our members’ home the next day to lay plans. My grandmother sent me ten dollars for a holiday treat. Elder White and I had enough food to last until the first if we didn’t go crazy, which left thirty-two dollars in my Missionary Saving Fund. Elder White had ten dollars also, so we had about fifty dollars altogether. Hermana Gonzalez drove us to the mall. Her sister-in-law had four kids, three boys ages twelve, ten, and four. We got a LEGO set for each of them as well as a huge army set of tanks, planes, and trucks for twenty dollars. Colored pencils, three dollars; and a big backpack from Claire’s with barrettes, combs, mini-curling iron and so much girly stuff for the daughter. Only twelve dollars. We went to FoodMaxx and got oranges, apples, bananas, and mangos. Eight pounds of fruit for ten dollars. Then back to the Gonzalez’s to wrap everything. She put the fruit on a huge platter and added a bottle of Martinelli’s, then cellophane wrapped the whole thing. Elder White and I each put in our own bottle of Martinelli’s we’d gotten at our Mission Christmas Conference. Christmas was ready. Hma. Gonzalez’s son wrote out all the tags on the gifts for us: “From Santa Clas.”

That night, we carried all the presents and the basket and bottles and set them out on the front porch. Then I rapped on the door and we ran. As the gate slammed behind me, I heard cries of “Quien es?” from the children. We went left around the townhouse and onto the next street over, then moved until we could see the house across the way.

We'd not answered the calls of "who is it," but eventually the porch light went on and we heard the door open. I held my breath, straining to listen. From way over where we were, the voices of the boys reached us. Squeals, cheers, and giggling gripped me in a spirit of such joy and delight. Tears sprang to my eyes, unbidden. What joy to share some of my excess with those who had none. Christmas was quieter, solemn, but more Christ-centered, filled with great memories and sentiments; and the opportunity to serve instead of the normal hustle and bustle and commercialization.

"I loved the people I met, I loved the time spent serving others, I loved everything about my mission." My report made that clear.

My father was invited to bear his testimony at the end. "I want to share my testimony of this great gospel. I know this Church is true. I'm grateful for prophets and the priesthood and the knowledge we have that we have the authority to do works in the name of God today. And what a blessing it is to be able to share that knowledge with others. I'm so proud of Daniel..." He choked up and I had to look away, for fear he would set me off as well. But I couldn't hide my smile either; I had done them proud and nothing could beat that feeling of joy. "The work he did in California bringing people to the gospel has brought many blessings to our family. I testify that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God. Through him, we have the Book of Mormon, another wonderful testament of Jesus Christ. I know that the scriptures are true and teach us the words of eternal life that will get us back to our Heavenly Father." His voice quivered with emotion and he had to pause again. I could feel the energy of his conviction burning through the room like invisible electricity. "I testify that Jesus Christ died for us and that through his great atonement we can be returned to God again if we stay true and faithful to the commandments. I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen." A chorus of 'amens' filled the room, echoing my father's sentiments and thanking him simultaneously for his beliefs. We sang a hymn, had a closing prayer, and the meeting concluded.

As we walked down the hall afterwards, my mother hooked her arm in mine and said quietly, "There's a situation."

"What do you mean?" I asked, my mind still on my report, and my heart lingering back in California.

"I... I wasn't sure I even wanted to tell you."

“Why?”

“You just seem so happy right now. We’re so, so proud of you.”

“Thanks,” I replied, but with an edge in my voice. “But?”

“But Carter...”

“What happened to him?” I interrupted.

“He went to the dance drunk.” The way she said it felt like a punch to the stomach, one I knew she also felt.

“He what?”

“Yes. They got kicked out, so they just went to a hotel and got even more wasted.”

Things like drugs and alcohol are forbidden in the Word of Wisdom, doctrine teaching Mormons their bodies are temples; these substances are poisons, and the righteous stay far away from them.

“The police found him this morning at 5 am. He was lying in a field, so drunk he wasn’t even coherent. His car is missing, his phone is missing, and he remembers nothing.”

The white walls and blue-flecked carpet swam before me. I wanted to throw up. I wanted to run to Carter and punch him in the face for being so stupid. I wanted to find him and hold him tight.

“Why didn’t...” I stared at her. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

My mother frowned. “We didn’t want to ruin the moment.” I understood their position, but I was still upset. This was meant to be a celebration; their son had served honorably and brought many to the gospel. But I was not the only son. “Carter’s still pretty bad off, so maybe let’s not talk about any of this for a while?”

I nodded, unsure how I’d broach such a subject anyway. Emailing had been my way of communicating to family as a missionary, but I supposed that distance had naively protected me from some of the larger difficulties they were mired in.

CHAPTER 3 - SANDCASTLE

When we got home, I went into the kitchen to make lunch, but found myself marveling at how wrong everything felt. My family didn't exactly seem to be living the gospel. Brody and Quinn came running in from the living room, yelling and bickering. That was the only thing they ever seemed to do. The kitchen gave way to the Family Room where Pete and Carter were playing video games.

"Can you shut up for two minutes?" Pete asked.

"We should tie them up and gag them," Carter offered.

Pete added, "Or just throw them off a cliff and have done with it." Cynicism and sarcasm were all he seemed capable of anymore, which jarred me.

There were no clean knives in the silverware drawer, so I had to wash one, but that required emptying the sink of dirty dishes to get to the tap, which seemed more effort than it was worth. There were papers out on the counter and "stuff" everywhere. G.I. Joes, flashlights which didn't even work, newspapers, half-empty cereal boxes. Everywhere I looked there were things that didn't belong or needed put away. There was so much laundry half-folded on the sofa, that sitting was impossible. But Carter worried me the most. He seemed completely swallowed in darkness. Like Satan had already won him over and his spirituality was completely snuffed out. Drinking, partying; he was probably having sex, too. Living in the world, but not of the world was a mantra he'd all but abandoned at this point. My mother was over-tired and over-stressed trying to navigate successfully in her own marriage, and the lives of her four kids still at home. On top of that, she was recently diagnosed with iron deficiencies and anemia. Her internal organs were failing her; how long did we have before it become too much and she collapsed?

I didn't even want to eat the sandwich I'd just made. I wasn't hungry anymore. Mormons are trained to look for problems, trials, and temptations in the people we are called to minister to. Inevitably this was the same lens I was using to see the world now. But there you spend an hour or two a day with people and then you go away, you have time to breathe, to focus, study, pray, and ponder how you can best help before you come back in swinging. Here, there were no breaks, no time for personal or companionship study. I didn't get to "clock out" every day at

9:30 pm and unwind. My missionary skills weren't enough here. Everything I'd crafted myself into over the last two years was crumbling like a sandcastle at the mercy of the tide. My rigorous study, dedication to discipline, upbeat attitude, even my spirituality; I could feel them all eroding under the pressure of reality.

My mother shouting woke me the next morning. From the top of the stairs, I briefly saw her half-dragging, half-pushing my brother out the door. I rushed downstairs to see what the matter was, but she'd already herded him into the van and driven off. The closing garage door and the empty space refused me answers. Still confused, I went into the kitchen and then the family room, but nothing seemed out of place.

Finally, I went to Carter's room to investigate. I pushed open the door and stood motionless in the doorway. There were some papers scattered about near his bed, and a knife spotted with blood. I collapsed to my knees, my body plummeting with my stomach. I thought I was going to throw up. Using the doorframe, I supported myself, just staring; I was too shocked by the scene before me to make any sense of it. I stayed like that for a long time.

Carter had been fighting depression and anxiety for some time, but self-harm was beyond even my imagining. We'd been so close before my mission; now I felt completely shut out.

My mother later helped piece together the morning's events. Carter blamed my parents for taking him away from Ohio in the middle of High School because he lost all his friends – people he'd known since he was a little kid. He started breaking out of some of his funk when he got a girlfriend, but that eventually fell apart. Carter had been texting his ex, presumably to try and get her back, and she revealed she was seeing someone else now. He got angry and stopped responding, so she called our house phone. My mother went to Carter's room to tell him that he had a phone call and she found him lying on the floor semi-conscious, bleeding.

I volunteered to stay overnight at the hospital so my mother could rest. Carter was still on suicide watch, and angry.

"I'm here for you, man. Whatever you need."

My words failed to fill the distance between us. He was right in front of me and I wanted to reach out and take his hand; do something, but Carter was having none of it. He wouldn't even look at me. He stared at the wall. He didn't want to be here. He didn't want to wear the hospital

gown. He didn't want the security guard to be right outside the door in case he tried something else. He just wanted it all to end.

Carter sighed and closed his eyes. I loved him so much. *Why do you have to suffer? Why can't I take your pain from you?* I hated feeling so useless. Carter was hurting and he wouldn't let anyone in; I knew because I'd felt like that before.

I remembered fondly our previous relationship. When we would spend hours in his room together and I'd read *The Dragonlance Chronicles* out loud, or our countless G.I. Joe and LEGO adventures; when it was just us and make-believe.

Part of his anger was definitely rooted in his surviving the attempt on his life. The giant gauze bandages around his wrists filled my vision as much as I tried to ignore them. They were much thicker than I'd thought they be, almost like bubble wrap bracelets.

The space between us felt as large as the one I felt with President Collins, but this one hurt more, was more personal. *How the hell do I reach you?* Get past his outward rage and find the hurt inside it. Hold it, help it, heal it. *Maybe he was pushing me away because of my Mormonism. He didn't seem to want anything to do with it anymore. Or was this about something else? Why won't he talk to me?!* I stared at the sleek white tile floor.

My missionary world was all I had to fall back on. *What point is there in offering something that's not wanted?* My words lived and died with the beeps of the machines in the room before they even passed my lips and the night ticked away, punctuated only by occasional coughing from down the hall.

CHAPTER 4 – ESCAPE

The days following seemed like years. I tried not to think, not to breathe, telling myself the pain would leave if I ignored it long enough. My time spent playing video games skyrocketed; a non-solution to numb myself to everything going on around me. Nothing improved. Cater was still sullen and detached and no attempt to reach him seemed to work. My own problems and pain readjusting to post-missionary life grew to a breaking point and I ran away to visit Utah.

Seeing the mountains again felt like a homecoming. They're the kind of landscape you don't realize you're missing until you're seeing them again and they're making you happy.

I went to get my old job back and started hunting for an apartment. I visited the Spanish Department to see how many classes I could test out of since I could speak the language so well now. When I dropped in after hours on Ashlyne at Provo High School, she laughed in surprise and told the two students hanging out in her classroom who I was. She'd been a good friend to me before my mission, and now she was a teacher. I thought it was weird to think someone I'd hung out with on the porch for late-night conversation or on lazy Sunday afternoons would have a real job now. She said, "I'm so surprised you wanted to see me. I never thought I'd see you again ever."

I told Ashlyne how much I'd missed her and that I needed her help finding Tika. Before I'd gone on a mission, I'd attended a whole year of college at BYU and Tika had been an important part of that. She had gorgeous long brown hair that I loved to run my fingers through. Sometimes she wore glasses that made her look a bit nerdy, but I liked that as well. She had an infectious laugh and perfect teeth. We spent a lot of time together back then and I thought we'd had a solid connection, I'd even daresay that we loved each other. I assumed we would write each other for the two years, she would wait, and then we'd get married. But a few months into my mission, all communication from her simply stopped, with no explanation. Tika and Ashlyne had been close friends and she would know where Tika was living now.

She took some convincing, but finally relented and took me to see Tika. I had to know what had happened.

Tika welcomed us to her basement apartment with an enthusiastic smile, apologizing for the mess caused by having a newborn. She didn't seem caught off guard, or surprised, or anything about our visit; almost as if she'd expected it. She cleared a space of newspapers and baby clothes for us on the living room couch. The room was compact, and barely fit the couch and the TV stand across from it. On either side of the stand were the kitchen and the entryway.

After the required pleasantries, I launched into what I was there for. "Why didn't you write to me?" I asked.

She sighed, and shifted her baby from one hip to the other. "Do you remember Clint?"

I nodded. "Sure, you'd just broken up with him when we started dati... whatever we were." I supposed that's what I was there trying to figure out.

She took in a big breath. "I wrote him...everyday...diligently, consistently, for two years." She let the sentence hang in the air a moment. "He was serving his mission in San Jose."

There was the bomb. I looked at her, but didn't say anything.

"I couldn't do it again. I'm sorry. It was too much."

I looked at the picture of Christ she had hanging on the wall and wished there were more lights in here.

Her husband entered the living room, backpack slung over a shoulder and said hello. Ashlynne and I stood up to shake his hand. I tried to hide my surprise; I knew him. Tika gave him a kiss.

"Really good to see you again, Daniel," he said to me. "Hope your mission went well." I nodded. "Sorry I can't stay and chat, but I have a class." He looked at Tika. "I'll see you two later, yeah?" then with a wave and a smile, he was gone.

"I still feel weird," she said to us.

I didn't hear her at first, I was still reeling from seeing her husband. I knew him; he had been my next-door neighbor during freshman year.

"Daniel?" Ashlynne prompted.

"Sorry." I blinked to pull myself toward the conversation again. "You said you feel weird?"

"Yeah, I just never imagined marrying someone like him."

"Well, why did you?" I asked.

She blushed a bit, but recovered quickly enough.

“Well. He’s tall, skinny, has glasses, is left-handed...” My stomach dropped as the list went on. Everything she said described me to a T. She’d stopped writing me because she didn’t want to be reminded of Clint, and then simply replaced me because she wanted to get married more than she wanted to wait two years for another missionary. I maintained my composure, but felt even more betrayed than before we’d come over. At least it was now clear why she’d broken contact with me.

Noticing the awkward silence, Tika tried to guide the conversation in a different direction. “Did you bring any pictures from your mission?”

I swallowed my ire and took her invitation to talk about something else. I told a few stories and showed both Tika and Ashlynnne the photos I’d brought. Then Ashlynnne had somewhere else to be, so we needed to leave.

“It was really great to see you.” Tika told me as we were leaving.

“You too.” I lied to her face. She had mattered to me in a way that I didn’t to her, and I was ashamed I’d let myself believe it had been love.

Ashlynnne was nice enough to drive me back to where I was staying with my older brother, Alex. He’d served a mission in Sweden and returned an entirely different Alex than the one I’d known before he’d left. We roomed together at BYU and he even let me read his mission journal, which had been the catalyst for getting me to go on a mission. His mission had been incredibly difficult for him, and he’d always struggled with feeling like he hadn’t made a difference. So every time I baptized someone, I counted it as a baptism for Alex. I wanted him to understand his mission mattered, and that he had made a difference. I’d had a bunch of my converts write him letters documenting their experiences with the Church and thanking him for having served his mission; because of the impact it had on me, which in turn led to the impact on their lives.

Alex and I sat down in his dining room at the large oak table, covered with a white tablecloth. There were some boxes and things stacked at one end of the table; they didn’t seem to use it often for eating. I got out the pictures I’d brought and we spent the next five hours talking. I told him the stories of each convert who had written him. Photos only captured a glimpse of peoples’ lives, so I spent time on each and every photo; giving details about the people, their experiences, and the times we’d shared together.

The conversation eventually turned to Alex's marriage.

"I just feel duped."

"But why?" I asked. I was still tying the string that kept the photo album closed.

"I..." He frowned and looked out the double glass doors into the living room.

"Everything's changed."

"How so?"

He turned to look back at me. "You know; the wedding was great. We were so happy."

"You seem happy now too," I said. "I mean, you have this great place..." I gestured around the room.

He shook his head.

"It's more complicated than that. When we were first married, Lindsay used to study the scriptures with me—"

"—like we did before I went on my mission."

"Yeah, like that. And we'd go to the temple together. She even told me she was still considering going on a mission."

"So what happened?" I asked.

He glanced out at the living room again, to make sure Lindsay wasn't within earshot. "After we had some more time on our own, Lindsay started feeling like the pressure to do 'right things' had been lifted from her and she began spending more time thinking for herself. First, she stopped attending church. Then, she started adjusting her belief set. Now she's told me she doesn't want to have kids."

"She... what?!" I sounded more shocked than I'd meant to. I also looked to make sure Lindsay hadn't heard. We waited a few seconds to be sure. "Well, if everything's changed, where does that leave you?" I asked.

"There aren't a lot of options." He tugged absently at the tablecloth.

"Doesn't seem like it," I replied.

"Rock and a hard place."

"Definitely." I took note of the other places in the room that had boxes still, like they'd not finished moving in, even though they'd lived here for a while now. I wondered about this, but wanted to stay focused on the conversation.

He continued, “End the marriage in order to fulfill the commandment to procreate and raise up posterity unto the Lord or continue in the institution deemed sacred above all others?”

I didn't have an answer for him. That kind of decision would not be easy. The Church did not take kindly to divorce, but if she wouldn't have kids then shouldn't he leave and find someone else who would? The whole thing was a Catch-22. I wanted to be mad at Lindsay for forcing Alex into such a difficult situation. I once again felt powerless to help, like I had with Carter in the hospital.

I attended church in what would be my new ward when I came back for good in January. I didn't really enjoy myself. No one seemed overly friendly or went out of their way to welcome me or speak to me.

On my flight back to Florida, I started doubting if Provo was the right place for me after all. I didn't know why I'd been expecting anything else, but it seemed like so many people had moved on. Almost everyone who'd supported me in the changes necessary to get ready for a mission was now married, had kids, or had moved away. It almost didn't feel like home anymore.

Back in Florida, I put myself painlessly into auto-pilot: work, drudgery, and hours of fruitless time killing.

I felt so stuck. If only it were January already, not November. After one week back, I needed to leave again. Instead of hopping on a plane, I convinced my family to rent a van and road trip back to Ohio for Thanksgiving. My mother had been looking for an excuse to visit her friends, and my brothers had plenty of friends they wanted to see as well. The trip up was uneventful, though long and arduous, especially with seven people crammed in one van. I don't remember much from the drive itself, except tensions running high. Some of my siblings probably fought over who would get to sit in the front seat next or use the Game Boy.

Once we arrived, I barely took any time to myself before I was calling everyone and trying set up times to see them again. Most of the interactions were a blur, just seeing what everyone'd been up to while I was gone and telling them about my time as a missionary. The majority of them weren't members and got quietly thrown up against the Mormon measuring stick of worth and found wanting. I wanted desperately for them to share in the peace and

happiness the gospel had given me, but I didn't know how to get them to see its truth and convert.

Among the blur of meetings and conversations, one in particular stood out. Vicki was a girl in my theatre program in high school as well as the Flag Corps and always seemed so confident in herself. I'd looked up to her, especially whenever she got a starring role in one of our musicals; now her hair was cut short and she was sporting a new pair of dark brown glasses. I hugged her tightly. She thought it would be fun to go see Sam, another girl from the theatre program who lived in Grove City, and some of her friends. Sam was always too bubbly for her own good and carried a superman lunchbox instead of a purse.

Once there, we laughed and joked and I felt like I was back at Reynoldsburg High School. We went to the movie theater and saw RENT, then went back to one of Sam's friend's apartment. His name was Jake and he was older than me, and a bit balding. He was also gay, completely out, and over-the-top about everything.

First, he gave us a tour of his place. Besides his bed, most of the furniture was in his office. "I spend the most time in here," he explained with a wink and a laugh. His computer was set up in a giant smooth mahogany worktop with glass cabinets on either side. His computer chair was swanky black leather and on a swivel. When he caught me eying the towel at the base of the chair, he shrugged and laughed again.

"Don't you mind that, boy. That's for whenever I want to... you know..." He raised his eyebrows a few times, looking straight at me. I blushed. *Was he seriously being this upfront about his private practices?* "I mean, most of the time I just use tissues, but..." I wanted to melt into nothing; I was so embarrassed. "Don't look at me like that," he smirked. "I'm completely self-serving, honey. I do whatever I want, whenever I want. Including pleasure." I tried to swallow the awkward feelings which had overtaken me.

"Let's have wine!" Jake shouted, and Sam and Vicki clapped. We adjourned to the living room and sat on the floor because there wasn't any furniture there. They passed around the bottle of wine and talked about why they hated RENT the movie compared to the original stage production. I passed on the wine and didn't have much to add to the conversation. I'd never seen it on Broadway and I was still processing most of what I'd just watched. I listened intently, my mind going a hundred miles an hour. Thinking about the movie, about Jake, about honesty, about high school, about normal life vs. mission life.

The night wore on, and Vicki eventually said she had to go, she had an early shift in the morning. We said our goodbyes and then we were on our way back to Reynoldsburg. Vicki could tell something was up when we got in the car.

We'd barely pulled out of the parking lot when she started in. "What's up?"

"Huh?"

"With you."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, come on."

I shrugged.

"Why are you so quiet?" she asked.

"I dunno... just thinking I guess." *Dreaming? Trying to make sense of Jake. His authenticity. His honesty. My own life. My place in God's plan. How being a missionary prepares you pretty well for being a missionary, and they say it's practice for real life, except it's a lie because nothing prepares you for coming back. Nothing. But how the hell did I say all that to her? She wasn't Mormon, so she wouldn't even understand, would she?*

"About what?"

"Just some of the stuff Jake said tonight."

"Like?" She wasn't going to let it go.

Deep breath. *Just go for it. What have I got to lose? Nowhere else to go.* "Like how he's completely self-serving. He does whatever he wants, and that's that. He's totally okay with it, like it's no big deal."

"Is it a big deal? Don't you do that?"

"No. I try and put God first. Always."

"But why?"

My cheeks started to flush. *How can I make her see? If she doesn't understand spiritual things?* Conversations with people who didn't understand my commitment to God, the faith that drove me, the sacrifices I made to be a missionary; they were always difficult.

"Because it's right," I ventured.

"Who gets to decide what's right and what's not?"

"God does."

“And if I don’t believe in God?” She accidentally hit my leg as she shifted to the next gear. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” I pulled my leg away and rubbed my knee. “That’s your choice, I suppose.”

“There’s no need to get testy about anything, Daniel.”

“Sorry.” I sighed. I pressed my lips tightly together and tried to breathe less so the glass wouldn’t fog.

“But if my choices make me happy? Why do I need a higher power to dictate that?” she asked.

I felt like I was digging a hole and she was pushing me in. Or I was a mouse and she was an albatross hunting me. I hated conversations like this, because I never knew how to operate successfully. I spent plenty of time in California in discussion with pastors from other churches, but I had time to prepare for those and if they got heated, I defaulted to bearing pure testimony. *Should I do that here? How do I answer her without sounding like a jerk? Our Church tells us to stand up for our beliefs, but how do you do that with someone who is your friend without sounding like you’re judging them for being wrong? That’s what I’m doing, isn’t it? Without God, you’re lost. You need God.*

“Because you do.” I shook my head. “I know that’s not a good answer. I don’t know what else to say. You just do.”

She pursed her lips. “Well, if that works for you, then I’m glad. I don’t think I need it.”

Vicki 1, Me 0. I sighed again.

“That can’t be it, though. What else you thinking?”

My heart was trying to reach out of my body and grab Vicki; I wasn’t sure if it was meant to be in a hug or a stranglehold. *You want to be honest. That’s what you saw in Jake. Just try it. She’s handed you the opening.* I licked my lips. “The whole being...” I couldn’t even say it. The words caught in my throat. No.

“Being?” she prompted.

“I...like Jake.”

“What?” She laughed. “Like gay? Or what?”

“Yeah, that.” I let out a huge breath, my knees pressed against the glovebox. I slid my hands between my knees.

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing.” *Everything.*

“Okay?”

My thoughts got in the way of my words and I didn’t answer her. *The Church believes being gay is a sin. It’s wrong. Homosexual practices are condemned. How does that fit into words?*

“Daniel? What is it?” She put her hand on my leg, this time intentionally. “Are you okay?”

“I...”

“Seriously.” She started connecting dots in her head. If I could have, I would’ve opened the car door right then and run off into the night. “Daniel. Are you...?”

“No!” I answered too quickly. “Sorry. No. I’m not. I don’t...”

“It’s fine.”

“What?”

“If you’re gay, that’s fine.” She took her eyes off the road to look at me. I could feel her eyes, but refused to look back.

“I’m not.” She looked back at the road. Silence reigned.

I bit my lip, blinked and turned more toward the window, shifting my knees against the glovebox. I wasn’t sure the vibrations from the engine were masking my tremble. My heart was beating so fast I thought it might explode out of my chest. I couldn’t get enough air, like I was in the final sprint of a 1000-meter dash.

As if she could read my thoughts, Vicki said, “Why are you running from your feelings? Daniel, honestly. If you’re gay, it’s fine! I’d accept you no matter what. Be what *you* want.”

I didn’t say anything, but I glanced at her briefly. *Because I’ve been taught that they are wrong.* Vicki had taken the back country roads instead of the highway and out here the objects passing in the night were blurs, unrecognizable as real things. Every once in a while the car lit up under the gaze of a streetlight.

I’m not gay. Right? Jake seemed...happy. Didn’t he? But he was such a sinner. The Gospel promised eternal life and the Book of Mormon Prophet Alma taught “wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:10). I wanted happiness, right? Why did I have these naggings to forsake everyone I knew and go to New York and become a drag queen? Would there be

happiness? Peace? Would I feel any different than I did now? *Why must I face these things? Why must I battle such gross desires? Why can't I just be normal?*

Vicki didn't push any further, she could tell she'd set me off. "Just think about it," she offered.

"Thanks," I replied. I wanted to punch through the glass.

CHAPTER 5 – TRANSITION

On the way back to Florida, I was still trying to make sense of everything Vicki had stirred up inside me. Staring out the window wasn't helping. Quinn was lost in her *Game Boy* and Brody was sleeping. My other siblings were all doing something to keep them occupied. Watching the passing scenery was making me stir-crazy; I couldn't stop shifting. No matter how I sat, I couldn't get comfortable.

Since Carter's attempt, he and my parents had started going to therapy and spending more time together. I could tell it was working. They were getting closer and Carter was starting to be himself again, less brooding and prickly. My mother was getting better at having one-on-one conversations with him, where they talked openly and honestly about how Carter was doing. That's what I wanted, that private attention.

"Mom?" I called out.

"Yes, honey?"

"Can we talk?"

"Sure. What do you want to talk about?" She turned around to look across my siblings, at me in the backseat.

"No, not..." I sighed. *Not here*. There were too many ears. Conveying my needs without drawing unwanted attention was impossible, I realized. "Never mind," I said finally, shifting once again.

Even though I was surrounded by my family, I felt terribly alone, like no one could understand me. The tears just started; I tried to stop them, but to no avail. Quinn noticed, but didn't say anything. She stared for a few seconds and then went back to her game. I felt like I was at war, but with myself. And there weren't any breaks between rounds, or pauses to regroup, get some water, or wipe the blood off my face. Just constant knockdown, drag-out fighting. If I could have, I would have dug my fingers into my stomach and physically ripped out the way that I felt and then stomped on it until there was nothing left to feel. I hated it. I hated me.

Back in Florida, I retreated back into myself, too afraid to really explore. Days melted into weeks and I struggled to keep hold of the principles I'd cultivated as a missionary: honesty,

integrity, daily study and prayer, being the best I could be. They all seemed to be memories now, like California.

The night before I went back to school, I asked my mother if she would really miss me. After all, she wouldn't have to deal with my annoyances anymore. She laughed it off without really giving me a straight answer. Besides my parents and younger siblings, there wasn't anything about Florida to miss. Not like the people of California. Or a badge.

In Utah, I had a new apartment, new roommates, a new ward, a new Bishop, new classes; pretty much new everything. I was taking Creative Writing, Spanish 315, Persuasive Writing, and a Student Development class that analyzed identity, self-awareness, self-understanding, and decision making. I hoped it would help me make more sense of myself. I kept thinking about my conversation with Vicki and my "new" mission to get married.

Because another academic year was starting, I needed a Continuing Student Ecclesiastical Endorsement; basically, a religious vetting that I was still doing what I was supposed to in order to be an upstanding member of the religious community. This endorsement was required of students at all Church-owned educational institutions, not just BYU. I, however, wanted to put that meeting off as long as possible in light of all my struggles resurfacing.

Without an endorsement, I wouldn't be Honor Code compliant, and couldn't continue attending school. Everyone who went to BYU signed the Honor Code, which stated, "As a matter of personal commitment, [you] seek to demonstrate in daily living on and off-campus those moral values encompassed in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and will: be honest; live a chaste and virtuous life; obey the law and campus policies; use clean language; respect others; abstain from alcoholic beverages, tobacco, tea, coffee, and substance abuse; participate regularly in church services; observe Dress and Grooming Standards; and encourage others in their commitment to comply with the Honor Code."

January to March was considered a "grace" period while interviews were conducted, but that window was quickly closing. Interviews were generally carried out by one of the counselors in the Bishopric, not by the Bishop himself. But I knew that to get my endorsement, I'd have to meet with my new Bishop, not just a counselor.

Some Bishops were pretty easy-going, but others were hard-liners; which kind you got was like playing roulette. Some Honor Code rules were super strict; borderline ridiculous.

Everyone lived in sex-segregated accommodation and “visitors of the opposite sex were permitted in living rooms and kitchens but not in the bedrooms in off-campus living units.... The use of the bathroom areas by members of the opposite sex is not appropriate unless emergency or civility dictates otherwise, and then only if the safety, privacy, and sensitivity of other residents are not jeopardized.” That wasn’t even all. There were visiting hours too. Girls couldn’t come over before nine o’clock in the morning and had to leave by midnight; well, one-thirty on weekends.

The principle behind the Honor Code was to ensure all students were fully living the gospel, but also to avoid even the appearance of evil. The hope was that by trying to live a life of perfection – even if you weren’t – it would minimize transgression, but it never seemed to work the way it should; the guy who lived in the room next to me freshman year slept with his girlfriend, got her pregnant, and didn’t even get kicked out.

So I needed my new Bishop to sign off that I was living the Gospel enough to attend school. *But was I?* I mean, I was trying, but would it be enough?

To get my mind off things, I got in touch with an old friend who was also a returned missionary. Emily had lived across the courtyard from me my freshman year and whenever I struggled with my commitment to the gospel, she and I studied our scriptures together, to try and buoy each other up in our walk with Christ. That worked for a bit, but then my problems seemed to outgrow study and prayer.

We met up in her third-floor apartment, in the living room, of course, so we were keeping the Honor Code. We sat on her couch, more or less facing each other, scriptures between us. She smiled at me as we sat down and I couldn’t help but smile back. Her energy and positivity always matched her infectious smile. It was one of the things I loved most about her.

“How are you, my friend?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Nothing’s working.”

“Hmm.” She tilted her head a bit to one side. “Go on?”

I didn’t need a second invitation to begin unloading. “Studying is killing me. It takes so long to get anything done. I’m depressed. All my old problems have returned. You win, but you never really win, because they always come back. I feel like I’ve lost everything my mission gave to me.” Emily pressed her lips tightly together, thinking. I knew that she would understand

how I was feeling since she'd had her share of struggles too. But I wasn't done. "I doubt prayer, I doubt the things I'm reading, I doubt my commitment to the gospel. Am I really even trying?"

"Are you?" she interrupted. "That's not something I can answer."

"I... yes? I don't know!" I said. "I'm so discouraged. I don't even try and repent anymore."

"That sounds like a discussion for the Bishop, not me."

Emily and I discussed a lot in our talks. We were open and frank with each other most of the time, but sooner or later we reached a point where the other person couldn't help anymore. The problem for me was that this wasn't something I was sure I could discuss with the Bishop either.

"If I'd just stop sinning for five minutes, maybe that wouldn't need to be a thing." I put my hands between my knees and looked across the room. A desktop computer was set up on a small wooden desk that was very tidy. Many Mormons kept their computers out of their bedrooms, in more public areas, to reduce the risk of temptation to visit sites they shouldn't.

"Daniel, I wish I knew what I could say to help you more," she said, to pull me back into the conversation. She reached out to touch my hand. I didn't pull back, but didn't feel reassured either.

"It's fine," I continued, looking at her again. "I just need to figure out how to be stronger. And more committed. And stop giving into temptation. Then I'll be fine."

"Will you?"

I stopped to think a moment, then let out another sigh. "Probably not."

"That's what I was afraid you'd say." She thought a moment. "Are you dating anyone?"

"Not really."

She laughed a little. "What's that about?"

I smiled back, a bit wryly. "I mean, there are girls, but... I don't know. There's a girl from my mission, Elena, I baptized her whole family. We talk on the phone all the time. She's excited about the gospel and the things she's learning. Her family are preparing to go to the temple. I think she likes me, but I don't really know how to reciprocate." I looked away briefly. "I've told Elena about my struggles... I was just trying to be more honest, I guess. But I don't know how to cope with that – her knowing me as a real person instead of a 'perfect' missionary. Back in

California, I was infallible. But now that I'm home I feel like it's impossible to perpetuate that ideal anymore.”

She didn't want to let that train of thought go. “Why are you so scared to be real? That doesn't make sense to me.”

I shrugged, throwing my hands up. “I don't know. I just am. I want to be that ideal, I want to be that perfect person, I guess... I guess I don't like feeling like I let someone down. So I want to be what they see me as, so that they aren't disappointed in me.”

“I can understand that. Tough place to put yourself though.”

I tapped the cover of my Bible and scrunched my lips up, trying to think who else in my life could be a potential girlfriend.

“I have a friend out east, Sally. I only really know her through the collab writing we do online, but we chat on messenger or email almost every day. She keeps telling me how in love with me she is – I mean, I helped her out of some tough spots and was there to support her whenever she was having a hard time – but I've never even actually met her. So how could I love her more than I already do?”

“Yeah, I dunno,” Emily said. “Have you thought about meeting her?”

“We've talked about it a few times. Never really made any plans, though.”

Emily picked up her Bible and started flipping through it. I guessed she was trying to find a scripture she thought would apply to my situation.

“And then there's Melissa.” Emily looked up and stopped turning pages, but didn't say anything. “She's in my ward. I took her out last weekend. We had dinner, and it was fine, but then we went for a walk, and she wanted to hold hands, and...” I trailed off, unsure what to say next.

“And?” Emily prompted. “Don't leave me hanging!”

“And I couldn't do it. It didn't feel right to me. I try and get close to these girls and then things just come to a standstill. I don't get anywhere. We inevitably arrive at the part where it's supposed to move beyond friends – with hand-holding or kissing or whatever the next step is – and I just can't.” I shook my head, trying to keep my anger and frustration in check. “I run. I break up with them. I hang up the phone, I sign off of instant messenger. I say I had a great time, but I really need to go. I just...can't.”

“Well, there’s no real rush to get married,” she said, laughing and smiling again. Gesturing around the room, she said, slightly blushing, “As you can see, I haven’t worked that one out, either.”

“Yeah, but some of my mission buddies are starting to get engaged and I just feel left behind.”

“Don’t stress out over it. I mean I’m almost twenty-five and I’m not married. I’m practically a spinster now.” She tried to hide the pain and disappointment from her voice, but I knew deep down she was concerned about not having found a husband yet.

She seemed like a wonderful person to me, but not one I’d date.

“I mean Elena, Sally, Melissa; they’re great people, and I do care about them. A lot. But I’m not sure I know how to be anything more than friends. My walled heart doesn’t know how. Anytime it’s meant to move past that place of support and friendship, I just end up hurting them somehow. I’m tired of other people getting hurt.”

She set down the Bible and picked up her Book of Mormon. “Why do you think they get hurt?”

“Because they want me to love them and I don’t know how. *I’m* hurting too.”

“Why’s that?” she asked, sounding surprised.

“These wounds…” I struggled with what to say next. We were quickly approaching where I couldn’t articulate myself and she wouldn’t be able to help anymore. “I don’t know how to talk about them. Or how to put into words the pieces of what I’m feeling inside. I hurt though, and I hurt deep. I even still hurt from Tika.”

“I’m sorry that didn’t work out.”

“She seems happy; that’s all I should want for her.”

“But you don’t?”

“Of course not. I’m jealous. I’m jealous of her and I’m jealous of her husband. They got what they wanted, and they’ve moved on. But I’m still reeling from stuff in my past I can’t even put my finger on, and I’ve built walls to protect myself from that pain, and others. My relationships require me to love and I don’t know how. I pick up my heart and try and carry it over to them, and then get stuck in the labyrinth, as if whenever I pick up my heart from its pedestal, all the exits seal themselves off and I’m just trapped, holding this wounded animal. On

the outside I look like I'm fine, friendly and happy. But I'm trapped inside this box and I'm cold and alone and lost. Solitude is my best friend.”

Emily read to me 1 Nephi 11:16-17, where the Angel of the Lord speaks to the prophet Nephi. “And he said unto me: Knowest thou the condescension of God? And I said unto him: I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things.”

And we'd arrived. The point where she didn't know how to help me anymore, and I didn't know either. At least we'd tried. We said our goodbyes and went our separate ways, each more confused than when we'd begun the conversation.

CHAPTER 6 – BREAKDOWN

I mull everything over for about a week before the problems gnawing at the back of my mind keep me from focusing anywhere else. Tika, Vicki, Elena, Sally, Melissa, Emily.

I have to find a way to deal with everything that's tearing me up inside. All signs indicate the problem lies within me. So what's broken? Honesty? I need that. First, foremost, completely. *If I'm not honest with myself, how can I be honest with someone else?* Time to be done with walls, and protections, and hiding. This is the only way to succeed at dating, and then, get married. It has to be.

Honesty. I have to sift through the past. Get out the box I buried. My inability to date. To kiss girls. This all pointed... I must be... no. I'm not. Not that. But it's the only thing that makes sense.

I race back in my mind and start connecting the dots.

I was seventeen, working at *Subway*, and was in theater. I had few friends, and the ones I did meant everything to me. Shannon was a mousey, but quietly strong girl who had seen her fair share of difficulty, even at our young age. Her parents divorced, and there were accusations of abuse in the family. Shannon ended up with her dad, but the threat of having to move away at a moment's notice and leave behind everything she had in Ohio loomed large much of the time we spent together in high school. But she was honest with me and I was honest with her. One night when I was home by myself, we were talking on the phone and I said the words aloud for the first time in my life.

My journal from back then records: *Wednesday August 16, 2000 – I don't know, but I think I might be gay. But I don't want to be. I don't know why but I get turned on by guy's dicks. I have perused ads for good guys to get me off. That's sick! Obviously, I have a problem. And identifying that there is a problem is the first step. So now I need to figure out if it's a serious problem. I hope not. When I asked Kim, she assured me it was natural for men to compare and see how "stud-lier" they are. So I told myself it was just that. But now I realize how evil and*

corrupt I am. I am a horrible sinner. I have drifted so far away from God I don't even care about praying anymore.

Kim was one of the few other Mormons in my town around my age. We went to high school together and I trusted her more than anyone. Her parents were like family to me also. But was I using her to lie to myself? I told Shannon what I thought and she was very understanding and said she had some gay friends and I could meet one. So in secret, we set everything up. One day after I got off work, but before my mom would expect me home, I went across the road to Panera Bread and met Shannon and Seth for coffee (I had hot chocolate). He was in his mid-twenties, wore cut-off shorts and a tank top. He was really nice, but I'd never felt more nervous in my life.

The way he looked at me made me want to melt into my chair, but I was trying to play it cool.

“So you're gay?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“I thought...” He looked at Shannon.

I must have turned bright red and raised a hand to get his attention back. “Sorry... it's not that. Lemme start again. I *think* I might be gay.”

He nodded, unsure about the distinction. “Well, coming out can be hard, but it gets better with time. Why now?”

“Sorry?”

“Why are you coming out now?”

“I... I'm not coming out.” I gave an awkward smile. “I just wanted to know what being gay was like, so I could know if I am or not.”

He must have asked me thirty or forty questions. I felt like I was being interrogated for committing a crime.

“What are you afraid of?”

That, by far, was the easiest of his many questions to answer: “Utter rejection. If I was to turn gay, my parents would probably disown me. I would be excommunicated from the Church. Hundreds of people's opinion of me would change.” I ran a hand through my hair and glanced about the café to see if anyone else was paying attention to us. “How many people would stand

by me, no matter my sexual preference and how many would turn their backs? How many *real* friends do I even have?"

"I'd stand by you." Shannon said it without hesitation.

Seth smiled. "Coming out can be really scary, but you can make it. And as I said before, things do get better."

I shook my head again, panic welling up inside of me. "I don't want this! What is this like the Ultimate test? Why is this happening to me?"

Seth tried to reassure me. "Coming out wasn't easy. My parents took it pretty hard. But they came around eventually. And, now," He motioned to Shannon; they were both devout Christians. "I go to church. I have a boyfriend. Things will be okay."

I felt like the meeting had been a mistake. The more Seth talked about how it was possible to be gay, the more I thought about everything, and everyone, I would lose. The biggest thing I took away from that brief, uncomfortable meeting was that I could not, under any circumstances, be gay. Mormons are not this way. I took that idea and those words and I threw them with all my force into a mental box, and I buried it. Deep, deep down inside of me.

I planned to just let life pass until I was 22 or 23 and then find a way to live out my fantasies, but no! I won't do it. I won't be this way. All those ~~fantasies~~ dementions [sic] are Evil and perverse, and I WILL put them out of my mind. No more! I will repent and I will Not be Gay! The Bible was Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve. It's wrong! So basically, I've been hypocritical for a very long time. I vow right now to stop these behaviors at all costs. I will no longer look at men. I will be straight. God, I give myself to you that through you I may be cleansed of these evil thoughts.

Seth's final comment to me was, "At least you haven't had the chance to *act* on your feelings." I agreed. And resolved to overcome my urges. I entrenched myself in scriptures and spirituality and still continued looking, and masturbating, in the darkness of sin and secrets.

And then I got myself to a place where I could go on a mission and everything would be better. But no, because it came up even there.

I was serving in Hollister, California, training a new missionary: Elder Manus. He'd been out just over one month. The date was December 10th 2004, and after a full day of proselyting one of our recent converts, Juan, called me on the phone.

Juan was slightly older than us at twenty-three, had been a member about two years, and was extremely kind-hearted. Since finding the Church, his life had changed immensely, but he still had a past riddled with regrets. He'd struggled from the beginning to find a place where he could be accepted. Part of why this was so unsettling for me – I stared at myself when I looked at him. More than even I was prepared to accept.

Juan said he was calling because he wanted to say thanks. “Elder, te quiero doy gracias por todo lo que has hecho para mi.”

On the couch in my apartment, I blushed; but thankfully, Elder Manus was in the next room. Juan's comment should have taken me aback, but actually didn't seem too out of the ordinary. He was a kind and gentle soul, and a great recent convert to the Church.

“Pa' nada,” I replied. No big deal. Don't worry about it.

“When I met you, I learned so much about myself. You've helped me be more confident. About who I am. When I was younger, my brother dealt me a cruel blow. He called me gay. Do you think that's true?”

“Of course not.” No hesitation.

“Thanks. I've really enjoyed spending time with you since you got to Hollister.”

I smiled. “Yeah, it's been really great. I'm glad you found the gospel, Juan.”

“It's been so hard. I used to be so depressed. My life before the Church was really hard.”

“I hear you.”

“If you leave, you'll still write me, right Elder?”

I pressed the cordless tighter against my ear, as if that would help me hear Juan better. “Of course. Why would you think otherwise?” I replied, hoping my sincerity carried across the phone line.

“No, but really? Because all the Elders say that and then they forget about you. They come and they make friends and things seem to go well, and then they just leave. And you never hear from them again.”

“Te prometo.” I promise. I'm not like the other missionaries.” Silence as he considered my response.

“Elder, I want to tell you something...” He hesitated like what he was going to say next was difficult for him, like he had to work himself up to it. “Elder, I'm been thinking about this for a while now... I... I just want you to know...” He inhaled; I was hanging on his every word.

“I’m in love with you.”

His words hit me like a brick wall. An intangible weight pressed against my windpipe, crushing me into the couch. I gripped the phone tighter, sweat beading on my palms.

“What?” I gave Juan an out. A chance to back up, rephrase, take back what he’d just said. But he was all in.

“I can’t avoid it anymore Elder, I’ve tried. I’m in love with you.”

My ears were burning. My world ground to a halt. I had to find a way to reply. He wasn’t turning back now. Just as I stomached what he’d already laid out, he went further. “Do you feel the same way?”

Carnality raged awake inside me. Juan came from a dark world of sin and pain. Now he took it further, unable to resist. He saw my willingness to be his friend, to serve him; my acceptance, and my compassion. Then Satan jumped in and twisted his perception of my offering until it came out wrong. He was being tempted, and now I couldn’t claim full innocence either.

“Juan...” I began.

“I know, I’m sorry,” he said.

“It’s not that.” I was scared to say what needed to be said next; to be that honest and vulnerable. But it needed to be said. I took a deep breath, and then just plunged on. “Maybe I do, Juan. Maybe I do feel the same way. And I can be your friend. I can even be your best friend if that’s what you want, but that’s where it has to end. I cannot go any further.” My personal desires bumped up against my commitment to God and my mission. Everything felt like it was teetering on a knife edge. Either way I fell, I still got cut. “My Church – your Church – won’t allow that.” He didn’t say anything, but I could tell he didn’t know what to do. “I’m here for you Juan. I want to help you through this temptation, but there will not be any ‘boyfriend’ coming out of this. I cannot – I will not – return to what I’ve already been associated with.”

“I’m scared Elder.” His voice was quiet now. I don’t think he’d gotten the reaction he’d expected. I wanted to reach out and give him a hug, but there was nothing I could do over the phone.

“That road only leads away from the gospel,” I insisted.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No, thanks for being honest.”

“I need to go now.”

“Juan, w-” He’d already hung up. I felt crestfallen, scared and ashamed at the same time for the things I was feeling. Why was this happening? Why now? I was a missionary. I was serving God. He was the only thing that was supposed to matter, not me. Everything felt surreal as I dialed Elder Richards, my District Leader.

“Hello?”

“Elder Richards?”

“Yes, who is this?”

“Elder Handley.” My companion had figured out something was wrong and had come in to the living room. He sat down at the desk across from the couch and stretched out his legs, looking at me.

“Is everything okay, Elder?” Elder Richards asked and I focused back on the phone in my hand.

“Actually, no.” I almost broke down right there, but I was too embarrassed with Elder Manus there watching me. My stomach was in knots. *Honesty*. I took a deep breath and came out with it. “One of our recent converts just called me and told me he’s in love with me. I’m scared out of my mind.”

“I... I don’t really know what to say Elder.”

“I just want some advice.” I glanced at Elder Manus, but his face remained impassive.

“This is out of my depth,” Elder Richards replied. “My best advice is to call President.” I figured that would be his answer. I hated calling the Mission President because I knew how many other things he’d surely be dealing with. “But it may be best for you to emergency transfer out of the area.”

I swallowed hard, hoping it wasn’t as serious as that. Emergency transfers only happened when an Elder could no longer work in an area safely with his assigned companion. The mission did everything it could to avoid them. The call dissolved into pleasantries and I made eye contact with Elder Manus as I hung up the phone. I let out a ragged breath. My mind raced, and I tried to keep panic at bay. But there was so much work we had planned, so many families we were teaching and finally building relationships of trust with. Why now? Elder Manus turned to pick up the Area Book, our list of investigator teaching records from the desk, and started flipping through it at random. He wasn’t getting involved. I pulled off my badge to look at the numbers I’d taped on the back. I looked at my companion, then back at my badge, and dialed President.

Sister answered. “Hello?”

“Hi, Sister Robinson. Is President available? It’s kind of urgent.”

“Just a moment, Elder, let me get him.”

“Thank you.” The seconds ticked like a time bomb before President’s voice came on the line.

“What’s the matter, son?”

“One of the converts in our area called and told me he’s in love with me. I don’t know what to do. He’s meant to be presented for the Melchizedek Priesthood next week. He seems pretty upset. He asked me if I was in love with him back and I told him the truth – I was. But that I was committed to the Gospel and that there wouldn’t be anything coming out of his attraction to me.”

“Elder, you are not to talk to him again.”

“But President-”

“That’s final, Elder. No more contact.”

“I understand.” I was devastated. I knew Juan would be as well.

“Anything else, Elder?”

“Elder Richards thinks I should be transferred out.”

“What do you think?” he asked.

“I dunno, that seems a little extreme. But I don’t really trust myself.”

“Then trust in your companion. Pray, repent.”

“I will, President. Thank you.”

“I’m going to phone the Stake President and tell him what’s happening.” My voice caught in my throat. I wasn’t supposed to question the President. He was set apart to have foresight and intuition to know what was best. I had to remind myself of that fact as I quietly thanked him again and hung up. President was a no-nonsense kind of guy. And he was overseeing some two hundred missionaries so when he was presented with a challenge or difficulty, he dealt with it swiftly and firmly.

The phone was heavy in my hand and I immediately wanted to call Juan back. Tell him what was coming. The Stake President knowing would only make things worse. I felt like a victim. Juan trusted me. That was a secret, and was meant to be kept. Now? I felt only fear for the end result, one image repeating itself over and over in my head: Juan’s destruction. He was

struggling. He was being tempted. He was trying to unshackle himself from his past, and I was sure he was just confused. That was all it was, right? I questioned myself even. I thought of the hurt I would feel if Juan fell off the path of righteousness, but how much more it would hurt him.

My companion still didn't have much to say beyond a few conciliatory words meant to buoy me up. I wanted to throw the phone at him. How could he possibly understand? Our nightly routine was completely off-kilter at this point. I phoned Elder Richards back briefly to tell him I needed more time and that I didn't want an emergency transfer. Then my companion and I had nightly prayer and tried to sleep, even though I knew it would be impossible.

After about an hour, I got him up again and said I needed to go for a run or something. My mind was going crazy and my heart wasn't far behind. I called Elder Richards to get permission, then we went out. The night was cool, and the streets were wet from rain. Most everything was shut down, except the biker bar on the main street, which was always busy, day or night. There was a constant stream of people in and out, ten or twenty bikes parked outside at any time. People stood leaned up against the wooden sides of the bar, decked out in full leather motorcycle gear. Or they gathered in small groups, smoking, chatting about where they were going or had been, and laughing at some joke about the weather or the town. We avoided the bar by running the backstreets where there were houses. I remember the thud of our sneakers on the pavement, one of the only sounds breaking the stillness of the night. I talked things over with my companion in between breaths, telling him about high school and my suspicions about myself. He did his best to understand, but hadn't ever really had to confront anything like that in his life. Even though he tried to be supportive, he really found the whole thing baffling.

When we were back from our run, he went back to bed. I sat at the desk in the front room and wrote in my journal, hoping pen and paper would help me make sense of everything. My eyes kept going to the cordless phone in its cradle, half-wishing it would ring. It was past one o'clock in the morning, so I knew it wouldn't. I still wanted it to though. Ultimately, I still didn't know what to do.

I tossed and turned in bed, trying not to wake my companion. No reason both of us should suffer. After a few restless hours, we were faced with another day of missionary work. The hours weighed on me, but nowhere near as much as the pain and confusion I felt inside. Both for Juan and myself. Carnality. Emotion. Righteousness. What was right in the end? Why did I feel the same way about Juan? Why was Satan so, so smart? This was the last place I

thought my past would come back to haunt me, and yet, there it was, full in my face screaming at me. We taught some discussions but I was almost completely on auto-pilot withdrawn within myself and my raging emotions. Sanchez was struggling and we talked him through his trial so that he could find some peace. We visited the Acosta family and had a frustrating discussion with Maria. They were doing so well before, and then suddenly stopped progressing and dug in their heels, wielding their Catholicism as a shield. Maria loved her Virgin Mary and just did not want to give her up. The family was Catholic, and they were happy; they didn't need another religion. How could we get through to them? Even the Ten Commandments didn't sway her, despite the one against the worship of idols. Elder Manus and I weren't convinced that they hadn't been fed anti-Mormon doctrine by someone.

After our discussion with Maria, I couldn't teach anymore. I was giving everything to these people and this work, and all I was getting in return was anger and frustration. Words from my journal played in my head like a broken record: *I am shredded. I am barren. I am destroyed.* Over and over and over. When we got back in the car, I started crying, unable to help myself. My poor companion, he had done everything he could to be a rock for me, and here I was crying without any rational explanation as to why, except that I had nothing left to give. He probably thought I was mentally unstable. In some ways I was. I'd put on a façade all day and pretended everything was fine, and all I wanted to do was lie on the floor of my apartment and cry until I had cried my very soul onto the carpet and I was empty, devoid of feeling and emotion.

My companion suggested we go see Elder Richards. I agreed, but the discussion didn't help anything. I was still too caught up in the absolute destruction of Juan. The Stake President calling him and telling him he couldn't be presented for the Melchezidek Priesthood anymore because he was homosexual. How completely that would shake the foundation of Juan's faith. Missionaries didn't usually cover the Church's beliefs on homosexuality with investigators, just the gospel basics, so in all likelihood this would be new and frightening and difficult for Juan to process. But he'd also be deeply hurt that his secret was out. He'd only told one person. Me. And if he called to ask why or how or what happened, I wouldn't even be able to say I was sorry because I wasn't allowed to speak to him. Everything sucked. I took off my name badge and told Elder Richards I was going to drive the twelve miles out to Paiscenes to have dinner. Screw teaching.

Elder Manus and I started off even though it was pouring rain. My companion wanted to protest, but he knew the fragile state I was in, so he stayed quiet. As we drove, I played over everything again for the hundredth time that day. I got a few miles out of the city on the 25, and then I found something inside me I didn't know was there. I am strong when I am weak. I can't really explain it. I was finished. At my soul's end. Beaten, tattered, and torn. Everything was wrong. And falling apart. And I was powerless to stop it.

But I stopped the car. I pulled over. I was crying again. Raw tears that pushed out from my gut. Heaving sobs. Elder Manus could see something was wrong, but didn't know what to do or say. I was breaking. The headlights were the only light in the darkness. The sound of the windshield wipers tried to drown out my sobbing.

CHAPTER 7 – PRECIPICE

Reliving these experiences, connecting the dots... it's too much for me. *Vicki was right.* I'm starting to lose it. *No. This can't be, this can't be. I'm not, I'm not, I'm not.* I need to talk to Emily. Now.

My phone is out, already dialing as I rush out of my apartment and run down the street. She's not answering. Panic is setting in. The night air is crisp, and I wonder if she's asleep. I get to her apartment and take the stairs three at a time. I am bursting. I pound on the door. No one answers. Looking in the window, I can see a light on in the back hall to their bedrooms, but no one is coming to the door. I've tried calling six times and she hasn't picked up.

"Why aren't you there?! I need you!" I cry out. In the frenzy of the moment, I only know that I need someone to help me.

I turn on her landing and stare out at the parking lot. I'm starting to cry. I'm breaking. I throw my phone as hard as I can, not knowing what else to do. I climb up on the railing and look down. Three stories up.

Not high enough.

I turn round and hoist myself up onto her roof. It's loose gravel up here and I can see so much of the city. Lights twinkling, the power station's twin stacks stabbing high into the air to the south. I can't go any higher or I would. I walk myself to the right until I reach the edge. I force myself to look down again. The gray squares of the sidewalk stare back, between strips of well-kept green grass.

My mind is brutal in its assessment of me, and now my honesty threatens to push me off. *Stop running. Face the secrets. Face the box you buried. You're a homosexual. You know it. You've known it for years. You can't hide anymore.* I will myself to jump. To have the balls to just end it. To be man enough. How many times have I heard parents say they'd rather have a dead son than a missionary coming home in disgrace? I served faithfully and came home with honor, but look at me now. With these secrets. This darkness I carry around like a mountain. Aren't I just as bad? Worse?

I can't. I turn around and collapse to my knees, ignoring the gravel digging into them. I cry. Everything is shit.

I'm broken and I don't know how to fix it. I'm a depravity, a shame to everyone and everything. I've failed completely.

Facing honesty is too much. Something's wrong with me and, now that I'm trying to look at it, I just want to die. Anything is better than trying to live with the fact that everything I know and love is lost. My family will disown me. My friends will mock me, laugh at me, and then block me from their lives because they aren't really my friends. How do I possibly hold onto a religion that doesn't want anything to do with me? *I'm devilspawn, evil incarnate*. From the time we turned twelve, they began teaching us about the sacredness of sexual intimacy. Sex outside the bonds of holy matrimony was sin. Masturbation was sin. The only sins more grievous than homosexuality were denying the Holy Ghost after receiving a confirmation of the truth, and murder.

Wiping the tears that just won't stop coming now that they've been unleashed, I turn back to look over the edge again. *I'm a perversion. A disgrace*. These words make my face turn red and my breath come in ragged, choking gasps. I swing my body round so I can dangle my legs off the edge. *Throw yourself off. Just a little push. You're already halfway over. Just push and then close your eyes*.

I fall backwards. My head hits the roof and gravel stabs at my shoulder blades. Tears continue unchecked down the sides of my face. I search the black night sky pocked with gray clouds. *God, I need you*. I clutch my stomach, wanting to rip my clothes and skin and pry out the knots of pain inside. My thoughts continue spiraling. The fight goes out of me. I sit up. I look down again.

There's a lamppost down there. It's this side of the walk so maybe I'd land it, but it's not sharp enough to impale me. I'd just hit it and bounce off. Pain. Familiar friend.

But there's something about that lamppost. I wipe my eyes and try to calm my ragged breathing and focus. The light is off, and the panes closest to me are broken. Something about this thing suddenly draws my attention. Is this God's way of saving me? Maybe it is, because words strike into my brain like a lightning bolt and I want to write them down. I fumble for my phone, only to remember it's down in the parking lot somewhere, likely in pieces. I fish in my pockets and come up with a mechanical pencil and my checkbook. The only two things I have. I

start scribbling on the back of a checking deposit slip. As I do so, I move myself away from the edge.

i
 ~
 at wit's end
 poised to jump
i looked down
 to better know my last
 and paused
i saw there
 a lamppost
 tall and slender white
it stood watch as always
 a sentinel among the grass
 yet no light shone
 within its murky depths
 the bulb was dark
 its face grown cold
 as winter flitted by
 two panes were broken missing
 the face so sorely incomplete
 exposing the inner workings
 like my soul on occasion
 when struggles come to light
 the paint was chipped
it looked battered beaten worn
 like **i** feel sometimes
 after night closes in
 cold ravaged useless
i want to be no more
 yet there **i** stand resolute
 an unwavering guardian of good
i will not be moved
 take my light
 break my faces
 chip off my paint in pieces
i weather through it all
i am just a lamppost in the grass
 but **i** am strong

Seconds slide away and then it's just there. In pencil. Smudged a bit from my left hand. Strange how the poem comes to me, but it saves my life. I know that much. Everything is falling

apart, I'm despondent, and then a lamppost and a poem. I'm still not completely okay. But tonight I won't jump. I may have worked myself up enough to get there, but this happened instead. I don't know why. I hate not having answers, but I'm okay to take it one step at a time. I don't know how to go back, to set things right, and I don't exactly see a way forward, but at least the pain isn't more than I can bear. I read the poem again, trying to bottle my emotions back up inside me. Get some of those walls back up that keep people from seeing how much pain I'm actually in.

In a week where everything is wrong, where the people I need weren't there and I've admitted the terrible, terrible truth to myself – I am a monster – I will find the strength somewhere tomorrow to Bless and Thank God for my trials, especially the ones that are breaking me. I want to give up, I want to quit. I wanted to find a way to hurl myself off that edge, but in the end, I climb down and I kneel in the grass by the lamppost and I thank God for destroying me. Again. So that I can start picking up the pieces. Trying again to not be so tired. I'm *so* tired. In the nightmare that has become my reality, that's the only thing that's sure. I stop crying long enough to find my phone. It's not broken. Just scratched. A miracle? I try Emily again. Still no answer.

CHAPTER 8 – ASHER

In the morning I try and pretend none of the previous night happened, but I have the poem, so clearly it did. I fold up the deposit slip and carry it with me as I put the mask back on and head off to class, trying to continue to pretend that the world is fine and I am happy. I make it about two hours before my thoughts are kicking at me again and the façade cracks so that I have to retreat.

My insides are churning, tearing at themselves again. I need to write. Uninterrupted. I'll probably cry again. I hide myself away in the one place I know I can't be found: the 12th floor stairwell of the Spencer W. Kimball building. The elevators only go to the 10th floor. The 11th is keycard locked, so people rarely go there. And the 12th floor only goes to the roof so no one comes up here, except for tours, which don't run at night, and it's winter, anyway. I set up shop and get out my journal and my pen, then I try and unravel everything knotted up inside me onto the page.

February 6, 2006. 8:17pm. 12th Floor Stairwell – SWKT/Provo, UT

I do not eat. I do not sleep. I cannot focus. I cannot study. I cannot think. I cannot breathe. It tugs at me, screams for satisfaction, to be let out. My hands shake, my mouth goes dry, my head pounds, my heart bleeds. The NEED overwhelms, occupying every thought, every waking moment. I have no option. I do the only thing I can. I WRITE. Welcome to my life. My gift, my curse. My pain, my therapy. My everything, my only escape.

I am staggering, faltering. I can't go on under this burden, this tearing. 4 weeks here. So very much unrecorded. My world moves around me, I cringe and fall back. On Wednesday, I told Ashlynn everything. I was real. I let her see Daniel. The suffering, dark, inner Daniel. The part I ignore as much as possible, the part I hate, the part I want to heal. I went to the Counseling Center after my talk with her. I did an "intake" session with Dr. Stone. Homosexuality, masturbation, everything. He decided to keep me, he

wants to help me. I was supposed to see him again tomorrow. But his wife had a baby over the weekend, so he won't be here now.

I've been reading a book for class. It's one of the best books I've ever read. It's amazing. And scary. *My Name is Asher Lev* by Chaim Potok. Finally, someone who knows how I feel. Asher Lev is an Orthodox Jew. His father is strict and devoutly religious. Asher has a gift. And a curse. He paints, he draws, he feels with his brush and pencil. His father becomes darkly opposed and calls Asher foolish and animal. I suffer much of what Asher suffers. I see myself in him so completely it frightens me. "Jews do not behave this way." Mormons are not homosexuals.

Asher finds painting controls him, enslaves him, he can't control it. I sometimes cannot control myself. Asher's world is swirling pain and agony. Slowly, he ostracizes himself from everyone. They are around but he is in another world. He is alone and cold. Come to me, Asher Lev. I will hold you and we will no longer suffer alone. Asher does not understand why he causes so much pain, why people don't understand him. I live in the same prison cell of confusion. Asher fights to be a Jew, questioning. "Is this against the Torah?" Jacob Kahn helps him be an amazing artist, but at the loss of family and friends. I see, I feel, I understand you. Asher questions Judaism. I question Mormonism.

Where is the burning conviction and surety I felt on the streets of San Jose as people joined the Church left and right? Was it just in the nametag? Me faking it the best I could? Why does this conflict exist? Asher sits in church [sic] and listens to the service and dully wonders if he's in the wrong place? All he thinks about is painting. I sit in sacrament meeting watching the bread and water trays being passed and I squirm in my seat. Is this the place for me? Why am I so dis-interested? Is it because I know it fundamentally opposes all I want to be? Is Vicki, who advocates for me to abandon my faith and be self-serving, my Jacob Kahn? 'I want the world to be pretty with birds and flowers. The world is not a pretty place, Mama.'

I am in direct conflict with myself and don't know what to choose. I look at Alex, in the Church, I look at Carter, who isn't, and I want to crucify myself like Asher's mother between them. There are some lines that should never be crossed. Asher crosses them all. I, too, have crossed them all in my head many times. What would happen? Who would I hurt? How would the world change? The power I have SCARES me. I can be

anything I want. I can be a homosexual transvestite in New York City if I want. I can fight to be an actor if I want. I can write books if I want. So why can't I be a righteous God-fearing individual? Where is my missing piece? Asher gave in to being an Artist. Should I give in to what I want?

My world crumbles before me. My eyes weep, but I don't remember how to cry. I'm so torn up inside. I know the consequences of my actions and so I do nothing. Nothing but fester and watch the war slowly rage inside. My burden is my own. Who am I? What defines me? What should I hold on to? My past mocks me, my future scares me, my present pervades me. I need to heal, I need to find direction, I need to know me. There is power. Power to create and destroy. Power to bring pleasure and pain. Power to amuse and horrify. There is in my hand the power of demons and of divinity. Two aspects, one force. Creation, creativity, art; all demonic and divine. I AM DEMONIC AND DIVINE. But who wins? Which is for me? I feel you Asher Lev. I know your pain, I know your hurt, I know your loneliness.

Writing is my only escape. I seem to be good at writing. But how should I use that? How far should I go? Where do I draw the line? I can write about anything I want. I could write a parallel book to Asher Lev about the Mormon boy, the homosexual. The hell he lives in of expectation and heritage; the barrage of feelings, thoughts and desires. The sickness you feel at seeing someone and having in your head "he's cute" and then wanting to vomit because you can't control it but you've been taught for so long it's wrong and everyone would think you're sick if they knew. IT SUCKS. THIS SUCKS. I feel you, Asher Lev. They say that Christ suffered everything. They say he's lived all so he can relate... Did Christ want to jack off all the time? Did Christ see men and want to rip their pants off and fondle them, and madly kiss them? That's definitely not a Christ I ever envisioned. The world is not a pretty place.

I know only I can make myself a Mormon. My parents taught me, I'm surrounded by it, I epitomized it for two years, and yet often I hate it. It's stifling and I feel like scum. Am I? I don't fit, I don't see, I don't feel. The light that so often points to salvation fades, flickers, and dies. I live in my self-made darkness. Did I blow out the candle? Why can't I for this damned life of mine relight that fire? Why can't I find my way? Asher, did we choose this forsaken path? Or did it somehow choose us?

This is why I hide. Why I don't let people in. Why I suffer alone. This is why I beat and abuse myself. This is why I hate and despise myself. Think of the horror. Think of the disgust. If people knew, I would suffer more than I already do. Dammit, this is killing me, consuming me, destroying me slowly. Sinner or Scriptures? Penises or Priesthood? Homosexual or Heaven-striving? Self or God-serving? Can I ever figure this out? Am I sick and twisted? Must I always be alone? Why can't I just like girls? Why can't I have a family and be happy? Why can't I break addiction? Why can't I be happy? Why does the suffering, the conflict have to be a constant? Why does this press down on me? Why is the pen the only way I can calm my raging thoughts? My gift, my curse. My world, my pain. I HATE YOU ASHER LEV. I feel you Asher Lev. I love you Asher Lev. *Is everybody going crazy? Is anybody going to save me?* My mind is numb. My hands are cold. My throat is dry. My heart...keeps bleeding. Some wounds never heal?

CHAPTER 9 – PEEKAY

Constantly grappling with my thoughts and feelings about homosexuality left me exhausted. Days after writing “the entry,” I still wasn’t eating or sleeping properly, let alone studying. I made an attempt at being normal again by having a movie night with Ruby, a girl I’d met through Ashlynn. We’d started studying together at the BYU Library and getting to know each other a bit more and I was beginning to toy with the idea of asking her out. She was an English Literature postgraduate, so she was a few years older than me, but only came up to about my elbow. She had meticulously kept brown hair that came to her chin, always precisely parted down the middle. The grey and green backpack that she lugged everywhere with her was almost as big as she was and always threatened to topple her over.

The movie I chose was *The Power of One*, starring Stephen Dorff, Armin Mueller-Stahl, and Morgan Freeman; one of the only movies I owned, or would re-watch. I popped it into my SEGA CD and navigated the controls to get it started, then moved back across the room to the sofa, slipping under the blue fuzzy blanket dotted with penguins Ruby and I were sharing. We sat close to each other, but not too close. This wasn’t a date. Ruby remarked that she was excited and I gave her a smile.

The movie started off fine, but as I watched little Peekay tormented, spit on, pissed on, and beaten by his schoolmates, tears began to trickle down my cheeks unchecked. My own experiences with bullying had been similar, so I knew exactly how Peekay felt. Ruby was too engrossed in the film to notice the tears I didn’t bother to wipe away.

Watching Peekay as he mourned at Maria’s grave, surrounded by people who stood against him, drew something out of me I didn’t know how to draw out of myself. The connection I felt to him was like electricity dancing on my skin. Peekay showed an unwavering defiance, but a broken one. I’d felt that before. A giving of all you have to give, and yet still finding it in you, inexplicably, to give more. To have retched everything you have to retch, and yet still finding it in you to go on. The night Juan asked me if I loved him. Or the night I tried to jump off a building; the night I came out to myself. *Peekay. I know your pain, I know your hurt, I know your loneliness. I am Peekay. I love you Peekay. I hate you Peekay.*

As the sobs washed over me, I didn't try and stop them. I embraced them. Ruby looked at me with alarm in her eyes and put a reassuring hand on my arm. I didn't move. She didn't say anything, but kept glancing back and forth, unsure if she should focus on the movie or me.

"It's okay," I finally managed to whisper with the ghost of a smile. She didn't take her arm away though. Peekay lost everyone and everything he cared about and that seemed to be the same road I was walking.

As the movie ended and the credits rolled, my tears continued. Peekay ultimately found fulfillment by teaching others how to read and write, giving them the hope of a more equal South Africa. "A waterfall begins with a single drop, and look at what it becomes." I longed for the same thing Peekay found. To have that sense of fulfillment. That I was in the right place. That I would make a difference; help change the world. And not only because I'd been a missionary. It was something deeper I couldn't put into words. *I can be anything I want to.*

I took off my glasses to wipe my eyes and Ruby went into my kitchen to find some paper towels. "Here you go," she said when she came back.

"Thanks," I replied, sniffing.

"Was that a good cry or a bad cry?" she asked with genuine concern.

I laughed. "Yeah, I dunno. It just gets to me. I know that suffering. He faced so much opposition, yet always looked to the better tomorrow. He transcended everything and used the power within him to change the world. Every time I watch I want to run to South Africa and combat the racial tensions and inequalities that still exist. I want to fight for love and equality. I want to be the person making a difference, changing the world, changing people. Including them, loving them, and helping them."

"That sounds nice," Ruby agreed, staring out the window past the TV into the night.

"What do you want?" I asked suddenly.

Ruby swatted at something in the air and replied, "Oh, I dunno. To not have to write anymore about stupid Madame Bovary would be nice I think." She laughed a little.

I smiled. She was always going on about how much she hated her dissertation, but found it exhilarating at the same time. "No, but really. What do you want?"

"What do I want to be when I grow up?"

"Yeah, sure," I agreed.

She grew very serious. “I want to be a mom.” But she said it in a way that sounded almost as if she was ashamed of the notion.

“What’s wrong with that?” I asked.

“Nothing. Just so many women now, especially in LDS culture, seem to be pressing more toward getting an education and then jobs. Being a mother has lost some of its shine.”

“You sound like you’ve thought a lot about it,” I mused.

My comment wasn’t meant to do so, but she seemed to shrink within herself a bit as I spoke. As if I’d done something I shouldn’t have. “I...I don’t want to talk about it anymore,” she said in an almost frightened voice.

“Sorry,” I said, not sure what I’d done. I tried to right the conversation. “Sometimes I like to just think about it. All the possibilities. How free we are to just be...whatever. I can be anything I want to.” *I can be a homosexual transvestite in New York City if I want.* The thought bubbled up into my consciousness, dragging with it both excitement and fear, the same things I’d felt when I’d first written it in my journal. I swallowed hard to push it away. “I’m only limited by what I don’t become.” I fiddled with the edge of the blanket, eyeing the different penguins.

“Becoming isn’t always easy,” Ruby said.

“Is it ever?” I laughed and glanced at her. “That’s why we’re here. Our great mortal mission. To journey, and fight, and work at figuring it all out.”

“Mmhmm.” She agreed, becoming a bit more herself again.

Before I realized I was speaking aloud, I said, “I just wish I didn’t suck so much at it. I mean, I have so many weaknesses.” I got up to shut off the TV and the SEGA CD now that the credits had finished. “We’re meant to make progress and grow and feel like we’re getting better. But I’m just getting worse,” I said as I came back to the sofa.

“That’s probably not true.”

“It is though. I mean look at me. If I compare who I was as a missionary in San Jose to who I am now, it’s mind-boggling. Back there, I was awesome. Teaching and preaching and helping families...” I steeled myself for the honesty that came next. “And now most nights I don’t even pray.” My cheeks burned in embarrassment, but I found something comforting in being honest as well.

“Why not?” Ruby was genuinely curious.

“It’s just hard for me. I feel like I spend so much time on my knees begging and pleading, reaching up to the heavens expecting to hear or feel something and there’s always just silence.”

Ruby, like so many others at BYU, seemed to have everything in the Gospel figured out. To her, my weakness in prayer was like a leaky faucet. If interrogated enough, the problem could be found, rooted out, and that would be that.

“Are you listening for answers?” she asked.

“Of course,” I replied.

“With your head or your heart?”

Her question surprised me and it took a second to figure out how to respond.

“I...uh...both, I guess.”

“Well, what’s holding you back then?” Surely in her mind if I was ticking all the boxes: offering sincere prayer, listening for answers with head and heart...then it should be working. I should be getting answers.

Tension flared inside me like my blood cells were fire ants all biting me at the same time. What was holding me back? *I’m a homosexual*. Three words. That easy. We were in a moment of vulnerability, of openness, of sharing, and all I had to do was say three words. And they felt like the last three words I could ever say to her. The door was open and all I had to do was walk through. I’d already been honest about my struggle with prayer, why not this too? I was afraid she’d reject me. Or that I’d lose her completely. Worse, she might turn me in to the Honor Code Office. I shrank back in my mind. The risk was too much.

Blood pounded in my temples so loud I was sure Ruby could hear it. Ruby blinked, looking at me expectantly as she waited for an answer. In the hopes of diverting the conversation away from what I couldn’t say, I managed to finally get out, “Faith, I guess.” It wasn’t entirely a lie, but it wasn’t the whole truth either. *Why was it so hard to say three words?*

“What about it?” she asked, accepting the misdirection. The tension that had crawled up my body to form a noose around my neck loosened a bit so I could still breathe.

“All of it.”

“But faith is just believing in something you don’t know. That’s not that hard.”

“The believing part is. You don’t ever have doubts?” I repositioned myself on the couch so I wasn’t looking at her directly anymore, but out at the living room.

“Doubts about what?” she gently prodded.

“About everything. The Book of Mormon. Joseph Smith. The Church.”

“No silly, I have a testimony.” She said it with a half-smile, meant as a joking jab, a simple nudge with the elbow, but her words flew at me like an angry hornet, full of accusation.

Ruby had already checked all the boxes, so to her the solution was simple. I threw up my hands in defeat and rolled my eyes. “Yup. Me too. Problems solved. Glad we had this chat.”

“Don’t be a jerk,” she said, frowning and crossing her arms.

I sighed and turned back to face her. “Sorry. It’s just...”

“Just what?” Curiosity got the better of her, but she didn’t uncross her arms.

Ruby’s question was another chance to be honest. *You can trust her.* Hope fluttered in my chest. I wanted to be understood. The idea of having even one person who truly knew me was so enticing. Three words. I couldn’t. I shook my head. “It’s just... I don’t even know about my testimony anymore. It was easy to be sure of it when I was a missionary and I was committed and converted.” I thought of Elder Adams and our promise to not go back to lesser things. “It’s not supposed to be this hard, you know?”

“No...”

Of course she didn’t, because I hadn’t even told her the truth. I continued, “It’s supposed to be simple. You pray, you read scriptures, you go to church, you get married, you have kids, you keep the faith, you endure to the end, and bam; you get to Heaven. Done and dusted.”

“Are you crazy?” She laughed a little like I was a naïve child. “It’s always supposed to be hard.”

“Yeah okay,” I agreed, “but not *this* hard. Not ‘break you’ hard.”

“God won’t tempt you above what you’re able-”

I cut her off, even though I knew she meant well. “-1 Corinthians 10:13. Thanks, I know my scriptures.”

“It can be hard, but it won’t be impossible.”

“Sure feels like it sometimes though,” I said, scoffing slightly. Inspiration struck me then and I threw back the blanket to feel for the poem I’d been carrying around in my pocket. “I want to read you something. It’s about a lamppost.” I checked to make sure she was ready as I started reading. She listened intently, holding perfectly still while I read.

“That was nice,” she said when I’d finished. Then she sort of cocked her head to one side and asked, “What’s it about?” The noose tightened again and I chickened out.

“Challenges...difficulties I have,” I said, hedging again. “Like praying. Feeling I’m not being heard most of the time. I don’t like feeling alone.”

“It breaks my heart to hear you say that.”

I shrugged. “As I said, I just wanna be great. I wanna do more. Fix problems, stem suffering.” I motioned at the dark television, but was also inwardly motioning to my own breaking heart. Trying to be honest sucked.

Ruby’s watch beeped. I looked for the clock on the wall, but it wasn’t there and I remembered the batteries died two days ago, so it was in the kitchen awaiting new ones.

“Curfew?” I asked, frowning. She nodded and I clapped my hands together. *So much for honesty.* “Dang. We were having such good convo.”

“I know,” she replied.

I walked her to the door, and leaned against its thin edge to watch her count my three steps down to the street. Ruby was OCD and counting steps was one of her manifestations. When she reached the sidewalk, she turned back to wave. “Goodnight, meu filho.”

CHAPTER 10 – THERAPIST

Dr. Stone sat across from me scratching notes into a yellow steno pad. His face had an unshaven look. His new baby must've been more of a handful than he'd been anticipating. We chatted briefly about that and how my homework was going; not too well.

Dr. Stone's office was slightly larger than a broom-closet. As a PhD student training for certification, he didn't have a proper office yet, and he wasn't *actually* a doctor, but it seemed the best thing to call him. My left leg bounced up and down incessantly, catching Dr. Stone's eye, but this was a sign of my ADHD, not nervousness.

"This is going to be hard," I said, still trying to work myself up to the level of honesty reading "the entry" out loud required. My hands gripped my journal so tightly I thought I might leave permanent indentations.

"Take your time, Daniel. When you're ready," he replied. Despite the smallness of the room, the two fake plants, and the cracks in the plastic chair mat beneath his feet, something about the space in Dr. Stone's office enabled me to be honest in a way that I couldn't manage with Ruby. Maybe it was the fact that Dr. Stone already knew about my struggles and weaknesses from our intake session. Or that Dr. Stone was bound by the Counseling Center's confidentiality policies. Whichever reason, I knew that I could safely read my journal. I just had to open the book and start.

I can do this. I can do this. I can do this. I took a calming breath and began, my voice shaky, but growing stronger with every word. "I do not eat. I do not sleep. I cannot focus. I cannot study. I cannot think. I cannot breathe. It tugs at me, screams for satisfaction, to be let out." As I read aloud the words I wrote about Christ, my cheeks flushed. Writing the words had seemed bad enough, but reading them out – giving them voice – felt like defiling Him in some way.

When I finished, I let out a huge sigh. "Thanks for your bravery in sharing that, Daniel. You're very expressive."

I half-smiled and swallowed the lump rising in my throat. "Journaling is the only place I know how."

Dr. Stone didn't even say anything about the Christ part. He tucked his pen into his shirt pocket and leaned forward, propping one elbow on his knee. He looked at me and I felt as if he was really looking at me, Daniel the Homosexual. "The biggest problem I see here is your self-loathing."

"Really?" I recoiled a bit in genuine surprise. Hating myself was worse than all those terrible things I'd written?

"Yeah. Why do you do it?" He pulled his pen back out.

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat and looked at the cracks in the mat as I responded. "Everyone else does it, so why shouldn't I?"

"What do you mean everyone else?" He was digging. I didn't mean to be resistant, but it wasn't easy to simply splay myself out like I was on an operating table.

"I dunno." I shrugged, and looked back up. "Most Mormons I know do it. They get down on themselves about not being good enough, not trying hard enough, not doing enough."

"Striving--"

"I hate that word."

"--Striving to improve, though, is that what you see driving that?" he asked.

"Yeah. But like it's twisted and you just hate yourself for not being perfect."

He wrote some notes before continuing. "Your thinking is very black and white, Daniel."

"You say that like it's a bad thing," I gave a quick laugh.

He smiled. "I wouldn't call it bad, I'd just say that kind of thinking can be limiting."

My eyebrows furrowed. "How? I mean, we're talking about gospel Truth here, capital T. There is right and there is wrong. Homosexuality is a sin, being straight is not. Simple, black and white. There's no middle ground here. Am I wrong in that thinking?"

"Actually, let's talk a bit about your thinking," he said. "Your thoughts are pretty powerful things." I nodded. "You can't escape them and you can't hide from them. You said some of them even make you sick, like when you see a guy on campus."

"Right." I wondered where he was going with this.

"Why do you believe that thinking a guy is 'cute' is sinful?" He did the air quotes for effect.

I struggled to find an answer. I'd always been taught homosexuality was wrong, so thinking homosexual things was wrong also. How could it be any more complicated than that?

“It’s a thought, Daniel, that’s all.” He must’ve made the jump that thoughts lead to actions because he gave me a questioning look. “You’re not acting on them, right?”

“Of course not!” I replied, my pulse quickening. *How dare he even suggest something like that.* His comment brought Asher Lev to mind. Asher didn’t act on wanting to be a painter at first, either. But he got to a place where he felt forced to make a decision and he chose painting.

Dr. Stone tried another example to help me see what he was getting at. “Let’s say I’m a drinker. Every Friday I really want to have a drink and I think about how good one would taste. Is that a sin?”

Silence.

“I...guess not?” I wasn’t sure. Even if thoughts didn’t technically qualify as sin, they still felt like it; evil, sick, and wrong.

“If you’re not sinning, there’s really no need to get down on yourself so much.”

“That’s an over-simplification,” I argued.

“I understand that. But I don’t want you expending all this energy trying *not* to think about it either.”

“Why?” I demanded.

He could tell I was starting to get heated, and tried a new angle. “I think it’s a misconception to see homosexuality and heterosexuality as being on one scale, just at opposite ends.” I rubbed my fingers together slowly and ground my teeth a bit, but kept listening. “You have the idea that you’re one or the other. You’re gay or you’re straight, and that’s that. I believe they are two scales. There are high and low homosexual feelings and there are high and low heterosexual feelings.”

I shook my head, exasperated. “I don’t get what you’re saying.”

He set aside his pen and pad. “Your sexuality is evolving. Up until now you’ve been trying to work with one scale, not giving any place to the other. You think your problems with dating women are because you’re in the wrong place on the scale. But why do you look at male porn?”

I bit my lip, trying to keep up. Thoughts weren’t sin, there were scales, and now we were talking about porn. He went on before I could get my thoughts into words. “Why don’t you ever look at women? Do you find women sexually attractive?”

“Uh...” My mind was going a million miles an hour, trying to keep up and now also retracing my relationships. *Was I ever attracted to a woman?* Tika was the main relationship I had to go off, but I hadn't really been sexually attracted to her. I traced all the way back to my first girlfriend, Jennifer, in seventh grade. “I... I don't know.” I sort of felt like he'd just smacked me. Why hadn't I ever analyzed my relationships for feelings of physical attraction before?

Dr. Stone didn't give me time to mull it over. “Often if you don't establish a solid relationship with your father or you feel distance from males in general...”

I put my right hand up to stop him going any further and rubbed my temples with my left. “Wait, wait,” I pleaded. “Distance from males in general...that one makes sense. I've always had a hard time getting along with guys. Most of the time I don't understand them or like them. They just seem detached from their emotions and only want to talk about sports or cars and so, yeah, I have trouble relating to them. I do relate well with girls on the other hand. They're easier to talk to about feelings and intimate things.” Some of what he said made sense. “I don't know about my father, though. I mean, he's not social or anything; he just works. He's not absent per se, but yeah, you could say I don't feel like I really know him.”

“With your female relationships, you're probably getting all your needs met, so you have no need for sexual compensation. But with that distance – that lack – in your male relationships, you could be sexually overcompensating to create attraction and arousal.”

My brain felt like it was doing somersaults. My lack of close male relationships was somehow leaving me unfulfilled so I was sexually overcompensating through attraction. Everything Dr. Stone was suggesting was new to me. It felt both radical and yet struck an undeniable chord within me.

“Right now that's manifesting itself when you have the thoughts we were talking about earlier. You're thinking these thoughts, or trying not to, and then it builds and builds until it culminates with you breaking down, looking at porn and masturbating, but then at least the thoughts are gone.”

Everything seemed to add up. “So how do I fix it?” I asked.

“Right now, for you, everything sexual is bad.” He was restating the obvious. Homosexuality was a sin. “You've put yourself in a position where you feel like you have to make a choice.” He picked the pad back up and started writing again.

“Mormons can’t be gay,” I stated. I knew my doctrine.

“I think that view may be doing you more harm than good. I simply want you to consider moving away from such black and white thinking. Then maybe it won’t be as much of a choice as you think right now.” I pursed my lips, considering. Dr. Stone tapped his pen on the steno and the sound filled the whole room.

CHAPTER 11 – RUBY

If I wasn't as sinful as I led myself to believe and I took Dr. Stone's suggestion, moving away from dichotomous thinking, the perceived crossroads in front of me would shift. I decided I needed to know more about being homosexual: what it meant, how it worked, was it a choice like my mom said, was it as evil as I understood it to be. You could be Mormon or you could be homosexual; there wasn't anything in between, was there?

I didn't have anyone to ask my questions to, so I searched at the library. There weren't many resources, but I found some old books: an anthology, *Peculiar People: Mormons and Same-Sex Orientation*, and *Resolving Homosexual Problems: A Guide for LDS Men* by Jason Park. Searching online turned up an article from 1995 in the *Ensign*, a popular LDS magazine, written by Apostle Dallin H. Oaks on *Same-Gender Attraction*. Members were encouraged to use words like "homosexual," "lesbian," and "gay" as adjectives to describe thoughts, feelings, or behaviors, and never as nouns to describe people. Using those words to denote people, not feelings, implied they had no choice in regards to their sexual behavior. So I was same-sex attracted, but I wasn't gay. BYU also wasn't a safe space to explore sexuality, especially non-heterosexuality, so I had to be careful.

The only person who saw me with the books was the librarian when I checked them out. I tapped my thumb and forefinger behind my back and just smiled. "They're for a psychology class," I said. "Research paper." Once she handed them over, I stuffed them in my backpack, glancing around to make sure no one else was watching me.

The Honor Code had a clause on homosexuality: "Advocacy of a homosexual lifestyle (whether implied or explicit) or any behaviors that indicate homosexual conduct, including those not sexual in nature, are inappropriate and violate the Honor Code. Violations of the Honor Code may result in actions up to and including separation from the University." I didn't want to risk anyone seeing me, so I made sure to only read at night when my roommate wasn't home, and kept the books under my mattress.

I couldn't stand getting bad grades, so school got in the way of devoting all my energy to figuring myself out and reconciling my feelings and beliefs.

Now that I'd brought homosexuality to the forefront of my life, it felt like a mountain on my shoulders; I'd have to share it sooner or later or it was going to crush me. Keeping my secret dogged me constantly, affecting everything I thought and felt. I needed to tell someone else before I burst, or slipped up. Could I explore homosexuality in assignments without getting in trouble? I started gearing my psychology papers toward investigating aspects of homosexuality, gave my English papers a same-sex attraction spin, and riddled my nineteen-page self-assessment for Student Development class with an attempt at accepting myself as same-sex attracted, though I was adamant I wouldn't be acting on it. *Was the risk worth it?* Any of my professors could take my writing and simply hand it over to the Honor Code Office. I'd be screwed. Kicked out of school and the Church, disowned by family and friends; everything would fall apart.

I sat down in the library computer lab and opened my folder to look at the week's assignment for my Intro to Creative Writing class. We were doing a unit on personal essay and had to write about something that needed said, but that we weren't sure how to, or hadn't yet. I almost couldn't believe it. I needed this so much. I opened Word, put my fingers on the keys, and started typing. The letter that followed laid out everything I'd been holding back from Ruby.

Ruby,

Remember our discussion Saturday night? The one where we talked about who we are and who we aren't? Well, I had a few more things to say that I didn't have words for at the time, only thoughts and feelings that I couldn't bring myself to say. But in reality they need to be said. I want to put this in words because it's important to me and I hope to you also. We've talked about friendship and we both know I demand intimacy on that level and that level only. Yet I haven't been as real to you as I can be. I wouldn't tell you about the "dark secrets" I harbor that I keep in the corner as much as possible so I don't have to think about them. Just recently, as you know, I started acknowledging these problems that plague me and cause so much pain, finally trying to deal with them. I want to share them with you so you will know me. All of me, without masks or pretexts or fakeness. You need to know who I am so you will understand me.

You already know I'd like to get married right now and start my family. As much as it pains me, I can't take that route right now, first I have to cope with myself and my

abnormalities. I'd love to pursue a relationship with anyone, even you; but I know deep down why I can't. I struggle every day with homosexual tendencies and desires repressed in a Mormon atmosphere. Being raised LDS gave me very dichotomous thinking as far as morals and principles go; this is right, that is wrong. Now I'm crucified between belief and desire. I question the Church in light of the way I feel and think. Sitting in Sacrament Meeting knowing how I think and feel pains me and causes extreme discomfort.

Sometimes I wonder, *Should I even be here? Is this the place for me?* Attempting to cope with homosexuality is one of the hardest wrestles I've ever had. Do you know what it's like to look at a guy and think he's cute and then want to vomit? Or burn yourself for entertaining such thoughts because you've been taught for so long it's sick and wrong? It's a hell I hope you never have to experience, but it's a reality I live in every day. I try so hard to be a God-fearing, righteous individual, but suffer from thoughts and desires most would view as twisted and sick. You know I use my journal as my place of peace, my only medicine in all the pain. That's why I don't share my journal, because wishes of curling up and dying to end my suffering drip off almost every page.

Living as an LDS non-gay homosexual is not my only challenge; I also find myself enchained, unable to break away from pornography and sexual self-abuse. I've been an addict for five years and I hate myself for it every minute. My therapist says I engage in too much self-loathing, but I've tried for so long to come clean and always end up falling down again. I'm tired of hurting and I'm tired of falling and I'm sick of being a slave to desires I can't seem to control. I just want to be normal. I just want to be free again to be me. I work hard at my addiction and I hold out for so long, but then in a fit of self-indulging pity for the creature I see myself as, I throw everything into the fire and burn myself again. Fear consumes me as I see myself – a broken monster ravaged by his dark nightmare realities. *What would people say if they knew the truth?* So I keep hiding and I hold in the pain and the longing and the suffering. I cringe alone in my self-made prison cell of isolation and misunderstanding and seek solace nowhere, because I already know there is none to be found. My eyes weep as my heart bleeds, but no tears fall because I don't remember how to cry. Homosexuality and Mormonism bring my identity into direct conflict and I am forced to wield the sword of decision as I slay the foeman of

preoccupation, self-doubt, confusion and rejection in an effort to figure out who I am...and who I should be.

Ruby, I don't know how much of this you already know or how much you already suspected, but I wanted you to know everything. I wanted you to see me as I really am. I wanted you to understand the person I don't let anyone see because of fear and prejudice. I feel the need to hide so I don't disgrace my family, so I don't disgrace my religion, so I continue the legacy of righteous Mormons generations-deep in my family. I need to be a good guy, not a sick one. It's so hard I still can't define it accurately, to be pulled vigorously to the two opposing poles of God and self. That's why I'm not happy most of the time, because inside a vicious war for who I will become rages with such ferocity and at such levels of sin and self-indulgence it takes all my energy. I stay away from the edge for so long, fighting the need to satisfy myself and then scream as I hurl myself over the edge of the pit of self-destruction. I am so thankful for your friendship and all your support and respect. I love when you tell me, "ya sabes que te adoro," because it makes me feel good inside. Thank you for helping me up to this point, now you know who I really am and I'd only ask one thing of you. I plead that you continue to stand by me knowing what you know now – this is so hard to get down, to depict poignantly exactly how I feel. More than ever before I need you to be there for me like you've always been. My friends are few and far between who know who I am. Everyone else is just friends with the shell I use to cover my weaknesses and imperfections. I wanted you to know the truth.

Daniel

Writing the letter felt freeing. The mountain maybe wasn't a mountain after all, more like an enormous hill. *Was the risk worth it? Yes.* Someone else, who wasn't behind closed doors in a completely safe space, would finally know what I was harboring inside me. Gambling my entire future, I turned in the letter, fully aware that more than anything else I'd done, this was the most dangerous.

CHAPTER 12 – BISHOP

My nerves frayed. I almost stopped eating again, every tick of the clock agony as I waited for the call that I'd been reported to the Honor Code Office and I was to be kicked out.

When I was sure I couldn't wait another second, the graded assignment finally came back. My professor, Blaire Elton, had written: "Thank you for trusting me enough to share this. I realize that you won't be able to workshop it, but it is a very poignant essay. As it happens, you may not know that you *do* have advocates in the LDS community. You'll read an essay by one – Bob Rees. He lost a gay member of his congregation to suicide when he was a Bishop and has become a great activist for men and women who are often taught to hate themselves because of their desires. Cheiko O'Kasaki has also addressed the issue openly. I have another friend who is compiling stories – faith stories – of men and women with same-sex attraction from various denominations. I can put you in touch with any of these folks. They're my friends. Come and talk to me and I'd be happy to put you in touch with them – or just cry with you if you need that."

The letter to Ruby was the first assignment in that class I got full credit on. At first, I couldn't believe the response was real. The relief I felt was immense, almost overpowering. Maybe not even an enormous hill, just a big one. Blaire Elton could be trusted; no, was an ally.

I didn't have to be alone anymore.

Emboldened by Blaire Elton's words of compassion, I made the mistake of writing an email to my parents trying to explain to them everything I was dealing with.

Arriving on campus early for work the next day, I stopped in at the Learning Resource Center to check my email. Setting my bag next to the carrel, I glanced at my neighbors working on papers or scrolling Facebook. Most of them were lost in their headphones or YouTube videos. My heart sped up as I logged into my email and saw the bolded text of a new message from my mother. My parents were usually of one mind, rarely disagreeing on anything. A response from one was understood to be a response from both. They'd probably collaborated on the response as it was composed. I didn't hesitate; I clicked immediately to open it. My eyes gobbled up the

words, desperate to encounter the same sense of understanding Blaire had given. But as I read my heart sank until it seemed even the floor would open up and I would find myself falling, maybe forever. They couldn't grasp the world I was thrusting at them, not even a little bit.

Referring to how sick my attractions make me feel, she wrote: *“If this is your feeling still, then why is burying it again not your best choice? You also said,*

‘I can bury it again and pretend to be a good Mormon, but I lose honesty.’

I don't agree that this would be a loss of honesty...rather more of overcoming a great trial or burden or temptation placed before you. About your statement ‘To the General Authorities it's merely a choice. A decision, a will. Something you turn on and off,’ I also wanted to say that you should ask your Bishop and counselor about this attitude and how you are supposed to do it. I am just bouncing ideas off you for reflection nothing more. It just seems logical to me that embracing that choice is going to bring you way more heartache than you are currently having now although I could be wrong...”

I set both of my elbows on the computer desk astride the keyboard and let my head collapse into my hands, still staring at the screen from between my ring and pinky fingers. I concentrated on my breathing and took four slow, controlled breaths. Despite what she wrote, the only feeling I came away with was that they wanted to sweep this back under the rug and pretend like it hadn't happened. Weren't they listening to what I was saying? Didn't they care that I was hurting? I felt betrayed, and hurt, and I didn't know who else to turn to. For them, speaking to my Bishop, or Dr. Stone, and getting them to tell me how to turn off my same-sex attraction so my parents could move on with their lives was the best plan of action.

Lifting my head, I interlaced my fingers, leaving my pointer fingers sticking up and pressed them to my lips as I thought of a response. *I'm tired of living a lie. I can't do it anymore. It's killing me.* I was coming out and responses like Blaire's gave me hope, and I didn't know how to go back. This wasn't something we could simply wish away. I clicked send forcefully. I breathed a sigh and shook my head as I logged out, turned to grab my bag, and dashed out of the lab to work.

Four hours later, on a break between shifts, I popped into the lower Wilkinson Center Computer Lab, expecting another response. Sure enough. As I opened the email, I was feeling the same mix of trepidation and excitement that accompanies trying new food for the first time.

She wrote: *“How is admitting you have homosexual tendencies but choose not to act on them living a lie? I don’t quite get it? I admire what you are doing, I just don’t think becoming openly gay and taking on a male lover is going to bring you the peace you seem to be seeking. No offense meant... your journey is rough; I hope it leads you to the place you want to be...”*

Once again, I felt rejected. Being gay was the wrong answer and not something I should even consider. In the eyes of my parents, the solution was simple: I just needed to stop, put same-sex attraction back in the box, be a better Mormon, and everything would be fine. I largely ignored the hope in her response, feeling like they misunderstood the burden I was carrying. I whipped off a response in anger, pushed back from the desk in a huff, and went back to work.

After work I studied for a Spanish test until right before the library closed when I went to check my email again. This time the response was very short.

“I love you and I hurt for you and I am just trying to understand where you are coming from and where you are headed. HUGS. Love, Mom.”

I waited a few days to reply, irked by our seeming inability to understand one another. What was missing in my explanations that they weren’t grasping everything I was wrestling with inside myself? The back-and-forth continued and alongside their reassurances of love and attempts to understand, there were always jabbing reminders that leapt out to overshadow everything else. *“By the way, do you remember what the Bible says about homosexuality?”* Stark reminders of my sinfulness, even if meant as tongue-in-cheek, still stung.

My responses became more and more reactionary, rather than considering the sentiment behind their words. I grew tired of feeling irritated and angry every time I logged on. It was like I was writing her in Russian and she was responding in Chinese. We missed the mark somehow, over and over. None of that dissuaded me from clicking send every time though. Eventually, my mother went so far as to tell me I should just hurry up and get married because then all my homosexual feelings would go away. *A wife solves everything, ha.* I balked and responded flat out that if she persisted in this vein she was going to lose me.

Her “loving” response came back overflowing with articles about homosexuality being a choice. Link after link after exasperating link. I took them and responded with my own set of articles refuting every single thing she sent. And just like that, we were at war.

The more prevalent and more encompassing homosexuality became in my life, the more my church attendance and faith waned. I couldn't reconcile the two.

I finally ran out of time to put off renewing my Continuing Student Ecclesiastical Endorsement and had no choice but to sit down with the Second Counselor in my ward. Like most Bishop's counselors in student wards, he was recently married, looked like a cookie-cutter missionary with short, well-kept hair and a squeaky clean face. He seemed overly excited to be meeting me, even with his handshake greeting. I wished I felt as enthusiastic as he did. The table separating us could have been the Great Wall of China and it wouldn't have been any easier for me. I rubbed my hands together under the table where he couldn't see me.

After the niceties were out of the way, he got right down to business and started asking me the interview questions. "Are your membership records in the ward unit?"

"Yes," I replied.

"We've reviewed the Dress and Grooming Standards; do you agree to abide by them?"

"Yes."

"Do you understand the Residential Living Guidelines that apply to you?"

"Yup."

"Do you live a chaste and virtuous life, including avoidance of pornography, abstinence from sexual relations outside of marriage, and abstinence from homosexual conduct?"

I felt like a fish wriggling on a hook just pulled from the water. I'd known this crossroads was coming for months, which was part of why I'd avoided being in this room, having this conversation in the first place. I could lie through my teeth and say yes or I could continue trying to actually live the gospel and tell the truth. *I don't want to go back to lesser things.*

"I'm trying to..." I hesitated and glanced at his eyes. He was hanging on my every word and I briefly wondered if he had any idea how hard being in a Bishopric could be. Not everything in the Church was as pretty as people make it out to be. "...but I'm having some struggles."

What followed was an extremely awkward conversation for both of us. For me, because being forthright to someone you've known for all of five minutes about things plaguing you doesn't come naturally. It took guts to be honest, but I didn't tell him about my same-sex attraction. Masturbation and pornography seemed plenty. The conversation was awkward for him because he was completely unprepared for everything I said. His reaction was one of

genuine shock and surprise and he seemed a bit unsure on how he was meant to respond. He was there to greet people, check some boxes, and move on. “I...you’re going to need to meet with the Bishop.” Like I hadn’t seen that coming. The Bishop would need to decide if I could be endorsed or not.

That was how I met Bishop Stan Sharp. Our ward actually had a chapel, which was unusual for me since all my previous student wards had met on campus somewhere. The chapel was small, but inviting, and had walls painted a soft purple. Standing with my hands shoved deep into my pockets, facing the wall, I lightly kicked the baseboard over and over while I waited. Eventually the door opened and a girl I didn’t know brushed past me in a rush to exit the building as fast as she could. I turned to look at the man standing in the door to the Bishop’s office. Stan was in his late thirties, had light brown hair and an incredibly disarming smile. Just seeing it made me want to smile too without having the faintest idea why. He was a jolly man, but it came from a sincere and honest place. He greeted me heartily and invited me in. I forced a smile and said hello back. As I passed him, I wiped my palms on my pants to try and get rid of the sweat, though it did nothing for my nervousness. I knew my secrets, Ashlynne knew, Blaire Elton knew, my parents knew, he could know too, right?

I didn’t even wait for introductions, I just dropped everything as soon as I sat down. I’d made a fist with my right hand and had it pressed into my left palm as I spoke. “I’m struggling. With faith, with believing in the power of prayer. I’m not really attending church. I’m addicted to porn and masturbation. And I have same-sex attraction.”

He didn’t say anything for a second, just leaned forward as if scrutinizing or debating in his head what to do next. My nervousness exponentially blossomed as the seconds ticked away. Finally, he stood up without saying anything, but sort of smiling. I stared up at him. He beckoned at me.

“What?” I asked.

“C’mere,” he said. I stood up, a bit unsure, and took a step toward him. He put out his arms and drew me into a tight hug. I was momentarily taken aback and didn’t really know how to respond, but it didn’t seem weird or inappropriate. Then we sat back down and he spoke.

“I appreciate your honesty with me, Daniel.” *You can say that again.* “I work at the Counseling Center on campus and I see this a lot. You’re not the first one I work with who has

attractions he doesn't want or fully understand. You're in a difficult place, but we'll work through it."

I nodded. "Every day is a chore because of my attractions. I can't get rid of them, they make me angry and frustrated, and I feel sick to my stomach. I've prayed and prayed and prayed to have this taken away. I don't want to feel like this anymore, Bishop." I found myself surprisingly blinking back tears. There was something powerful in this kind of honesty. "Most nights I cry on my floor and wish I was dead."

He nodded emphatically and spoke with a surety I didn't share. "It's going to be alright, Daniel. Same-sex attraction, is hard, but we can get through it. You've not acted on it?"

I shook my head. He smiled again. "Come to church. Everyone has temptations. You've not done anything wrong. Come to church and take the sacrament; we'll start there."

The way he dealt with all of this seemed too easy to me, as if everything I'd said was a non-issue. As easy as forgetting to read your scriptures or something. It was all fine. He agreed to endorse me and I agreed to work closely with him to overcome my problems. I thanked him for the meeting and for endorsing me, but left feeling vexed that he'd entirely glossed over the magnitude of what I faced.

CHAPTER 13 – DIRTY

One evening I was trying to study in the library. I was having a hard time caring about school. I was attending church more regularly, but still hadn't taken the sacrament even though Bishop said I should. My testimony on prayer was still muddled. I was feeling depressed and confused as usual. In a particularly low moment, I decided to just give in. Then I'd at least have relief for a few days.

I looked at Ruby across the table, with her specific colors of highlighter and her white-out and meticulous notes, and smiled. She'd started opening up a bit more about her weaknesses and struggles. *I should give her the letter, that's why I wrote it.* I sighed. I wanted to embrace her problems to escape my own, but she wanted to use mine to help her forget about hers. Now wasn't the right time, anyway.

"Ruby," I said and started packing my things. "I'm going home to engage in self-destructive behavior."

When I looked again, she was staring at me with a look halfway between shock and horror. "Meu filho, no," she whispered, glancing around at the other tables where people were studying. She hated talking in the library because she thought she was too loud and disturbing other people, even when she whispered.

"Sorry. I'm going."

"Meu filho..." she pleaded again. I zipped my orange backpack shut.

"Lemme be," I said, starting to get annoyed.

"Please," she begged. "I'm worried about you."

"Don't be." I shouldered my bag and stalked away, my jaw set. I didn't look back.

Ruby followed me. I don't know how she managed to pack all her things in their proper places that quickly and chase me, especially since I'd deliberately cut across the grass after I passed the SWKT, knowing she wouldn't because of her OCD. But as I was halfway down the large staircase at the bottom of Maeser Hill, there she was. "Wait. Please." Her voice was tiny, but still carried.

“For what?” I snapped, whirling around and looking up at her. Why had I said anything to her at all? I should have just left quietly. I suppose I wanted this, wanted the attention, wanted her to try and stop me, even though I knew it was in vain. So why?

She took a deep breath and kept coming towards me, whispering numbers around her calling out to me. “Seven, eight, nine. Don’t do this. Ten, eleven...”

“I’m not strong enough.” My shoulders sagged and I shifted my weight.

“Twelve...you are.”

“I’m not.”

“Please. Thirteen.”

I turned around and kept walking, shoving my hands in my pockets. “Go away, Ruby.”

“Don’t.” Her voice was almost strangled.

“I mean it.”

I said the words without remorse and quickened my pace. The counting stopped and Ruby did too, but I kept going. When I got home I tossed my backpack up on my bunk in a huff and made sure the guy I shared a room with wasn’t home. The pleasure was real, but the electric tingling was fleeting and followed by sickness.

Mormons believe in being *in* the world, but not *of* the world like it says in John 17:16. Yet I seemed intent on being of the world for some reason I couldn’t get past. Mormons set themselves apart in many ways, like I had been on my mission; one of them being that the most faithful, temple-attending, wear a special garment as a symbolic gesture of promises made to God. These garments represent covenants made in the endowment ceremony and are worn under clothing, next to the skin; for some taking the place of regular underwear. Mormons begin wearing garments after the first time they attend the temple, where they receive individual instruction on how the garment should be worn and cared for. These commitments, and the wearing of the garment, reflect the outward expression of an inward commitment. They aren’t important for what they are, but what they represent; fostering a mindset of obedience to the Lord, through which members can receive physical and spiritual protections.

I’d been wearing garments since my endowment ceremony a week or so before I left to serve my full-time mission. I understood what they meant, why I wore them, and what they brought me as far as blessings...but I also wasn’t obedient. I was dirty. I was a terrible sinner, who welcomed self-destruction with open arms. Every time I tried to fight, I’d white-knuckle for

a while, but sooner or later, I'd give in. Always. Over and over. I epitomized Proverbs 26:11 – “As a dog returneth to his vomit, so a fool returneth to his folly.” Even after a shower, I didn't feel any better. Staring at my garments, stark white, folded nice and neat inside their drawer, made me want to scream and tear my hair out. I looked over at the scissors in the pencil cup on my desk.

Steeling myself, I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. *Get ahold of yourself.* I didn't need to go there again. But when I opened my eyes, I still felt hollow and cold. Why wasn't I stronger? Why couldn't I be better? I considered the garments once more and then shut my drawer. I leaned against my dresser and tried not to cry. I couldn't put them on again. It didn't feel right. I would not mock God. As I got dressed, my jeans felt cold and rough against my bare skin, but I didn't have anything else.

I didn't know what to do, or where to go, only that I needed to be away from here. I went out into the cool night, and wished I'd brought a jacket. I wandered for a bit, but then went to see how Ruby was even though I was ashamed for what I'd done. I did feel bad about how I'd treated her.

When she opened the door, she breathed a sigh of relief. “I've been so worried.” When I left her on the steps she apparently hadn't known if she'd see me again. Even so, she could tell I wasn't okay. Frowning, she asked, “Are you okay?” I shook my head, unable to speak. “Oh no. No, don't cry,” she soothed. All her misgivings about earlier faded in light of my current state of dishevelment. “Come here.” She tried to hug me, but for some reason I pulled away. “What's wrong?” she asked, her voice full of emotion.

I didn't answer her, just looked off down the street. “I think I'm going to the 7/11.”

“Okay, let me get my shoes. I'll come with you.” She moved back inside, but left the door open. “What are we getting?” I heard her call from the hallway.

“I wanna buy cigarettes.”

She reappeared in the doorway, shoes on, blue jacket in hand. “What?! Why would you... No!” She was emphatic, which wasn't how she usually spoke.

This was not a safe head-space for me. I was like a runaway train speeding straight at a brick wall. “Might as well feed other old addictions, right? I've already indulged the other ones, might as well hit them all.” I started walking, hands in my pockets, which felt thread-bare with

nothing between them and my skin. But I took my time going down the steps so she wouldn't get left behind. I needed the company right now.

She pulled the door shut and locked up, before chasing after me, counting steps. When we reached the street, she said, "What are you talking about? Daniel, you're scaring me."

"I'm talking about being evil, isn't that obvious?"

"Daniel..." She zipped her jacket.

"I am, Ruby. I'm complete scum."

"Okay, we can go to 7/11, but we're not buying cigarettes." She reached for my hand, but I pulled away instinctively, recoiling from her touch. "Sorry." She wasn't sure how to act around me when I was acting so off-kilter.

"It's not you," I said, briefly rubbing my hands, then shoving them back in my pockets. "I just... just don't touch me right now. I can't. My hands are dirty. I'm dirty."

When we got to 7/11, we didn't go inside right away. Ruby stayed on the sidewalk, rocking on her heels, wondering how to help me. I sat in the gutter, poking at some trash and mud with a stick. Ruby couldn't come sit by me because of the grass and I was, in her world, in the middle of the street which wasn't safe. I really wanted a cigarette.

She finally convinced me to go inside, but not for cigarettes. We bought some snacks, but I didn't eat any because of my hands. We wandered the streets for a bit, watching the moon, and ignoring the conversation neither of us wanted to have. Content with each other's presence, we reveled in knowing the other was imperfect and it was still fine. I guess that's why I'd sought her out when it may have seemed the least likely place to go. I knew she wasn't perfect and she knew I wasn't either, and we could share that space and experience. I was starting to settle down and feel okay again. I would get past this too.

It was getting late, so I walked her home. Ruby didn't want to leave me, but I told her it was past her bedtime and she needed to stick to her routine. She told me she'd pray for me and I'd feel better in the morning. Same as all the others who told me that, I didn't mind it, but wasn't convinced it'd work. If her prayers reached God when mine wouldn't, all the better for us both I supposed.

I sat on my steps for a while to think. How willingly I'd thrown myself at my addiction. That made it worse didn't it, since I was a conscious party? I wasn't resisting, I was acting. Flagrant sin.

I went back to my room and sat crossed-legged on my bed, contemplating. The space seemed different now, as if I'd violated it. I wondered if our apartment had been consecrated – which literally meant associated with the sacred – as Mormon homes and religious spaces usually are, and if I'd now negated that blessing. I felt sick to my stomach.

I decided to call Alex since he'd been a spiritual aid to me in the past. I laid on my bed and picked at the wall as the phone rang. Alex answered on the fourth ring. "How's things? I'm not interrupting?" I asked.

"No, yeah, things are okay," he replied. He didn't sound very convinced. My mother had told me a few days earlier that he and Lindsay had reached a "crossroads" and I felt scared they were headed for divorce. What would Alex do then? How would he feel and react? Who would shun him for failing at one of the most important relationships you can build in Mormonism? I hurt for him, just like I continued bleeding for Carter.

"I think I understand where Lindsay's coming from now," I said.

"Oh?" He was intrigued.

"What she said about how without the expectations of others you're truly free... when you stop using values forced upon you and find your own."

"Are you finding new ones?" he asked.

"Not really." I rolled over onto my stomach and looked across the room at the dresser. "Just grappling with the ones I thought I believed in, and wondering if they are a vestige of our parents, and not something of my own. Because I'm not following them. I say I'm trying, but I fail over and over and over."

"Everyone makes mistakes," he offered.

"Yeah, but we've served missions. I remember mine like it was yesterday. When it was the best thing that ever happened to me and my future was bright and happy, and the only tears I had to cry were from taking off the badge."

Alex laughed at my naivety. "But then life's next."

"Got that right. I just feel so lost. Caught in the midst of moral and self-chaos. Ya'know I wonder... the missionary I was... that badge on my chest marking me as a representative of Jesus Christ. Was that all just another mask I crafted? I was good at it, but was it really me? Or was it just my way of conforming to my environment so I didn't have a hard time?"

He didn't know what to say.

Alex was smart, and I respected that, especially when it came to gospel matters. But this was deep, and deeply personal. He didn't know how to help, though to be fair, he did a better job than my parents.

"I doubt," I continued. "I doubt and I waver and I get on my knees and I pray and it's just emptiness. I don't know what I'm doing wrong. Is my entire testimony a sham? Am I too evil to even have the spirit anymore? Is that why I feel so dead inside all the time?" *I couldn't even put on my garments.* I knew I was asking questions without answers, I knew that he wouldn't have anything solid to offer me in the way of a solution, but I called him anyway because he was an anchor for me and I believed in his spirituality even if I had trouble believing in my own.

It was well past both our bedtimes. I rubbed my eyes and said, "I should go. Everything just sucks."

Before ending the call, Alex said: "I wish I knew more of what to say. When I'm having a hard time, I just re-read 1 Nephi, chapter 11."

I knew exactly the part he was talking about. The angel of the Lord asking Nephi if he understands the condescension of God. And Nephi's reply: "I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things." Even without all the answers, we could take heart in the knowledge that God loved us.

CHAPTER 14 – SORRY

I felt like I was dripping with sin. The Church didn't seem to be a place for me, but its job was to make me a better person, so I needed it now more than ever. That's what I'd have told an investigator when I was a missionary. I'd be lying if I said that church had never done anything for me. It'd gotten me through so much in my lifetime, how could I turn my back and walk away now? Surely this was Satan trying to lead me away from the truth and protection that I desperately needed. He'd all but won. I had to double down and keep going. I had to renew my commitment. I had to renew my covenants. No one in authority had told me to remove my garments; I just felt too dirty to wear them.

I didn't have anything else to wear. But I couldn't just put them back on again, could I? This was serious stuff, not a fashionable accessory you wore when you felt like it. Toying with oaths and covenants was unacceptable, unthinkable. You were in, or you were out.

As a missionary, whenever we struggled with getting up on time, having dedicated personal study, companionship problems, or whatever; any time we felt like we needed to recommit we pretended we were brand new, Day One Missionaries, again. Forget everything that's gone before. Just stop and start over. Right then and there. Rededicate yourself and move forward. I opened my dresser drawer, took a steadying breath and got dressed, garments on. I was still an "active" Mormon, as far as paper records of the Church went, and I hadn't made any other plans.

The semester was drawing to a close and I was starting to look ahead to summer. I was talking to my parents on the phone and they thought it was best if I got a summer job and moved away from Provo.

My response was terse, but true. "I can't leave right now, because if I do, I know I'll walk away from the Church and never look back." Neither of them spoke. "I'm not ready to do that," I added.

"Church is a good place for you right now," my mother said, trying to encourage me. They both saw the Church as a haven where I'd be protected, so anything they could do to get me re-committed was the right answer.

I knew in my heart they were right; I'd felt as much earlier, but how could I share that with them? This struggle was too private, too raw. And I was ashamed of the choices I'd made. They couldn't know about what had happened. "I don't want to drown myself in religion either though," I replied.

Their lives were pure gospel, so they didn't have anything else to offer. "Do you have any friends you can ask to read scriptures with you? Maybe that would help." They were racking their brains for things to help me, but everything could be traced back to church. And right now that felt like a dead-end to me.

A beeping sounded in my ear. "Uhh... hang on, I'm getting another call." I pulled the cell phone away from my face and looked at it. I didn't recognize the number. I pressed my lips into a thin line, considering what I should do. The conversation with my parents was awkward at best, they were straining for a way to reach out to me, help me.

I clicked over. "Hello?"

"Si...bueno?"

"Yes, hello?"

"Eres Elder Handley?" I was confused, not recognizing the voice on the other end.

"Well, it's Ex-Elder Handley now, but...sorry, who is this?"

"Soy Juan." My heart leapt into my throat and I couldn't speak for a moment. "Hello?" he persisted.

I collected myself. "Yeah, Si, uh, hi...Juan. Give me a second, yeah? I've got my parents on the other line. Lemme just wrap up with them. One second." I put a hand to my forehead and spun in a circle, looking for some object in the room to help ground me in reality, but I didn't know what I was looking for. I clicked back to my parents.

"Hello? Hey, yeah, it's someone calling from my mission that I haven't talked to in months. Can I call you back?"

"Yeah, sure," my father said.

"We love you," my mother added. They always said that, and I always found a way to disbelieve them.

"Thanks, bye," I said. For some reason, I imagined myself waving, then I clicked back to Juan.

“Hello, Juan? Hey, hi. Wow, I can’t believe it! Como estas?” Even if it was unexpected, it was actually good to hear from him. I’d met many people on my mission I intended to stay in contact with, but who’d moved or changed their number – for whatever reason. I still often wondered about them and how they were doing.

“I’m good, Elder,” he replied. He sounded happy.

With a grin, I added, “Ex-Elder now.”

“So what do I call you?”

I laughed. It was weird to think that people from my mission only knew me by my title and last name. “Daniel is fine.”

“Okay, Daniel.” It was like I could hear him smiling through the phone. After a brief pause, he said, “Can I just say that it’s so good to hear your voice?”

“Yeah, you too.” I climbed up onto my bunk, shifting the phone so I could get a better grip.

“It’s been so long,” he said.

I laid down and stared at the ceiling, one arm behind my head. “It has. I haven’t forgotten you though, Juan. I think about you a lot.”

“Si?”

“Honest,” I replied.

“Thanks. You are in Utah?”

“Yeah, and you?”

“Well, I just got back from Mexico.”

“Cool! How was that?”

“I got to see mi mama. It was very nice.”

“Yeah, I remember you saying you wanted to save up to go see her. That’s so great that you got your wish. Where are you now?”

“I live in Concord, Elder...sorry, Daniel.”

“I know, it takes some getting used to,” I said. “Tell me more.” I imagined him across the miles in an apartment sort of like mine – a bit nicer though – sitting on his bed, or standing in his kitchen, talking to me.

“I got a new job.” When he spoke, it was like a balm to my heart. I was thrilled he seemed so happy.

“Congrats, that’s great. Do you like it?”

“So far, yes,” he said.

“Church?” I asked. I shifted position so I was lying propped up on my elbow, that way I could see out the window next to my bed.

Juan sighed and the space between our words began to fill with tension. Finally, he said, “Mira. After you left, I worked a little bit with Presidente Ignacio, but I got really discouraged. I just don’t think La Iglesia is for me.” He sounded more emotional than before. I could tell this still weighed on him, like it weighed on me. “I’m dating guys now. Please don’t judge me.” His voice was pleading.

“Juan, I’d never-”

He interrupted me. “-I tried to be with girls, but I never felt the same intensity. I’m tired of torturing myself with the gospel. So I’ve made a choice.” He thought for a second and then added, “Do you think it was the wrong one?”

I wasn’t sure what to say. It was Hollister all over again. He still put stock in what I felt about him. How should I respond when it was the same place I found myself now? I was considering the same, wasn’t I? “I don’t think I can answer that.” The weight of my words seemed to press me down into my mattress until I was sure the bunk beds would collapse in on themselves. I imagined the space between Juan and I evaporating until we were sitting in a room, half his apartment, half mine, together, face-to-face. Would that have made this conversation easier or harder? I fell back on language of acceptance and openness, even if I didn’t entirely know yet what it meant for me. Still, he needed to know the space between us had definitely changed.

“Juan, I came out.”

“Really?” Excitement edged his voice.

I realized he probably thought that meant something besides what it actually did. I had admitted my attractions, but that was about it. “I... I don’t know what I’m going to do yet.” I laid back down and using my free hand, I put my thumb and forefinger on either side of my face and pushed the skin down toward my chin.

“Que interesante.” He seemed to be thinking as well. This new information would surely affect his opinion of me. I hadn’t denied it back in San Jose, but I hadn’t accepted it either.

“Right now I still feel the way I did then,” I said. Same-sex attraction was not something I wanted.

“Do you still love me?” He asked. The past was so good at repeating itself! *Damn you, Satan*. Desire raged through me. I hated myself for it. The devil was subtle and crafty. No wonder he had the power to lead astray the very elect. I wanted to pull the phone away from my ear and yell into it.

I sighed and covered my face with the crook of my elbow. “I won’t lie to you, Juan.” He waited. “Yes,” I forced myself to say. “Yes.” It was what he wanted to hear. I knew that much. When I said yes though, I didn’t mean it sexually. Did he understand that? “But I don’t think I can help you. You’re in a different place than me, Juan. I’m still committed to the Church. We can’t be boyfriends.” I waited for him to say something, but he didn’t, so I kept going. “I’m sorry, but I’m not ready to leave Mormonism. I hate who I am and I don’t want to feel this way.”

“That’s no good, Daniel.” His voice was quieter than before, like I struck a nerve or something.

“Well... I just... that’s where I am.” I didn’t know what else to say. “I’ve come out and I can say now that I have same-sex attraction. And I hate it.”

He didn’t understand where I was coming from. “Por que?” he asked.

“It’s unnatural. Perverted. I want to get rid of it.”

The silence on the other end went on longer than it should have. When Juan’s voice came back, I could barely hear him. “I should go.”

I suddenly felt like I was drowning and attempted to backpedal. “Juan, I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” he replied, his voice full of anger.

This conversation wasn’t going at all how it should have. “Look, this is pretty hard for me too. I’m still trying to find answers. This is new, and scary, and confusing, and I don’t know what I’m doing!” My face burned and I considered throwing the phone across the room and being done with the whole thing.

“I’ll talk to you later, Daniel.” Juan hung up before I could say anything else. I took the phone away from my ear and flipped it shut, staring at the front. I wished that I had enough strength in my hand to crush it and imagined it turning to dust. Finally, I simply let my arm fall to my side and I closed my eyes, sighing deeply.

CHAPTER 15 – UNCONDITIONAL

Ruby, Carter, Alex, Juan, my parents; these people, these relationships, these problems; it all weighed on me. I had my own stuff to figure out: garments, same-sex attraction, where I fit in Mormonism. Something had to give. I needed a spiritual awakening. Some sort of rejuvenation. That weekend happened to be the Semi-Annual General Conference of LDS Church, meant to be a time of spiritual renewal for the saints. Most Mormons believe if you attend with a prayer in your heart and a question in your mind, the Prophet and Apostles of the Lord will speak on behalf of God right to your soul; provide answers to the questions and problems troubling you. I wasn't sure answers existed for mine, but I tried to remain hopeful anyway.

I was studying in the Harold B. Lee Library between sessions and lost track of time. Priesthood session was about to start. Most sessions are broadcast so members can watch on TV or the internet, but Priesthood Session is only shown at stake centers – meetinghouses larger than a chapel which are the central meeting point for multiple wards – and the BYU Marriott Center. There wasn't time to go home and change into a white shirt and tie, so I could either skip, or go as I was. Since I was trying to be more spiritual and more committed than I had been, I just went.

Walking there among all the people dressed in their Sunday best wasn't so bad; to them I could be heading home from campus, or somewhere else. But once I got inside, I was hyper-aware of how much I stuck out. Everyone else was all done up, dressed in white shirts and ties with polished shoes and suits. I was wearing ripped jeans, orange converse, and a t-shirt with dragons. I'd stuck my orange baseball cap in my backpack, but even so I kept to the back rows so people wouldn't see me. In the opening prayer, the speaker remarked: "We give thanks unto Thee, Father, for the privilege we have of assembling; to worship, to receive counsel and instruction." He went on to say we prayed unitedly for our beloved Prophet. But I didn't feel united. *I don't belong here.*

"We pray that thy work may go forth with purpose and unity throughout the earth, that Zion may truly continue to put on her beautiful garments..." The longer he talked about unity

and inclusion and assembling as one body, the more alienated I felt, and not only because of my ripped jeans. Zion and her garments made me remember my own struggle: *outward appearance reflects our inner commitments*. I didn't fit in this Church and maybe I never had.

On my way home, I stopped by my friend Allison's because I hadn't seen her recently and I thought it'd be good to catch up. Her apartment was cheery and well-decorated; the art on the walls and expensive-looking vases were a far cry from our pit of an apartment across the street with its cheerless brown carpet and off-white, empty walls.

Allison was pretty popular in the ward and not just because she was studying early elementary education, which meant she would make a stellar mom. One of the reasons I liked being around her was because, honestly, I was jealous of her. She was close with her roommates, and they often had girls' nights, painting each other's nails or sharing secrets about their crushes. I longed for that type of intimacy, but Mormon guys didn't do anything like that. They only wanted to talk about football, or cars, or something equally boring and stupid.

When she opened the door, a smile spread across her face. "Hey!" she said cheerily. "It's so good to see you! Come in." She offered me a seat on the living room couch, then sat by me. "I've missed seeing you."

"Well, I had my reasons."

That didn't put her off and she asked what they were. I took a deep breath, like I was getting ready to jump off a cliff. Words like "same-sex attraction" still tasted like ash on my tongue. And saying the words wasn't getting easier. I hesitated, thinking to myself again about how she would react; all the things I'd felt with Ruby. I was starting to push past that resistance and get to a place of honesty, but barely. I came out with a version of the truth, stumbling over some of my words.

She seemed to take it all in stride, hands clasped together. She did glance upstairs a few times, maybe wondering if any of her roommates were home and might overhear. "I have to say I'm amazed. That sounds so hard, Daniel." Her voice was sad, and I could tell that my sharing had affected her. She reached up to brush a strand of blond hair out of her face. "I don't really have any way of empathizing with your...situation." She shook her head and frowned. "I've never had to face anything like that."

For a girl like her, sheltered and cared for every step of the way, brought up in the safety of the Church and surrounded by spiritual people day in and day out, what was the hardest thing she'd ever had to deal with? Probably whether or not to sleep in for seminary.

I shrugged. "Yeah, well. It is what it is, I suppose."

"You sound discouraged." She reached for my hands, wanting to take them in hers, to show me how she cared for me. I didn't pull back, but I didn't offer them either.

"It's really hard." I looked her right in the eyes as I said it, wishing I could go inside her brain and really make her understand. I thought back a few weeks, standing at the top of Emily's building trying to make myself jump off. *This is pointless*. Coming out was like trying to teach a brick wall how to swim.

"What can I do to help you?" she asked.

"I dunno, pray for me I guess. That seems easy enough for most people." Even if prayer didn't work for me personally, it didn't mean that I didn't believe in it at all.

She threw the words back in my face. "Will you accept the help that comes?"

My face burned. She probably didn't mean it as an accusation, but that's how it felt and I immediately withdrew into myself. I didn't know how to answer her. I'd never thought about that. *Was I ignoring God?*

"I don't know." I stood up, hurriedly. "I need to go."

I didn't wait for her to protest or say goodbye, I just left. "Sorry," I muttered as I pulled the door closed behind me. I went home to try and pray.

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I was starting to feel suicidal again. Maybe jumping off a building *was* the best answer. I urgently needed someone to talk to who would understand, so the next morning I went to the Counseling Center.

The secretary stared at me over her desk, and her glasses that were too thick for her wiry frame. "I need to see Dr. Stone, please. It's urgent."

She clicked her mouse a few times and shook her head. "Sorry. He's not available." My next set appointment with him wasn't for six days.

I tapped the counter a few times. "Okay, can I see Stan Sharp?"

“Mmm, that’s not possible, I’m afraid. We believe in continuity of care here, so you need to stick with the counselor you have.”

Why the red tape? I was clearly in a bad way and they were putting up bureaucratic barriers now? I didn’t see any other option besides playing my trump card. “He’s my Bishop,” I replied. “Please.”

She didn’t seem happy about it, but she picked up the phone and dialed him. There was no answer. “Sorry,” she said, shrugging her shoulders as she hung up the phone. I scribbled out a note and left it with her. Not knowing what else to do, I put on my mask, pretended to be fine, and went to class. Bishop phoned and left a message that I could see him at four o’clock. I counted the minutes until I could see him.

I got there five minutes early and had to wait for him to finish with another client. His office was one floor up from the main Counseling Center, so there wasn’t really a waiting room. Just his secretary’s desk wedged into the space outside four offices, with a couple chairs. There weren’t plants, or books, or anything. I chatted with her about my semester and her kids while I waited. I rubbed my finger and thumb together the whole time.

Finally, his door opened and I almost jumped up. He held the door and put out his hand for me to shake, enveloping my hand in his. “Daniel, how are you?” He asked, with a big smile. His manner was cheerful, and his office felt inviting; different from his office at church. There were windows looking out onto Brigham Square on one side and a bookcase full of therapy books. His computer desk was full, but not untidy. He motioned for me to sit down on the maroon love seat tucked into one corner.

“Okay, I guess,” I lied as I sloughed my backpack to the side of the couch and sat down.

Bishop went back to his desk and sat in his swivel chair. He took a second to minimize some things open on his desktop computer, before turning back around to engage me. “The secretary told me you were pretty insistent on getting in here.”

I nodded, taking a deep breath. “Yeah, I’m having a pretty hard time. My next appointment with Dr. Stone isn’t until the tenth. So, I just...I needed to talk to someone. I’m feeling suicidal again.” I choked up. He looked grave. I pressed my lips tightly together and stared at the floor.

“Have you tried anything to help you find peace?” he asked.

“Everything,” I replied without hesitation, making eye contact again. He waited for me to say more. “You want the details?” I sighed.

Bishop put up his hand in a gentle way. He didn’t want to force an explanation. “No, no, it’s fine. I trust you.”

“Good.” I said it almost bitterly, though that wasn’t how I’d meant it to come across. I waited for him to say something, but he didn’t. He seemed to be relaxed, leaning back a bit in his chair, hands resting on his chest.

“I mean...I’ve been coming to church.” Sacrament Meeting was to renew our covenants every week, ‘recharge’ our spiritual batteries. “Every time I go...I just feel uncomfortable.”

“What do you think about when you’re taking the sacrament?”

I ground my teeth a bit. “I haven’t partaken in months, remember? I don’t feel worthy.”

He frowned. “We’ve discussed this though. You haven’t done anything. You should be partaking.”

“I have though.”

He shook his head. “I know that you’re struggling and there are slips. None of us are perfect and that’s fine.”

I pulled at my bottom lip. This man was an authority over my religious and spiritual well-being and he was amazing. He knew I was falling short, but he wasn’t going to drag me through some intensely labored repentance process as another bishop might have. Maybe he guessed it would push me further away from the Church rather than closer to it. “Are you praying?” I shook my head. “Why not?”

I didn’t have a good reason why not, I just wasn’t.

“Elena called me last night,” I said. “We talked for an hour. She and Charles are official now, about three weeks, which makes me happy.” I smiled. “She said her family is probably getting sealed at the beginning of May. I’m so excited.” Sealing is an ordinance performed in temples by someone with priesthood authority, for the purpose of binding familial relationships to endure throughout eternity.

“And this has to do with your praying...?”

“Well, she asked me how I was doing and I told her. I hated her seeing me so weak because of the angelic view she holds of me. She told me that her view of me never changed, no

matter what I said. I told her that *I* still felt like her view of me was changing, even if to her I wasn't. She felt bad for me, but confessed she hadn't really been praying either."

Bishop was interested in the story, and shifted so that his hands were behind his head and his legs were crossed, but in the figure four manner, not tightly. His movement and posture communicated openness, an encouragement to be at ease and honest. As a therapist, I knew in the back of my mind that Bishop was aware of his posture at all times, and the unspoken signals his body language conveyed.

"Elena not praying didn't sit very well with me, so I dug out my missionary-self and challenged her. I told her if she'd say a prayer, I would too. She agreed. I told her I had been her pillar, now it was her turn to be mine."

"It's amazing how God uses us to be angels in other people's lives despite our weaknesses."

His comment reminded me of the night in Hollister when Juan's professed love was still ringing in my ears and I felt completely bereft, yet went and taught Elena's family anyway. "So, last night I said a prayer for the first time in months."

"That's great, Daniel." I could tell he was genuinely pleased. Any progress was a victory. He didn't take long before his next statement, which seemed to have been weighing on his mind. "I want to ask a favor of you."

My palms began to sweat. I rubbed them with my fingers and then wiped them on my jeans. What crazy request was he going to make of me?

"I want you to fast this weekend."

I let my breath out slowly. "Okay." I didn't sound too sure.

"Contemplate, and pray and reflect. You need to be *strong*," he emphasized the word. "I want you to go the whole week without giving in to temptation." What he was asking would be difficult, but it wasn't impossible, was it? "Consider bearing your testimony on Sunday."

I frowned and my stomach plummeted. That notion scared the hell out of me. I didn't say anything, but I already knew how it would go. On Sunday I'd be sitting there and feel the need to get up. *But what the hell would I say? 'I'm same-sex attracted, but somehow I still know God loves me?' I mean, honestly.*

"Okay," I replied.

He asked me whether I was going to the temple.

“My mom told me I should go, too. That that’s the best place to seek answers. But, to be perfectly honest, the last time I went I felt like I was defiling it. The whole time I was in there, everything just felt wrong to me. Knots in my stomach. Like I wasn’t good enough to be there... *You’re hell-spawn*. I dunno.” I shook my head.

“I think you should still be going. But you need to feel like your worthiness amplifies the spirit, not detracts. Go on *complete* faith. Daniel, you’re carrying a burden others don’t have. When you go, place everything on the altar. Everything.”

“Thanks, I’ll think about it.”

He pressed his lips together, but nodded. “You’re worrying an awful lot about your thoughts.”

“Well, yeah!” I was getting frustrated, everything bottled up coming to the surface again. “I hate the things that are in my head. I feel sick all the time.”

“But nothing that you’re doing has actions attached to it.”

“Masturbating is definitely an action,” I said, incredulous.

He leaned forward, putting both feet on the floor. “But do you intend to pursue a homosexual relationship?” My face burned like I’d been slapped. I had no answer.

“I don’t know how to answer that,” I said, although my voice was so low I wasn’t sure he heard me.

“I want you to be clear, Daniel, that there’s a difference between thought and intent. Do you know your intentions for the situation facing you?”

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“This is a process, not an easy one-or-the-other answer. It’s not like you’re standing on a fence and now you just have to pick which side to jump down on.”

“Really?” It still seemed pretty cut and dry to me.

“Yes, really. Do you feel otherwise?”

I did. “That’s exactly how I came away feeling from Conference. This is solidly, absolutely black and white and there can be no concessions. The Church sees homosexuality as a choice, a will, a decision. Something akin to an ‘on-off’ switch even. I just don’t know how to turn the damn thing off.” I’d warmed to my subject now and needed to say my piece, so it was Bishop’s turn to stay silent. His face didn’t give anything away.

“The Brethren gave talks directed at discrimination. They touched on racial, political, and cultural discrimination. But nothing was said directly about sexual. A lot of what was being said didn’t sit well with me, but I understood it. I see their message. They can’t change what they’re preaching, I know that. They can’t. Sexual orientation is not a concession they can make. The very foundation of the Church would be threatened. Everything Mormon is about the family. I mean, look at the Proclamation...”

“Daniel.”

But I wasn’t finished yet. “They can’t change, even if I want them to. So if I can’t fix this, or get rid of it, then what can I do? There’s no room for homosexuals in the Church.” I folded my arms.

Bishop stayed calm and tried to soothe my anger. “This is a process, Daniel. This isn’t just a matter of accepting same-sex attraction. You and I both know that this is not a choice you made.”

“But they—”

“—Please, let me finish,” he said in a soothing tone. I sat back. “That doesn’t matter. You didn’t wake up one day and arbitrarily decide, ‘Hey, there are guys and girls, I’ll chase the guys because that will feel good.’ Especially not understanding the risk that brings to your family, faith, school, etc. No. Daniel, this was thrust upon you through circumstance, influence, and need.”

“Influence and need?”

“When you have thoughts... desires... they’re indicating a want for something, a craving if you will.”

“Depends if we’re talking about guys or girls.”

“That distinction is extremely important. Go on.”

“Well, with girls I’m looking for someone who makes me want to be better. Like Tika did. With men, it’s more about sex.”

“What kind of sex?”

“Most of the stuff I watch is vigorous, rough, even animalistic.” I couldn’t look at him when I said that for fear of blushing.

Bishop didn’t say anything about my comment. He wasn’t there to make snap judgments, or ridicule me. He wanted to better understand me and what I was going through. His tone

seemed to convey the sense that, if anything, my last confession made him sad. “Many of the gay men I know destroy themselves fighting for an elusive happiness,” he replied. “And multi-partner sex only brings more loneliness.”

“I know all that. I’m not trying to live in a fantasy.”

“Your attractions are beckoning you somewhere that you don’t want to go.”

“Right. That’s why I resist them. That’s why this is so hard.” That’s why I wasn’t 100% okay with Allison’s question.

“What would it look like for you to establish a serious, deep, non-sexual relationship with a man?”

I thought about his question. “I sort of had something like that when I was a missionary.” The more I thought about it, the more it made sense. “With Elder Adams.” I paused and gave a small laugh. “Actually, I guess he’s just Keith now.” I didn’t dwell on the change in name and title. “We respected each other, looked out for each other, had great camaraderie. I admired him so much, he was such a great example. I... I love him.”

“I bet you miss Elder Adams...Keith, and wish you had more time with him around.”

“I do, I really do.” I raised a hand to make a clarifying point. “Don’t get me wrong though, Bishop. There’s never been anything sexual about that. Him and I.”

“But that’s what you want. That’s what you’re looking for. Genuine, deep, connection with a man that’s not sexual.”

I leaned forward, putting a hand on my mouth as I connected the dots in my head. His words seemed to offer an explanation for my attractions, and I pounced on them, my stomach fluttering with excitement. “You’re absolutely right. All I’ve ever wanted is intimate, real, close guy friends to support me like girls do.”

In my head I tell myself I just want to suck dick and romp around naked, fucking. I know that word is offensive, and puts Mormons off, immediately. But it’s the right word. It feels terrible and violent and wrong, and sinful. Which is exactly how the desires and wants screaming for fulfillment inside me feel. And that solution, that fantasy action, it’s easy, effortless, and accessible whereas developing deep and genuine relationships is unattainable. Hard as hell. So I prefer to sexualize, to make up for the loss. *Holy revelatory truth.*

I understood in that moment more of what was going on in my head, where these temptations were coming from.

“I know what I need, but not how to get it.”

“Keep loving,” Bishop said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The way you care about others is incredible. You unconditionally love, and it’s apparent.”

“That’s because it’s what I need most in my life. I haven’t felt that kind of love, so I give it in an unending quest for reciprocation.”

“Daniel, I hope you know that I love you. Unconditionally.” I saw his teary eyes, I heard the tremor in his voice, but I couldn’t feel it. “Know that nothing will change that. This new path you’re navigating is difficult. I know it’s been hard for you already. In the long-term, you will be faced with a choice. If you fight to stay in the Church and are celibate, or you decide to marry a woman, I want you to know that above all else I will love you. I will support you. And if you ultimately decide that the Church isn’t working for you, that you want to find a man to have a relationship with, then that won’t change. I’d be sad you left, but my love for you wouldn’t change.”

“And?” I prompt.

“And that’s all.” I was blown away by his support. Maybe I could be okay again. Even if I got kicked out of BYU, got excommunicated, was disowned by my parents and friends, I would still have him. And that meant everything to me in that moment.

“C’mere,” he said, standing and motioning me over for a hug.

I went into his embrace and he squeezed tightly. “I’ll be strong, Bishop. I’ll have an amazing fast.”

CHAPTER 16 – SECRETS

I made it two days before I masturbated at school. As buoyed up and determined as I felt when I left Bishop's office, I couldn't keep my sexual thoughts at bay. Bishop's admonitions were simply no match for my desire and only served to intensify my guilt when the inevitable happened. Pleasure mingled with sickness, increasing my self-hatred. The after-taste of failure was one no amount of mouth-wash could erase. I was so angry at myself for not being stronger, for not trying harder, for not finding a way to get rid of my same-sex attracted thoughts and desires. The anger I felt was white-hot and burned at my insides. I wanted to stab myself so it would all drain out until I was a hollow nothing without feelings or problems. Not for the first time, I wished I knew where to find a gun.

I went looking for Ruby and couldn't find her. Anywhere. Her OCD made her live in a very structured way. She could only use one computer, and only study in one spot in the library. Routine was everything to her, and it meant I always knew where to find her. I looked for her the whole day, and started to feel distraught.

I finally found an email in my junk box that night. Based on our conversation and what she talked about with her Bishop, she had decided that she was going to "help me" by staying away. I was appalled and hurt. She had the bright idea that severing herself and trying to change what she couldn't would somehow help me. Later that night she did come over, but I was on the phone with Elena. By the time I hung up, it was past curfew and I needed to get up early for class, so I didn't go see her.

I found her the next morning in her usual study spot. "I've started getting counseling. It wasn't an easy decision." I said it casually, as if it were no more important than what I'd eaten for breakfast.

"I love counseling," Ruby grinned, "though I don't have a very good therapist right now."

“My mother’s been telling me for months to go, but I was always insistent that counseling was for crazy people, and that’s not me. But really, I’m glad I finally made the decision.” I unzipped my backpack and started putting my things on the table.

“It’s so nice to just be able to talk about your problems.” Ruby chimed.

“Absolutely.” I gave a small laugh. “Take the mask off.”

“We all wear masks.”

“Yeah, but some of us wear them all the time and no one ever gets to know who we really are.”

“It’s exhausting.” The conversation was heading right where I needed it to, but coming out didn’t seem to be getting any easier for me, even with people I trusted.

“*I’m* exhausted. I think I’m going to cancel my counseling appointment,” she said, matter-of-factly.

I shook my head as I sat down. I gave her the letter.

She read it slowly, then read it again. She kept pausing, sometimes mid-sentence, and looking into my eyes as if she was going to pull the pain inside me out through my pupils and hold it in her hands, roll it around on her fingertips, break it open and understand every bit of it. She had to keep looking away though, because it got to be too much. Her own empathy for my predicament threatened to tear her apart too. Tears were in my eyes and hers as well. I tried to smile though, and offered to get her some tissues or something, glancing at the other students at nearby tables witnessing our communion. Most of them were politely ignoring us, but there were occasional glances.

Ruby shook her head, not really knowing what to say. “My heart breaks for you.”

“You’re not helping anyone by doing this to yourself,” I insisted. “Changing your schedule, trying to break your OCD, skipping counseling, none of that helps me break my same-sex attraction. Why do you think that it would? You’re just causing yourself grief. And me too.”

She frowned, and agreed to keep her appointment. When she got back, she didn’t want to talk. I knew what that felt like, so I didn’t press her.

We spent most of the day studying in silence, but at least we were together. While researching for my psychology paper on development and socialization of boys, essentially

looking at the Nature vs. Nurture argument, I stumbled on a video of two boys kissing and watched the whole thing. Twice. I didn't tell Ruby.

When the library closed, we went and sat on the steps of the Maeser Building. The night was cool, but not too cold. Ruby sat her backpack next to her, and leaned against me. I didn't pull away. We both stared out at the stars and the city lights in the distance; everything around us was still, except for the occasional rustle of leaves as a breeze came and went.

I wished I knew what Ruby was thinking, what she was struggling with. Why she was so adamant about trying to change herself, so that it would help *me*. I wanted her to do what I refused: share that pain with me. I wanted to understand, to know, to breathe the same pain, so that I could know what to do to help her.

She sighed, as if she'd heard my thoughts and got out her journal. I raised an eyebrow, intrigued. We'd shared plenty over the last few weeks, but I was the journal-sharer, not her. She'd never let me see inside those pages before, but now she knew. I had been completely honest with her. Maybe she wanted to reward that trust and be honest herself. I held my breath without realizing I was doing it. This was a big step for her.

"Don't judge me," she pleaded.

"I wouldn't." I reassured her.

She flipped to an entry and started reading. Trust. This was all about trust. She didn't trust me. Not me for me, but because I was a guy. That wasn't my fault. All guys were bad, untrustworthy.

I'm waiting for Daniel to reveal his hidden agenda, to take everything I have, and to leave. To screw me, and toss me away once he's satisfied.

Every muscle in my body went tense. I could not believe the words she was reading to me. How could she think this?

That's what always happens.

My eyes filled with tears. The dots connected. Suddenly, much of Ruby's odd behavior became clear, shedding light on instances in our relationship I hadn't previously understood. This was *all* about her past. The things she'd lived through. "Ruby..." She stopped reading and looked up at me, on the verge of tears herself. I pulled her into my embrace. "Ruby, I would never."

I shook my head and she broke down, sobbing into my shoulder. We stayed like that for some time, both of us crying. I learned that Ruby's past was marked by a long history of abuse, physical and sexual. And that it came from the men in her family. Not strangers, but family. And that now, she saw herself as nothing more than damaged goods. She'd never said a word to anybody. Like me, she felt trapped, wondering what people would say and think. The only result she saw was the destruction of her family. So she kept silent. Carried that weight and that trauma her whole life. That initial rending had robbed Ruby of the ability to say no; to feel any sort of power over her own being. Her trauma resurfaced in relationships, landing her in a seemingly unending cycle of abusive boyfriends.

She wanted to be happy; she wanted to be a mom. Now her reaction when we were talking after *The Power of One* made sense. Her feelings and fear of never seeing me again when I was feeling too dirty and wanted cigarettes carried double the weight.

Ruby clutched her journal tightly to her chest and looked out at the city lights. She seemed scared of what I would do with everything she'd just shared with me. The only thing I could think though, looking at her so small and frail was how great her suffering seemed. "It's not your fault," I said. I repeated the words, over and over. I was so wrapped up in my own same-sex attraction that other people's problems were ignored. Their problems mattered too. Her calling me selfish before was even more wounding now. I needed to focus outwardly more, remember that I wasn't the only one having a hard time. I held her head in my hands, and moved her face so we could see into each other's eyes.

"Ruby, listen to me. I have *never* had a hidden agenda with you. I would never hurt you on purpose."

She sniffled and wiped at her nose with the back of one hand. "Promise?" she said quieter than I'd ever heard her before.

"Promise," I said, emphatic.

She collapsed back into me and kept crying. I stroked her hair and gazed out at the city again. I repeated that it wasn't her fault.

After a while, when she was a bit more composed, she laughed. "That was silly, wasn't it?" I tried to laugh it off with her, but my heart ached to the point of bursting. I felt so bad for

her. I wished I knew a way to help her heal and get away from seeing herself as something so dirty and broken. But then that's how I felt about myself as well, wasn't it?

"I'm just scared."

"Me too." I agreed.

"No. I'm scared you're gonna leave. I've invested everything I have into helping you. And you can just walk away at any moment."

"I wouldn't do that."

"No?"

"Ruby, I couldn't. I couldn't. I'm invested in helping you just as much as you are in me. I *want* to help you. I love you." I said the words not in a romantic way, but a deep-seated, compassionate way. *I can't abandon her, she needs me. And it's nice to be needed.* The more I focused on her problems, the less I remembered to worry about my own.

In the wake of everything that happened, that night I never really knelt down to start my fast. And before eleven o'clock that evening, I'd broken it by eating, anyway. My problems could be forgotten, but they refused to go away.

CHAPTER 17 – LETDOWN

Five days after Bishop asked me to fast, I was sitting outside the chapel waiting for Sacrament Meeting to start. Other members gathered in the foyer in front of me, greeting each other with hugs and handshakes, chatting amicably about their weeks and upcoming summer plans. I felt sick to my stomach, and on the brink of tears. I had told myself, and Bishop, that I would be strong and have an amazing fast. I was so confident I invited a number of close friends to participate with me in search of personal understanding, strength, and direction: Elena, Kim, Allison, Emily, Ashlynn, Ruby, my parents, and Alex. And then everything had fallen apart. I wasn't strong enough. I was *never* strong enough.

I saw Ruby on her way to Sunday School and she smiled at me. "How's your fast going?" she asked.

"I don't think I'm doing it anymore."

"Oh. What about the others? What about me?" she wondered.

Bitterness swelled inside me as I replied, "Yes, as you can see, you aren't the only one who lets people down. I'm pretty damn good at it too."

She didn't say anything else, and walked off. My anger with myself prevented me from feeling guilty about how I'd just treated her.

When the ushers opened the doors to let us into the chapel, I tried not to shudder as I entered. I was supposed to take the sacrament, I was supposed to be spiritual, I was supposed to think about bearing my testimony. Instead my stomach was knotted, my throat was dry, and I wanted to curl up and die. *I suck at being a person, and I suck worse at being a righteous god-fearing individual.* It would be another Sunday of squirming in my seat and feeling immensely uncomfortable the entire meeting. *Why am I even bothering?* I love being Mormon.

The opening hymn was "Be Thou Humble." The words of the song stabbed at me: "Be thou humble and the Lord, thy God, shall lead thee." I sure didn't feel like I was being led. I just felt lost. So was I not humble? The first verse of the Sacrament Hymn said, "make sure your hands and hearts are pure." I felt like I was going to vomit. I couldn't do it. I couldn't. I couldn't take the sacrament. When the tray came to me, I wished I could cease to exist, just "poof" and be

gone. I felt like every single person in the room was watching me, and judging me. I refused to look up at the stand where I knew Bishop was overseeing the administration of the ordinance. He'd be watching me for sure. I spent the rest of the meeting staring at my black shoes, demarcating every scratch and scuff mark, continuing to wrestle against the tightness in my stomach.

After the meeting concluded, I wanted to run home and shut myself up in my room and cry in the fetal position, but I knew that Bishop wanted to see me in his office.

As I entered, he said, "You look sad."

I sat down and blinked hard to hold back my tears. "That's because I don't want to be here."

"Why not?"

"I feel like a failure. I can't handle letting people down. I hate it more than anything."

"Daniel, it's okay."

"It's not. I couldn't do it and I suck."

"God's not angry. We still have work to do." This time I felt his compassion for me and believed it. He really did care about me, and I found that comforting.

"Do you strongly feel God's love for you?"

I shook my head. "I've never doubted that He's there and that He cares. But I don't strongly *feel* His love."

"Think about your love for Ruby."

"Okay?" I thought about our conversation on the steps. Her collapsed against me, quaking with sobs so fierce they seemed almost able to tear her apart.

"That's how God feels for you."

I could accept that, but I sure as hell couldn't feel it. "Why can't I feel it then? What am I doing so wrong to be so hardened?"

"I don't think anything; you just need to work." He got out his Bible and opened to Luke 24 and read to me about the disciples on the road to Emmaus when Jesus comes to them and they don't recognize him. "They didn't recognize him because he needed to teach them some things."

I scoffed. "So I'm supposed to be learning something? Years into a struggle and I'm supposed to be learning something?"

“They were good men, they were right there with the Twelve, so they had to be good men. But they needed to learn. You just need to work. You need to feel and understand God’s love for you.” I nodded, trying to open my heart to his counsel. “Can I give you a blessing?”

“Sure.”

Bishop laid his hands on my head and I tried to imagine the heavens opening and God being aware of me and using Bishop to give me personal revelation and blessings. It was as if I could almost feel a thin line of light streaking down from somewhere above, through the building, right down into the room, and into the center of the crown of my head, piercing through me. I listened intently to every word Bishop said, allowing the spirit to flow over me and wrap me up in its arms of comfort. Bishop blessed me that I would be able to comprehend and feel how deeply and un-judgmentally God loves me. The thing that stuck out most to me was when he said: “I bless you to understand that there are those around you who want to be your friends who you need to accept.” *What? There are people who want to get close to me that I’m not letting? Who wants to help that I’m shutting out?* He closed the same way he started – that I would know God’s love for me.

“Thanks for that, Bishop,” I said after he finished. I stood up to leave. “You’ve already been a help to me.”

“This is far from over,” he replied, shaking his head.

“But you’re caring about me, and that’s something I need right now.”

“Daniel, I *ache* when I think of how you are suffering. I can’t think of anything harder to be dealing with. Anything. Please be patient with me as I continue to ponder and pray how to help you.”

“I will. Be patient with me too.”

“Absolutely.”

From there the week didn’t get much better. Monday I had my next meeting with Dr. Stone and we basically just repeated our confusion session. He asked me question after question I didn’t know how to answer.

“Why are you so concerned about the pain of others?”

“I hurt. I always have. I’ve never cared. I just bleed. But others hurt and I can’t stand it. I can’t. I hate it. It kills me. I want them to give it to me. ‘I’ll help you. I’ll take away your pain.’”

“But you won’t let anyone do that for you.” I shrugged. What should I say? “That’s a double-standard.”

I tried to move the conversation away from myself. “That’s why Ruby frustrates me so much. She won’t give me her pain. I’ve fixed other people, but she won’t let me. It’s infuriating.”

“Daniel, you aren’t Christ.”

“What?”

“You’re trying to *be* Christ.”

“I…”

“That’s not your job. You aren’t meant to be the savior of the World.”

But I want to be. I want Ruby’s hurt. I want everyone’s hurt.

“What’s wrong with me?” I said.

Dr. Stone shook his head. “Why should only you get hurt and no else? That’s not very fair.”

I didn’t have a response. *Something’s wrong with me. I want it. The hurt. I want to lie on the floor ripped open and bleeding and die. Why? Oh God.*

Dr. Stone set his notepad aside. “I have some bad news.”

“Oh?”

“I’m going to be moving to Arizona in a few weeks. I’ve taken a job there and with my wife and new baby, I couldn’t pass up the opportunity.” I didn’t say anything, so after a few seconds he went on. “You’ll need to find a new counselor, I’m afraid.”

As if I didn’t already have enough challenges, now I would either need to quit therapy or find a new counselor and start all over again.

I left Dr. Stone’s office angry. At him, at the situation, at everything. I knew it wasn’t Dr. Stone’s fault, but I felt like this was just one more obstacle to deal with; so he was the easiest target for my frustration.

The bookstore was right upstairs, so I stopped to get another journal, since I was almost out of pages. As I left with my purchase, I looked over toward Brigham Square. There were a bunch of students gathered around, far more than normal, and I could hear someone shouting on a megaphone.

I went over to see what the commotion was about. Groups of students stood in small clusters, talking. A number of BYU officials, all wearing earpieces and dressed in suits and ties, milled on the edges of the crowd. They hung back by the leafless trees flanking the square, away from the circles of students; watching everyone like a bunch of circling vultures, waiting for an opening. Some of them swooped in to break up a group that apparently had grown too large. Many of the students who were stopped had their backpacks or books in their arms, and had clearly just stopped on their way to the library or their next class. Many of them kept looking over at the steps of the Wilkinson Center, and I followed their gaze.

A boy with reddish-brown hair, wearing a blue button-up that said *Soulforce* on it, with a striped tie and khakis, was being led away by a white-haired plainclothes policeman. He would reach up and touch his earpiece every few steps, as if listening to commands coming in from somewhere else. Applause peppered the crowd as he was led toward a white van. But not before he handed off the megaphone he'd been using.

"Go on Jake!" someone called out from the crowd.

"What's going on?" I asked a guy next to me. He was wearing a plain purple t-shirt and blue jeans with a bright red sweatband on his left wrist. He also had wire-rim glasses and short, sandy blond hair. He was kinda cute.

"Soulforce," he replied, as if I would know what that meant.

Another guy in the circle offered me a leaflet. He was wearing the same blue button-up with a collar as the guy – Jake – who'd just been arrested. "We're on an Equality Ride."

"A what?" I took the leaflet after some hesitation.

"We're going across the nation visiting schools and institutions that are discriminatory toward gays and lesbians."

My heart leapt into my throat. Blood rushed to my temples. I felt cold, like I'd just stepped outside into a blizzard without any clothes on. I wanted to drop the leaflet I was holding and bolt. *I shouldn't be here*. Suddenly there was a burst of clapping and cheering and most eyes went back to the steps.

A girl from one of the other circles, leaned over and tugged on the guy's shirt who had given me the leaflet. "I think they've just arrested Jake's parents," she said, pointing.

He shook his head, craning his neck to see. "The Reitan's too, huh?" he said. "They didn't say anything on the megaphone."

She shrugged. “Well, I guess they were trying to get in the way or something.” She glanced at me, but I didn’t know what to say. The nature of their conversation made it sound like what was happening had been scripted, planned.

Another girl, with red hair, went to the top of the steps and shouted into the megaphone: “The policies of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints are killing gay people!” She didn’t get any further than that before being arrested herself, this time by a guard wearing a flat cap; but another girl quickly took her place.

“The BYU Honor Code discriminates against gay and lesbian people who are likely suffering silently under this code’s strict policies.” She too, was quickly arrested.

I felt like I couldn’t breathe. “Are they trying to get arrested?” I asked.

“Yes,” the girl replied.

“Why?”

“Our whole purpose is to bring attention to the dialogue of gay people. This institution oppresses them. I’m an ex-Mormon myself. By standing up and speaking out, we want to help create that dialogue. Get people talking.”

A guy on my right spoke up, his thumbs tucked under the straps of his backpack. “What you’re doing is going to create change about as much as sitting in a chalk circle will change BYUSA.” BYUSA was the official student association on campus, and many students had problems with how they ran things.

“They told you that you weren’t allowed to use the space as a public forum,” someone else said. “And you did anyway.”

“Well, I think it’s great they’re here, because we’re getting a chance to show that we’re open-minded and can be classy about an issue we don’t agree with,” said the kid with blond hair I’d first spoken with earlier.

My head was spinning. These gay people were trying to undermine the Mormon Church in order to promote equality for gay people. I questioned my place in Mormonism, but that didn’t mean I didn’t believe it, or I hated it. I hated me for being same-sex attracted, these people represented the way that I felt. I wanted to side with them, but at the same time, they advocated for the abandonment of my faith in order to live more honestly and openly. I questioned if the death of my religion was a necessary casualty for me to find peace.

The guy who gave me the leaflet tried to get my attention back. “We’re having a rally tonight at five o’clock, over in Kiwanis Park.” He tried to show me something on the leaflet, but I was starting to panic. “You should come.”

I shook my head. “Sorry, I can’t.”

I turned quickly to leave, looking again at the officials on the sides of the crowd, speaking in low tones to one another. This place was dangerous. *What if they saw me? What if they know I’m gay?* As I left Brigham Square, my pace quickened, until I was almost running.

I spent that evening searching out as much information as I could on Soulforce. Their organization, their goals, the names and stories of their riders. I felt the same never-ending conflict inside of me as I tried to decide if Soulforce was a vehicle of good or evil.

The news the next day was full of the protest, arrests, and subsequent rally that had been held at the park. Some BYU students had even come forward to share their stories. I feared what would happen to them now. What sort of Honor Code repercussions would they receive? I also learned that they were coming back in the morning to stage a ‘die-in,’ where Equality Riders and BYU students would march onto campus carrying lilies and then lie down in Brigham Square to represent the lives of LDS kids who had killed themselves over being gay.

I avoided campus because I was too scared. Secretly, I wished I was brave enough to join them. To march down that street, carrying a lily, holding it high for all to see, giving a voice to the pain and suffering that I held inside. I wanted to shout from the rooftops about trying to jump off that building. I wanted to know and to remember the ones that had been successful.

These were *my* people. They knew what I felt and wrestled with and likely had the same feelings of self-hatred. I wondered what all their names were and how many of them there were. Five? A hundred? At what point did it become too much for them? Would the same thing happen to me? Only more questions. Always more questions, never answers.

CHAPTER 18 – TOBI

Soulforce rattled me in a way that I didn't anticipate. I felt like I was being forced to choose a path, one leading toward Mormonism and the other toward being openly gay. Only one path was right and both came with a price, and a loss. Surely there must be a third option, some sort of middle ground... I withdrew back into myself again as I continued wrestling.

Even if I didn't agree with Soulforce's methods, wasn't their motive pure? Could I call it that? I *was* suffering silently, wasn't I? I wasn't brave, and I wasn't out, except to a few people... and I did feel trapped. They were fighting against that.

And yet, identifying as same-sex attracted did not automatically constitute an abandonment of principles and morals to become a glorified sexual act. It did not imply a spurning of God, family, and culture. That seemed to be what some of the Soulforce Riders were calling for.

On the other hand, if I embraced my attractions, Mormons would have trouble continuing to associate with me. They would want me to deny that part of who I was. Anything to do with same-sex landed me square in the pit of abomination, even if I was just fighting to figure myself out. But for many, feelings and attractions were enough to spurn otherwise righteous individuals. I'm not trying hard enough, I'm not praying hard enough, I don't have enough faith if God isn't fixing me and making me straight and "normal" again.

If there was a third path, an in-between, I sure couldn't see it.

I continued trying to wear my mask of 'everything is fine' but it wasn't really working anymore. Ruby called me on my sullen behavior as we were walking to an appointment with her Bishop that night.

"What's going on with you?" she asked, making sure not to step any of the sidewalk cracks as we walked.

"I don't want to talk about it," I said brusquely.

"Why are you being so distant?" She stopped walking and looked up at me.

I shook my head. "I said I don't wanna talk." I motioned for her to keep walking.

“Okay, but *why* is what I’m asking.”

“I’m going back in my shell. I’m putting my walls back up. I can’t do it. I’m a terrible Mormon. I hate myself. I’m exhausted. I’m tired of fighting. I’m tired of trying. People don’t understand me. *I* don’t understand me. At all.”

“But we want to.”

“But you can’t. I mean, I saw Sister Moore from my mission yesterday and told her everything and she said the same thing everyone else does ‘I have no idea what that would be like.’ They can’t fathom it. They can’t conceptualize the pain, the harm, the conflict. It just won’t fit in their brains. So I’m done. I’m done sharing, because no one gets it.”

“Please don’t do this.” She stared at my hand, like she wanted to reach out and grab it, hold it, but she knew I would just pull away. She bit her lip and rocked from one foot to the other.

I was bottling everything up as part of my shame and guilt, but also to protect people from the way I really felt. It was too much for them to bear. If Ruby kept pressing me, maybe I should open the floodgates and let her have it. “It’s deeper than that though, if we’re really honest,” I said, testing the waters.

“I like honest the most,” she said, smiling. We started walking again.

“I can’t let people help me. I can’t do it. Because if others help me that means I wasn’t good enough on my own to do it. And that means I’m weak... and a failure.” I stopped in my tracks and stared at her, my tone grave. “I will not be a failure.” And there it was, more clear than it had ever been before, I would not let people help because I was afraid to be a failure and couldn’t face that. We resumed walking as I continued. “I cut everyone off because I just don’t know how to let them help. I just don’t. I can’t do it. I don’t know how.”

Ruby didn’t have anything to say. She was staring at her toes as we walked. “This is *my* hurt, *my* conflict, *my* problem, *my* failure.”

“That’s selfish.”

“Well, I guess I’m a selfish person,” I snapped, anger flaring inside me.

“Is that what you want?” She glanced at me.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not a hard question. Is that what you want?”

“No, Ruby. I want to lie on the floor, curled up in a ball, sobbing. I want to jump off a building. I want to find a gun and blow my brains out. Is that what you want to hear?”

“Daniel, please don’t say things like that.”

“I’m serious. That’s how I pass most of my nights. Wishing and wishing and wishing. For a way to end it. For the bravery to actually jump this time. My heart’s bleeding. I’m broken, Ruby. I have this beast inside of me clawing at my insides, trying to rip my skin off, and just get me to be gay. Just go for it. Doesn’t matter who you hurt, or what you lose, just be...carnal.” I said the word like it was the filthiest thing that had ever left my mouth.

“You’re not answering my question.”

“I am. You said, ‘is that what you want?’ That’s my answer. *I want to die*. I do.” She stared at me, unsure how to respond. “I spend my time crying, doubting, fighting this terrible thing. And what do I get for it? I win for a minute, a day, two. Then I just mess up again. I’m losing faith. In God, in the Church, in myself.” Now that I’d started the words were just spilling out of me, unhindered. “It’s too much. I don’t want this trial and I don’t want to feel this way anymore and I want to find a girl and I want to fall in love with her and I want to be strong and I want to get married and I want to feel God and I want to be loved and I want to be happy.”

“You’re not happy?”

“Happiness doesn’t exist.”

I said it. I believed it. *I will never fix this.*

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Ruby got called in to see her Bishop almost as soon as we were inside the church, so I sat down to write in my journal while I waited.

Down the hall, my Bishop appeared from his office and saw me. He waved and I waved back, then he stopped to talk to the clerk. A moment later, he came over to where I was sitting. “You okay?” he asked.

“Am I ever?” I half-laughed.

“So-and-so is late for their appointment; you want to come in a minute?”

“Sure,” I said, clicking my pen shut and closing the book before getting up. Inside, he offered me a seat, then put his hands together in his lap like he always did. “What’s up, Bud?”

I shook my head. “Just thinking, like always; struggling. I was talking to Ruby on the way over – she’s seeing her Bishop now – and I just, I dunno, I just hurt so much. Everything sucks.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I just feel so evil all the time. Sick. It makes me absolutely sick.”

He could tell my emotions were roiling. “What happened?” he asked. He wanted to help, but he also knew he didn’t want to kick a hornet’s nest.

I considered where to begin. What *had* set me off this time? “I saw a trailer for this movie called *Summer Storm*. It’s about these two boys, Tobi and Achim. They’re best friends on a championship rowing team. Achim starts dating a girl and Tobi gets jealous. So at summer camp, they run into this other team of athletic gay guys. Basically, it’s a coming out story where Tobi and his teammates are forced to confront prejudices, fears, and their hidden longings. I watched it over, and over, and over.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It just... like stirred something inside me. I want to hold Tobi.” I looked away, unsure how to say next what I felt. Emotions like this simply ran too deep for me. Words weren’t enough. *I am Tobi. I am Peekay. I am Asher. I know their pain, their hurt, their loneliness. Their inability to belong. We are different. I love you Tobi. I hate you Tobi.* I felt like my heart might burst in that instant.

Bishop didn’t press me. He waited until I could speak again. He wanted so badly to understand me. I started crying. “The trailer... there’s a scene where Tobi’s all wet, huddled in a corner, just shaking and crying. That’s me, Bishop. I am Tobi. I feel it, I see it, I know it. I’m eaten up by it. I want it to stop. I want to die. And I want to see this movie more than anything I’ve ever seen before.” I paused, and gave a half-smile through my tears, unsure if I wanted to voice my true feelings. I decided I did. “And I think Tobi’s attractive. There, I said it; I think he’s hot. I think he’s hot and that makes me feel sick to my stomach, but there’s something else there too. A thrill, an excitement, a desire. Carnality at its best, I suppose.” I shrugged.

Bishop nodded. “I understand.”

“Do you?” I didn’t mean to snap, it just happened. I wiped at my eyes.

“I’m trying.”

“Thanks,” I sighed. “I just don’t know. I feel like I need to explore, to know better...”

“I agree. You need connections, Daniel. I have a friend in Salt Lake that runs a group for people who are active in the Church but also claim their homosexuality.”

I nodded, excitement creeping in. *Others like me.* “That sounds great. I haven’t seen anyone else like that. Most everyone I know who accepts homosexuality leaves the Church.”

“I may also be able to put you in touch with the Matis’.”

“I don’t know who that is.”

“They are the parents of a gay son, Stuart, who killed himself on the steps of a chapel in Los Altos, because he couldn’t take the self-conflict anymore.”

“Wow, that’s heavy.”

“His parents are good people.” There was a knock on the door. Bishop went and answered it, spoke briefly with the person, and came back. “My next appointment is here.”

I nodded. “I think anything’s good for me. Anyone you can put me in touch with.” I stood up to leave.

“What about Evergreen?” he asked.

I shook my head. “I don’t know about any of this stuff.”

“Evergreen’s an LDS group strict about staying true to the religion. They offer information and resources for anyone dealing with unwanted homosexuality.”

How had I not heard of them? “That sounds great too. Anything to help the hurt.”

“You have to figure out how to share it, Daniel.”

“I can’t.”

“You must.”

“I don’t know how. *I won’t.*” There wasn’t time for this to become an argument. I said goodbye and walked out, the words ‘See you Sunday’ following me.

CHAPTER 19 – LIKE ME

I looked up Evergreen, the organization Bishop mentioned that was dedicated to maintaining their faith over their same-sex attraction, but I wasn't sure about attending. In that search, I found another organization, called Affirmation, who sounded like they could possibly help me. I really wanted to go, but I was scared shitless to tell anyone. Everything had to be in secret. There was too much riding on my staying hidden. I didn't tell Bishop. I didn't tell Ruby. I didn't tell anyone. But I decided to go. I wanted to see what they were like.

Walking there took me longer than I'd anticipated. All the houses along the way looked identical, with their perfect lawns and flowerboxes, though there were small stylistic differences. A wreath on the door here, a bird-feeder in the tree over there. Everything was perfectly manicured and kept so as to appear flawless; it reminded me eerily of the houses in San Jose around the Mission Home.

I thought back to my last drive with Elder Adams again and how far away that time, that person, that life without difficulty seemed now.

I shielded my eyes from the glaring sun as I looked at the green street sign with white letters to make sure this was the right road. I stood on the porch for what felt like years, urging myself to ring the doorbell. What lay on the other side of that door? Salvation or the end of everything I loved?

A man, in his forties or fifties, I didn't know, answered the door. His hair was greying and he smiled at me and invited me in.

I stood frozen on the doorstep, clutching the strap of my Nintendo bag tightly against my chest. "Please, come in," he said.

I finally convinced myself to step inside, and he shut the door behind us. The meeting was already well underway; it'd taken me that long to find the house.

"I'm Terry, welcome," he said. "You can just set your things in there." He motioned to a small bedroom, off the main entry, where a number of jackets and bags were piled onto a queen-sized bed.

"I... I'm Daniel," I said. I leaned on the edge of the bed to take off my shoes.

“I can tell you’re a bit nervous. Don’t worry about it. This is a safe space,” he said, trying to reassure me.

“Come in. We’re just watching a movie.” The linoleum was cold against the soles of my feet, even with socks on.

I got about halfway into the family room, when all eyes turned to look at me. There were probably ten or twelve gay people there; most of them older, many of them cuddling. I don’t really know what I’d been expecting, but it definitely wasn’t this. I felt myself go red. I turned quickly on my heels and bolted back down the hallway. “I’m sorry, this was a terrible mistake,” I blurted out.

Terry followed me and tried to reassure me as I was putting on my shoes. “No, I... this was a mistake. I need to go.”

“Please, just listen,” he said, trying to calm me. I was starting to tremble. “I can tell this has been frightening for you. I’m sorry it’s been upsetting.” I didn’t say anything in response. “I met a BYU student at the rally at Kiwanis Park last week. He was very nice. Perhaps I could put you in touch?” I wanted instantly to ask a million questions about the rally, and the “die-in.” Had he gone to that as well? But I knew only one thing in that moment, and that was that I needed to leave.

Terry produced a pen and paper and I scrawled out my email address for him. My mind was a blur, rational thought blotted out among the alarm bells screaming in my brain. Meeting another same-sex attracted person would be interesting, but Affirmation was not the right place. Even cuddling, these people were going far beyond what I was comfortable with. I wondered how much of their beliefs they had compromised to get to that level of familiarity. Was I embarking on that same path? *No. My education is paramount and that means staying true to the Honor Code and Church policies. This has been a terrible, terrible mistake.* There could be no same-sex activity, of any kind. I ran out the front door and didn’t look back.

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My hands were shaking as I walked into the Guru’s Café on Center Street. The inside of the restaurant sort of reminded me of a small warehouse with the large pipes running along the ceiling as part of the décor and the metal lights that looked like flowers. I was silently praying

that I didn't run into anyone I knew while I was here. There was a scattering of customers, either ordering at the register in the back, or sitting at various tables throughout the restaurant. There were two guys at a table on the left side toward the back that looked like who I was meant to be meeting. They were chatting as I walked up, trying not to appear too shy.

"Hi. Are you...?" I rested a nervous hand on one of the wooden chairs.

They looked up in unison. The one closest to me, with short red hair that was a bit messy and a crooked smile, asked, "You're Daniel?"

I couldn't help smiling back, and nodded. My heart was pounding.

"Yes, yes, sit down." The one with dark hair and glasses told me to pull up a seat. I slid out the wooden chair and sat down, sliding my Nintendo bag off my shoulders onto the back.

"I'm so nervous!" I said aloud, bouncing on my toes.

"There's no need for that," the red-head said to reassure me. "I'm Trent."

"And I'm John," chimed the other.

Once the pleasantries were out of the way and we'd ordered our food, we launched into getting to know one another. I could not believe I was actually meeting other same-sex attracted Mormons, ones who went to BYU even. Going to the Affirmation meeting had been the right decision if for no other reason than because it had led me here.

"I told you some about me in the email I wrote, but I want to get to know you," I said to Trent.

He nodded and looked at John, but John gestured for him to go first, and he nodded.

"Okay then. So I grew up Mormon in California, and I always felt different and didn't know why. I just didn't fit in with the other kids in my ward. When I was thirteen, I came to conclusion that I was gay." I cringed when he said that word, since it was one I tried to stay away from, but I didn't say anything out loud. Clearly, he was comfortable identifying as gay, whereas I wanted to distance myself from the baggage and preconceptions that accompanied that word.

"I remember when I was fourteen, I'd just been ordained a Teacher, Stuart Matis committed suicide on our chapel steps."

"Oh, wow," I exclaimed. I remembered Bishop mentioning he knew Stuart's parents. My mind tried to grasp what an event like that would do to someone. I tried to think of myself in Trent's place, and couldn't. It was too much.

So I sat, kind of stunned, and waited for him to continue, my food forgotten.

“I knew once that happened that I couldn’t tell anyone how I really felt.”

I shook my head in agreement. “I can’t even imagine. He was in your ward?”

Trent nodded. “Being gay was scary, but I knew from Stuart that I didn’t want to die. I needed to find a way to make it... work.” He glanced at John, but he didn’t say anything, so Trent went on. “When I was sixteen, I got into a relationship with an older guy who ended up taking advantage of me. I got out of it after a few months, but it left me feeling more confused.” Trent shifted a bit in his seat, and John put his hand on Trent’s arm to reassure him. Trent was being so honest about everything he’d done.

“I decided after some more time trying to figure myself out, that I wanted to date someone more my age. When I was eighteen, I started dating a boy from another high school.”

I tried to imagine what it would be like to date someone of the same-sex. There was something thrilling in thinking about it, but something reviling as well.

“I’ve done pretty much everything there is to do with guys.”

I shook my head, flabbergasted. “And now?” Trent and John seemed to be way ahead of me in this process.

Trent shrugged. “Somewhere along the way I found faith. And that’s what I’m committed to now.” I was floored. “I feel strongly that the gospel is right. It has to be.” He broke into a smile. “I’ve always wanted to be a Dad.”

I could relate to that. John jumped in. “Coming out is really about values, Daniel. What do you want? You need to decide what you value. What’s more important to you?” *Do I want to have a family or do I want to suck dick?*

“So, what, you’re like dating girls?” I asked.

Trent nodded. “Yeah, but I have trouble meeting them.”

“Same,” John agreed. “Wish I had a bigger dating pool.” He laughed a little.

“I’m just the opposite,” I said. “I’ve never had any trouble making friends with girls.”

“Really?” Trent asked. “Sounds like you need to focus on getting better guy friends. Straight ones.”

“But what if I’m attracted to them?”

“Look,” Trent cut in. “Just because you feel a certain way doesn’t mean you can’t live the gospel. Sometimes I wonder *why* I’m not allowed to have relationship with another guy, but I just do it for obedience’s sake. I follow for the sake of following.”

“But why?” I asked.

“It’s like with the Honor Code,” John jumped in. “Some people are trying to fight the part that doesn’t let us have beards, right? Maybe I disagree too, and think they should be allowed, but that doesn’t mean I’m just going to stop shaving. I *did* sign. It’s about your integrity. Stick to what you value.”

I nodded, feeling so much respect for their position. Honestly, I was almost overwhelmed. They seemed like such perfect examples. They had it together and seemed like they’d almost figured everything out. They were way ahead of me in this process.

“For you, faith is the highest value, so that’s what you stick to.” They both nodded. “Really, that’s all I need, I guess. I need to make a decision. If I feel good about that road – at peace with myself – then I should keep going. Like you two.”

Trent shook his head and said off-handedly, “I mean, I’m not the best example. My past is colorful, for sure.”

“But, a lo major, maybe you made those mistakes so someone else wouldn’t have to. Like me.”

“I hope so,” he replied.

“So where is your faith taking you?”

“Hopefully to a wife and family,” John said.

“I want to serve a mission real bad,” Trent said. “And, let me just say, you may arrive at conclusions that are different than mine and I’ll still be your friend.”

“Thanks, that means a lot to me.”

I came away from our meeting feeling like God was actually looking out for me. God was looking out for *me*. I could not believe the way that I felt. I had been so nervous, but this couldn’t have gone better, even in my head. Of all the same-sex attracted guys I could’ve met, I found the two committed to the gospel. *That’s where my real values lie.*

Later that night, I got distracted from journaling by the sound of music outside our apartment. I looked outside and saw flashing lights. *The Enclave* across the street was having a block party or something. I went to check it out. One of the ground floor apartments had propped up giant speakers on their kitchen chairs in their doorway and were playing jams from their computer. The setup of the courtyard, with apartments on all four sides, made the perfect

amplifier for the music as it bounced and reverberated off the buildings. Two doors down they had set up a ping-pong table and were passing out ice cream floats. People were standing on the balconies overlooking the courtyard chatting in small groups, most of them likely on dates. A few people were still making the most of the complex swimming pool, but most of the crowd was down by the music, dancing. The music was bumping and so were the people, bodies rocking to the beat. Well, as good as awkward white guys and gals can jam.

I looked for Allison or my roommates in the crowd, but didn't see anyone. I managed to find some people I knew a little bit from my ward and joined their circle. One of them whose name was Brennan, gave me a high five. He seemed a bit awkward, but maybe that was just me not knowing how to read him properly. Either way, I knew these people enough to stand next to them, relax a little bit and enjoy myself. Finals were coming and people were eager to let loose and have a good time.

The night was perfect, not too hot, but not chilly either. The music attracted a lot of people from other complexes who weren't part of our ward. A couple of guys caught my eye. Five actually. I watched them intently while trying not to appear too obvious to the people I was with. *They weren't, were they? Oh God, they were.* They were actually freaking dancing on one another. Guys. One boy started running his hands through the other's hair while they were thrusting and rubbing on each other.

Desire was in my face, screaming at me. I wanted in. I wondered if they were gay or just really good friends? Did they go to BYU? Most people in Provo went to BYU. If they didn't, then who were they? Where did they live? I wanted to talk to them, to get connected. Maybe I was misreading them and they weren't really like that...but they were being pretty explicit in their dancing. I left the friends I was dancing with, so I could watch them better. They got tired after a few minutes and decided to call it quits. I trailed them at a distance as they left the party, as if that would make them stop and pay attention to me. Accept me. Include me. God.

I walked around the block to collect myself and calm my raging thoughts. Then I went back to the dance. *Everything's cool.* But before long, I found myself lingering on guys from my ward. *Is he gay? What about him?* Even some of the ones I talked to in a feeble attempt at "being better friends," I ended up wondering about. The night was ruined. I couldn't get my mind off my desires.

Just when I thought the path was clear, and I was re-committing myself to follow Trent and John along the gospel path, here came the other side yelling, “pick me!” I had no idea what to do, I really didn’t.

Why do people have to make concessions? Trent said that, and it made me think of Bishop Sharp. They are okay with *both*. Even more frustrating when I was looking for answers that fell decisively into right and wrong.

The next day I found myself mulling over the previous day’s conversation, and I felt distracted from my studying. Ruby made the comment that not seeing each other for twenty-four hours was “super unprecedented.”

I wasn’t sure why, but that assertion made my skin bristle and I told her exactly what I thought about that. “Ruby, summer is coming and I’m not going to be around as much. I’m gonna be working more hours, and spending more times playing video games and whatever else I want; not cooped up here in the library all the time.”

“Okay.” She sounded absolutely crushed.

I sighed. I knew that our experience together on the steps of the Maeser had changed the way she felt about me, and acted around me. I’d promised not to hurt her, and didn’t want to, but... “Look Ruby, I love all the time that we get to spend together, but I can’t be with you *all* the time! I’m not your boyfriend! There’s no way I’m tying myself down like that.”

I was trying to do my Spanish prep, but simply wasn’t feeling it. I began packing my bag. “I’m gonna go. I don’t know where. Probably to Trent’s.”

I don’t know what spurred me to lie to her like that. Where else was I going to go? Of course that’s where I was going. I’d found someone who felt the way I did, knew what the conflict was like inside of me, had found a way to remain committed to the Church; I wanted to spend as much time with him as possible.

He’d said yesterday that he learned by experience: “I have to put my hand on the burner to know it’s hot.” Being burned would take time to heal, and leave a scar. As I walked toward Trent’s apartment, I wondered, *am I the same way? Am I going to have to know the mistakes to get it in my head that the Church is actually the best answer?* Trent sticks with the Church because that’s always where he ends back up. *Why* are the attractions I feel so strong? Can feelings *this* forceful really be that bad? I wanted to ask him that and a hundred other questions

burning in my mind, but no one answered when I knocked. He lived in the same apartment complex I had as a freshman, so I went to visit another friend.

After forty-five minutes, I went back, but he still wasn't home.

I saw a girl from my old ward walking by and waved, calling out to her from where I was on the third floor. Her name was Amanda, and I always remembered her as being the absolute bubbliest person I'd ever met. I don't think I'd ever seen her sad, or down, or troubled about anything. She just always found a way to be happy. I respected that and wished I could be more like her. She cried out a greeting and that it was so good to see me. I rushed down the stairs to embrace her, and then agreed to walk her home. We chatted as we walked, and she offered me a ride home. I agreed, and we set off for her car. She told me she was graduating next week; I couldn't believe it. When she asked me how I was, I replied that I was struggling a bit, and on the second time round, she actually took the bait.

I was working myself up to coming out to her, but kept dancing around the subject. She wasn't afraid to go there, though. "So what you're really trying to tell me is..." She trailed off, leaving me the space to say the words. But even with all the people I'd told, it wasn't getting any easier for some reason. I sucked in my breath to summon the courage I needed. Before I could, she said, "is that you're gay." I stopped dead and just stared at her. My shock must have showed on my face because she laughed.

"How did you...?"

She unlocked her car, and we got in, and started driving. "So talk," she said.

Now that the bomb was dropped, the rest was easy. I gave her the run-down on my struggles, self-conflict, and attempted suicide. Then I told her about Trent, which was why I was over there in the first place, and how he seemed like such a blessing. Of all the people I could've met, God gave me him.

"So what are you gonna do?" She asked, with genuine interest.

"Right now? I think explore. Talk to people. Get to know Trent, and John, better. Seek out others and see how they do it."

"Well," she gave a laugh. "There aren't any easy answers. I know that much from studying the gospel. Not just for that, for anything." I nodded, but she wasn't done. She was

overflowing with love and compassion for me. I was so grateful I'd run into her. "Daniel, I want you to know that you can do this. I absolutely believe in you. There's hope. Do you see that?"

I nodded, actually agreeing a little bit. "Yeah, I guess I do."

"Oh Daniel, I wish you could feel how much love I have for you."

"I don't even really know you."

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter. It's not about us. Daniel, please trust me. There's a place for you here. Be your best. Be one of the 10%. God did not make a mistake with you. He didn't. There's a place for you in sacrament, there's a place for you in the temple. Don't lose that." She reached over and squeezed my hand, smiling in that ever-so-disarming way; like all she had to do was smile and, somehow, you could just feel in your bones that it was going to work out alright. Beyond her smile, I was struck by how soft her hands were.

Her phone started ringing then and we'd reached my place. I said goodbye, thanked her for the chat, and got out.

After she drove away, I stood there for a while, marveling at her, and myself. I barely knew her and yet I told her. Was I going to tell everyone? *Is it bad to be so honest? She was so hopeful. Are these desires really that wrong? Should I be working to curb them as I am? Am I going to have to follow Trent's path to know which way is right? Is that a good way to live?* I felt like so much was still up in the air. But it felt good to talk about it, to talk about me, to be honest. I would keep searching, and like Amanda suggested, keep hoping.

CHAPTER 20 – TORN

I kept trying to get ahold of Trent in the days that followed, but he disappeared and stopped returning my calls. And he was never home when I went to visit. Amanda called me though and told she wanted me to meet her gay friend, Tim.

I agreed to do so and we set to meet the following Sunday. When he drove up, I didn't really know what to do with myself. He was attractive, short black hair, well-dressed, and sporting sexy sunglasses that all but screamed "fabulous" as he pulled up in his convertible. My first impression of him was that he was what I would call a "super flamer." But if I was gay too, could I use that term anymore?

I got into the passenger seat, trying not to act too awkward. He decided we should drive the Alpine Loop while getting to know each other. I told him about me, and how I knew Amanda, and then he told me about himself.

"Oh, I figured it out when I was like twelve. You know? The boy across the classroom lookin' mighty fine." He winked at me, and I wanted to melt into the leather seat.

"I came out in high school."

"In Utah?! What was that like?" I couldn't even imagine the prejudice and discrimination he must've faced. *How brave.*

"Darlin', when you come out in Mormon-town, you instantly become the most popular kid in school."

"What?"

"Yeah. Every Mormon girl wants to have a gay best friend." He laughed like it was nothing.

"So how did you end up at BYU?"

He looked at me over the rims of his sunglasses. "Oh, I didn't want to go to BYU. No sirree. But my Bishop counseled me that it would be a safe place. So I gave in and decided to apply, but only because of my Bishop. I was just sacred that I was going to be alone." He a hand up to his forehead, going completely over-the-top. "I didn't want to be a lone sufferer, dying in self-made silence."

I almost snorted. “Are you alone?”

“Heavens, no. I’ve got all kinds of friends. And they’re all over the spectrum. Married to girls, dating guys, falling away from the Church, staying in the Church; everything in between.”

I couldn’t really pay any attention to the forests and trees we were driving past because I was too interested in Tim and his experiences.

“So where do you stand on the whole thing?”

“Well, let me say that I know I can be with a woman. And I am glad for that knowledge, even if I paid *dearly* to obtain it.” He made a wry face. Again I asked myself if I would need to date a guy in order to learn what I wanted.

“So are you like out to everyone?”

“Well, I don’t really hide, if that’s what you’re asking. Guys come out to me all the time because they know I’m gay.” He was in Men’s Chorus, and orchestra, and did acting. “I just got done with a part that was pretty flamboyant, if I do say so myself. I had rhinestones and a feather boa even.” This time, I couldn’t help laughing. Somehow it just fit Tim so well. “I mean, I do have to be careful, especially now that I’m getting bigger parts and doing more prominent things with the school. People are starting to get wary. They *are* watching me.” I felt a tingle of fear go through me and remembered the guys in suits at the Soulforce rally.

I could tell that Tim wasn’t one to shy away from being the center of attention. “Are you dating?”

“I mean, I wouldn’t call it that. There is a boy that I cuddle with now and again, but ‘boyfriends’ is too strong of a term. And the gospel *is* important to me. I’m not some loose apostate. I know I could do more to be better. I could work harder at ‘standing in holy places’ – is that the Especially for Youth theme this year?”

I shook my head and shrugged. I had no idea.

“I’ve been thinking about experimenting. Trying to find someone to date.”

He held up a finger in caution. “Well, lemme just warn you honey that everyone I know – including me – that’s screwed somebody... that was before making temple covenants. You’re on a whole other level.”

I sighed and looked away, staring at the passing scenery. Again, no real solution for me. “Would it be worth it?” I asked myself aloud.

“I don’t think so,” he replied, but then shrugged. “There’s *always* a way back though.”

I mentioned Trent and his analogy about the burner. Tim took off his sunglasses, so he could see me better. “Let me be serious for a second.”

“Yeah?”

“You be careful around that boy, Trent.”

“Oh?”

“I don’t think he’s in a good spot just now.”

“How so?”

“Well, I can’t really talk about it; it’s not my place.”

The conversation lulled after that, and we talked about more mundane things like our summer plans. Tim was off to Europe for a few weeks, and wouldn’t be back until the end of May. Still, I was glad to have met him; if only because it gave me a different perspective from Trent and John. There was more than one type of same-sex Mormon, and apparently, they didn’t all get along either; more food for thought about my own path.

I found another book called *In Quiet Desperation*, by a gay Mormon named Ty Mansfield, that also had a section by the Matis’. Reading it was a powerful experience for me, especially learning more about Stuart and his dedication to the gospel and sole desire to have his same-sex attraction taken away from him. He wore holes in his carpet from spending so much time on his knees praying that God would fix him and take away the longings he had. And when they didn’t go away, he blew his brains out. Ty’s part was a different tone. It was super gospel-heavy. Faith this and faith that, atonement, Christ, and joy in the journey. I understood that he was trying to be sincere, but I couldn’t stomach all that rhetoric and preachy patronization. I ended up putting the book down and not going back to it.

My cousin was getting married so I skipped out on a Mission Reunion to go to that. My cousin Danielle picked me up. She was a few years older than me and good friends with Alex.

As soon as I got in the car, I knew that before the day was over, I would come out to her. After a few minutes into the drive, I asked, “Where’s your husband? He couldn’t come?”

An awkward silence followed. Then she decided to tell me the truth. “We... we got divorced, Daniel.”

“Oh.” *How could I not have known that?* I felt so embarrassed. Divorce, like being gay, was generally a taboo subject in Mormonism, so our families likely pretended it hadn’t happened. That was always easier. Like my parents wanted me to do: just sweep it back under the rug and press onward.

So she had baggage too. We chatted about my family members. I told her about Alex and Lindsay, and even some about Carter. She caught me up on her family dealings as well.

Eventually she got around to the subject I knew she would. “So, how’s dating?”

I looked out the window and took a deep breath. “It’s...” I moved my head around, dancing around the answer. “It’s difficult.”

She smiled, but didn’t say anything.

Suddenly, I punched the dashboard, and Dani jumped. “This is so stupid! Why can’t I just say it? Why can’t I just talk?”

“Daniel, it’s okay. Whatever it is. Trust me.”

“It’s just so frustrating. Why can’t I just say the words. It’s three stupid words.”

“What are they?” she prompted.

Finally, I got it out. “I’m same-sex attracted.” I breathed out and briefly closed my eyes, then turned to look at her to see how she responded.

Dani pursed her lips and thought for a moment before replying. “That sounds so hard, Daniel.”

I laughed and smiled and relaxed a little more into my seat. “It is.”

“So do you go to the temple?” She connected the dots pretty quickly.

“About that...”

“Mhmmm?”

“I don’t think I’m gonna go inside. I’m not willing to sacrifice my personal honesty to save face with the relatives.”

“Well, do you still have a testimony?”

Her question stung for some reason, and I wasn’t expecting that. The car felt too small, the same way it had when Vicki was grilling me.

“I don’t know anymore,” I said, not shying away from the way that I felt. “I haven’t for a while now.”

Our conversation was cut short because we arrived at Dani's sister's house. We got out and greeted everyone, then drove with them to some soccer fields, where one of my first cousins once removed had a game. We left the kids with her husband's mother, who I'd never met before. I sat in the back and pondered while the two of them chatted away and we drove up to Logan.

Once we arrived, I ended up going inside. I'd weighed it again in my mind and decided that attending the ceremony would be okay. I wasn't actively participating, or making promises I wouldn't keep. I was just watching.

Waiting for the ceremony to begin, I thought about where I was with everything, especially Dani's question: *Where is your testimony?*

I felt okay and the chapel we were sitting in was peaceful. The Spirit, or something I didn't think I fully understood, was there, and I felt calmed. I felt *something*. And that something, even if I couldn't name it outright, reconfirmed in my mind why I was there and that I wouldn't abandon the Church. I couldn't.

The sealing itself made me cry. I watched them smiling and happy, reveling in one another's presence. They were now married for time and all eternity, so long as they remained faithful. I was jealous. Something in my head said, *Hey, that's what you'll be missing if you leave. Keep the faith.* But at the exact same time I wondered why my desire to have a strong boy take care of me was so powerful. These two polar opposites pushed at one another with enough force to give me a never-ending headache. Bishop seemed to think there was a way to have both and so did Trent. I just had to figure out how to find it, too.

CHAPTER 21 – DESERT RECKONINGS

Three months after coming out to myself and a few others I felt I could trust, I was still knee-deep in the process of reconciling my same-sex attraction with my Mormonism. If the gospel was true, then by default I was evil; there didn't seem to be much getting around that. So I needed a way to not be same-sex attracted. Or a way to accept, be open about it, and skirt around self-hatred. Such a search seemed paramount because I knew I wanted to navigate a path that kept me close to the Church. And then there was the additional small matter of who would still accept me and who would leave once they knew the truth. My unknowns persistently insisted on staying that way.

To give me breathing room, Bishop invited me to join a spiritual retreat. He thought time away would help me find clarity about what came next. I accepted his invite with enthusiasm. Bishop also invited a number of people from the psychology department where he worked. There were eleven of us altogether.

For the trek down from Salt Lake City to Southern Utah, I went in the car Bishop was driving and I sat between two girls around my age, twenty-one or twenty-two. Jordyn was a psych student getting ready for her dissertation. She had straight blond hair and a floppy hat that was too big for her head. The dark-haired church-mouse of a girl was Bobbie. I was intrigued why she'd come because she was introverted, and didn't seem the camping or hiking type. Her dad, Zach, was driving the other car so maybe he'd made her come. I was curious about Bobbie, but didn't want to come off as over-bearing. Brennan sat in the passenger seat. I hadn't seen him again since that night at the dance.

After a few hours in the car, we stopped in Capitol Reef National Park. I was so glad to be outside and spun in a circle with my arms wide as we exited the cars. The day was clear and beautiful, the sun not too hot, and the sky a rich blue peppered with puffs of white cloud. We were flanked by red rock cliffs on both sides. They were rust colored with black and tan striations. We were meant to hike a dry riverbed, but Bishop went off with Brennan before we could get underway, so while we waited I chatted with Jackson. He was a psych student under

Bishop, married with two kids already, but not much older than me. I hinted that I was same-sex attracted, but didn't come out and actually say it. His simple response was, "I think homosexuality is the hardest struggle."

Once Bishop and Brennan were back, we set off. The going wasn't too strenuous and allowed us time to get to know one another. Cooper was aloof, but friendly. Also doing psych. He was extremely attractive as well, though I hated myself for even having the thought. Will was Bishop's co-worker and father of four. He mainly worked with anxiety, OCD, and sexual disorders. Cathy was forty-nine, a counselor for troubled teens, the oldest one on the trip, and nervous about being able to keep up with the rest of us. Tyler, like Brennan, lived in my complex but I'd never interacted with him. He was balding and wore open-toed sandals. Not the most practical for hiking, if you asked me, but it worked for him. Zach was in his late forties and carried a fanny pack that clashed with his white fisherman's hat. I didn't learn much about him at the beginning, besides already knowing he worked with Bishop and Bobbie was his daughter, because he always seemed to be chatting with someone else.

We came to what Bishop called "the slot," a ten-foot drop into a pit of water. From up top, we couldn't tell how deep the water was down there. Cooper went first, then Will. The water was waist-high. Bishop knew we'd have to work together to get everyone down and this was only one of the places we'd need teamwork to be successful. I went down somewhere in the middle of the group and then helped ferry the packs of the people behind me to dry ground.

Later, Brennan and I found ourselves together, ahead of the rest of the group. I marveled at my surroundings, like how green the trees growing out of the riverbed were because as far I could tell, everything was just sand. They had to be getting water from somewhere, but I couldn't tell where. Some of the trees bent in directions that didn't seem possible; growing up and then curving and running parallel to the ground. One of them went up then made a U-shape, so the branches and the top of the tree touched the ground. We saw six deer and some massive webs filled to the brim with blue and orange caterpillars. There must've been three hundred wriggling around inside. Brennan wanted to poke them, but I said leave them be. Nature's power was even still evident where the river had carved out pieces of the rock face, though the force behind that power had long dried. I welcomed the chance to commune with that power and get to know these people as well.

We came to a fork and didn't know which way to go so Brennan and I sat to wait for everyone else to catch up. He told me about his past, and it sounded like my own: Rejection, bullying, misunderstanding. One of Brennan's biggest struggles was in relationships. I told him about my same-sex attraction, but before we got a good conversation going, the others caught up.

At the end of the hike, we learned we had to forge the Fremont River. My shoes had barely finished drying from "the slot" and I wasn't particularly excited to get them wet again. Driving over Boulder Mountain, I held my shoes out the window to help them dry. If I'd known my feet were getting wet on this trip, I'd have packed more than one pair.

I asked Bishop if I could borrow his phone so I could call my father for his birthday. I spent forty minutes waving the phone around, trying to get a signal. I got frustrated, but everyone else in the car enjoyed my erratic movements. Once we'd parked at Escalante Airport, I found a ridge and was able to get two bars to complete a call, though my father said the connection was horrific. *Happy 50th*. His birthday had been good, he told me. We small-talked and he told me about his day and his gifts. My mother got on the line and told me not to get ticks. *Aren't moms great?*

When we began the descent along the slick-rock into Escalante, I found myself walking next to Cooper. I tried to pretend I couldn't see his well-defined arms in the moonlight. I hinted about my struggles but was too embarrassed, or shy, or angry about my thoughts – I wasn't sure which – to say out loud I had same-sex attraction. He expressed understanding, but then we lapsed back into silence. I didn't know what else to say. When we got to the bottom, I found a good spot of sand, laid out my sleeping bag, and was out cold.

Morning arrived cold and gray, with light rain. We hiked over to a place Bishop called "Blue Bodies," basically a swimming hole. Bishop put on his swim trunks and said, "Let's go!"

We looked at him like he was crazy. He saw this as an opportunity to push ourselves to do something we didn't want to. Will went first, then Cooper. I tried not to look when Cooper took his shirt off. I jumped in after Jordyn. The water was cold enough to live up to its name. We quickly swam to the other side and huddled together on the rocks just above the pool. Everyone went in except Bobbie. She outright refused, especially with the weather.

Once we'd dried a bit and were done shivering, Bishop asked us all to share our personal goals, or why we'd come on this trip. Some in the group sought peace of mind in the midst of their various difficulties, others wanted a break from real life.

Cathy's reasons were a bit heavier. "I'm trying to come to terms with being estranged from my mom," she confessed.

"That sounds really hard," Bishop offered.

Cathy nodded, fighting back tears. After everyone had spoken who wanted to, Jackson and I were the only ones who hadn't volunteered.

"Jackson?" Bishop prompted, but he wasn't ready. He shook his head, emphatic about staying silent, lips pressed firmly together into a tiny line.

So I went last, and almost not at all. I found it hard to be honest in front of everyone and it reminded me of the car ride with Dani. Why was it so damn hard to actually say what was tearing at my heart? I'd told plenty of people now, including Jackson and Brennan, with hints to Jordyn, Will, and Cooper. But it was *still* hard to spit the words. *Why?!*

Like with Dani, I just had to plow ahead. Just start talking and go for it. "I'm here because I'm trying to reconcile the testimony I had, and maybe still do, with same-sex attraction." I felt like I had with Amanda. Like I'd just dropped a bomb in the center of the circle. Bishop hadn't told anyone beforehand who I was or what I was dealing with. I could've easily gone the whole weekend never speaking once about my attractions and I probably would've gotten on fine with everyone. But there was something in sharing this, in being open and honest about it. Finally, it was out. And the bomb didn't explode like I expected. Everyone seemed to take my confession in stride.

We went river wading again. We hiked four miles in the water, slipping on moss and sloshing around. I was still thinking about earlier. "It doesn't make sense to me why it's so hard to just say. It's not like I'm trying to run away from it, like I'm trying to hide. I don't see why I can't just say the words out loud."

I wasn't speaking to anyone directly, but Will was right next to me and he said, "It was very brave of you, Daniel."

"Yes, thank you," Zach added. Bishop was a few steps ahead and he paused to see if Jackson's overhearing us would encourage Jackson to open up, but he still didn't want to say

anything. He occupied himself with catching fish by stabbing at them with his walking poles. Tyler and Cooper sharpened sticks and joined in; I tried to help as well.

Cooper came over to me as we hunted. "I appreciated what you shared earlier," he said.

"Yeah?" I tried not to blush.

"Yeah. It takes real courage to admit something like that."

"I guess." It wasn't a guess though, because I knew exactly what he meant, I simply didn't believe it about myself. "Sorry I didn't tell you last night on the way down," I added, not meeting his eyes.

"I sort of put two and two together," Cooper said, flashing a smile. He was dangerous to be around. *His teeth are perfect.* Having thoughts like that deepened my self-loathing.

"I was really nervous," I said.

"Of what?"

I pressed my lips firmly together, trying again not to blush. "I... well, like I said, it's just hard to say."

He replied, "I hear you."

"I'm still sort of figuring it all out, you know, coming to terms with it myself."

"Well, good luck, man." He put a hand on my shoulder and it took all my resolve to stay calm. "I hope you figure it out. If I can be of any help, I'd be happy to."

"I'd like that. Thanks."

When we stopped to rest later, Bishop split us into groups and gave us maps and a compass. The task was part orienteering, part group dynamic. We had to hike two miles to that night's campground using only what he'd just given us. I got paired with Jackson and Bobbie. Jordyn was with Brennan, and Cooper went with Cathy. Bishop went off by himself to do some thinking. Will, Tyler, and Zach acted as spots to make sure we didn't get lost and never made it to camp. Navigating alongside Bobbie and Jackson ended up being pretty fun; we worked well together as a group, though we disagreed sometimes on what constituted the "best" route.

At one point, we practically scaled down a cliff and Jackson got pretty nervous. Bobbie surpassed all my previous judgments, proving herself truly a hiker. Jordyn kept getting lost and Brennan wasn't helping, so the third time they ran into us, she asked if we could merge the groups and work together. We had a huddle about it and then voted that teaming up would defeat

the purpose of the task set for us, so we went on without them. Our group was the first to make it to the camp and Bishop was there waiting for us.

When we bunked down for the night, Will came over and said, “You took the spot where I wanted to sleep, but I’m fine setting up in the niche above yours.” As he was laying out his sleeping mat, he added, “You know, I appreciated your disclosure this morning about your same-sex attraction. I have the most empathy for SSAs and I’ve cried the hardest with SSAs as they share their struggles and defeats with me. Not that it really helps while you’re in the midst of it all, trying to accept but still living life the way you want, but my hat’s off to you. I know of nothing harder. Nothing.”

I wanted to reply, but couldn’t really think of anything. I just said, “Thanks.” My mind mulled over what he’d said. *Nothing harder...so did that make me the strongest? Did I say in the pre-existence, the belief each individual soul existed before mortal conception, that I’d take the trial of homosexuality because I knew others would be too weak?* An interesting thought, to say the least. I thought about talking to Cathy about what she’d shared that morning about her mother, but couldn’t translate my thoughts into actual words. The conversation kept playing in my head the way I hoped it would’ve gone if I’d been brave enough to actually say something.

The next morning Bishop designated Jordyn as the leader and we all had to follow her. The day would be about practicing both leadership and following others, even if we didn’t always agree with their route. We ended up hiking in a swamp. *Yay for more wet feet.* The water was murky, and anything that went in came out black like it’d been dipped in tar. The water smelled awful as well, half-stagnant, half-decaying animal. I didn’t want to get muddy, so I tried to make a more solid floor by sticking to the sides and crushing down the reeds that were as tall as my head in some places, but I wasn’t very successful. Poor Cathy fell in up to her hips at one point and had to be helped back up. She was more annoyed than upset, but we all felt bad for her. I managed to stay dry above my calves. After the swamp, Bobbie led as we scaled up the side of a ravine. I got nominated leader next. Down, around and across the valley floor. At one point I strayed somewhat from the beaten trail and made my own. People weren’t too pleased, but they kept coming.

About midday, we came to another swimming hole, fed by a waterfall and surrounded by cliffs. The sun was shining in the blue sky so this time we were excited to swim. Bishop told us

the pool was deep enough for us to cliff jump. Cooper, Will, and Tyler didn't take much coaxing, but I found myself feeling a little more hesitant. *It was so far down!* Almost forty feet. The cliff was so high. I wasn't sure I wanted to do it, but I also didn't want to be the only boy who didn't. *So high, so far down.* Feeling like I needed to show that I was as masculine as the other guys may have been silly, but my same-sex attraction seemed to be pushing its way toward having bearing on almost everything I did. After some hesitation and mis-starting a few times, I finally went for it. Sometimes you have to step back, stop thinking about it, plug your nose, squeeze your eyes shut, and jump. You just go. And then you scream on the way down. I didn't pull my left hand in to my body all the way as I hit and I sprained my wrist, but I had taken the plunge to new depths so the pain seemed worth it. I hoped this could prove symbolic for the next step in my personal journey.

That night we made camp in a dry riverbed, or "the wash." We had spaghetti for dinner and Bishop let us build a fire for the first time. As the sun set and we settled in around the fire, we had an "update" on where everyone was with their goals.

"I still have a hard time with homosexuality. I'm really wrestling with it, trying to figure out what's right. I feel one way in my heart, but have been taught something else which makes me hate myself. I don't know how to move forward."

Will commented, "I still feel like you think you're broken. I don't see that." Others chimed in with similar sentiments.

"You don't?"

"No. You're too hard on yourself, but not broken," he insisted.

"I really enjoyed your leadership earlier," Cathy offered.

Tyler added, "Your willingness to help others on the trail hasn't gone unnoticed."

"I love how selfless you are," Jordyn said. Everything positive they said about me I knew I would hear, accept, and then be unable to believe deep down.

I rubbed my pointer finger against my thumb and stared at the fire, wishing not for the first time, that I could melt into the shadows and stay there. Someone coughed to my left and I glanced over, but couldn't tell who. They were waiting for me to respond. The spaghetti felt doubly heavy in my chest.

"I hear what you're all saying, and thanks for being so kind, but for some reason I struggle to believe you. I don't know why I'm so negative."

Bishop said, “I don’t believe negativity is part of you, it’s just something you’re holding onto from others. You really helped Brennan.” I looked over at him, but he was staring into the fire. “And Cooper.” I didn’t dare look at him. “And Jackson.”

I heard Bishop speaking, but I still didn’t believe what he was saying. I pushed back. “It’s...it’s just hard. Because it’s uncomfortable.”

He pushed back too. “Why do you find it uncomfortable?”

I looked anywhere but at Bishop as I tried to form a response. “I don’t know. I... –how to accept good things and praise from people. I mean, deep down, I know, *I know* I’m great. Caring, selfless, courageous, everything you’ve all been saying to me on this trip. I know those things. Yet positivity is so hard.” I fiddled with a stick, poking the ashes of the fire and did a half-laugh. “I know it’s ridiculous I feel that way. I really should get over it and move on.” I wanted to get up and leave the fire then and rush off into the night where I wouldn’t be the center of everyone’s attention anymore. I wasn’t sure why I wanted to hide, but that was my gut reaction.

Cooper called me out. “That’s just more of the same. You’re putting up walls and self-loathing. We’re being honest with you right now.”

I didn’t say anything, but in my head I repeated, *I am a little ridiculous.*

Jackson spoke up. “Look, the things we’ve said *are* true. Even if you feel awkward when we say them, that’s fine, they’re still true.”

I knee-jerk answered. “Well, I can’t just change myself in a day.”

Bishop put up his hand soothingly. “We’re not really talking about self-change here, Daniel. Think of it more as being about self-acceptance.”

I pursed my lips and considered his words. “By conceding I’m same-sex attracted and that I’m struggling with it, haven’t I accepted it? I mean, I don’t deny anymore who I am.”

“That’s one of the things that most impressed me about you,” Jackson said. “That you’re so open.”

“And consciously trying to deal,” Tyler added.

“Doesn’t feel like I’m dealing very well. I just keep hurting.”

Brennan jumped into the conversation, posing a question: “If I take a hot ember out of the fire, I know you would all tell me to let go of it, so why do I hold on so vigorously to what burns and hurts me?”

I thought again of Trent's analogy. *I have to put my hand on the burner to know it's hot.* Cathy ventured an answer. "I think it's because most of the time it's all we know. We don't want to let go because then we'll be left empty. Letting go would mean changing, and that can be scary."

I drew a parallel between Brennan's inability to heal and my failings with praise. "I think often we hide," I motioned to Brennan and then to myself, "to protect ourselves. If we go around showing off our embers, then people will want us to drop them. And then, what are we left with?"

"I've figured out how to get rid of all the crap," Cathy chimed back in. "I take all my problems and stresses and I imagine stuffing them inside encyclopedias and putting them on a shelf. When I need an issue, I go find that volume. But carrying them all around all the time, that's murder."

"What you need to understand, Daniel," Bishop replied, "is that we care about you. We think you're great even if it's impossible for us to completely understand what you're going through. You march to the beat of your own drummer. What you do is fresh and valuable for that reason." I tried to believe him, I really did.

I felt relieved when the conversation eventually moved on to Jordyn and away from me. "I'm trying to be better about slowing down," she said. "I rushed through school. I've been praying for a husband. I just want to be a mom. That's all I've ever wanted. It's hard for me to take the time to sit and breathe. I've been going so hard for so long, I feel empty without direction and deadlines."

Jackson decided to finally open up and trust us with his reason. "I came on this trip because I lost my father recently. I haven't really mourned or come to terms with him being gone, which is why I didn't say anything before. I've never even talked about it with anyone. I just ignored it. Saying it means I have to acknowledge that he's really gone."

I breathed out quickly as if I'd been punched. The weight of what Jackson was feeling seemed incredible. "Wow," I said. "Thanks for being so honest, Jackson."

"I've just been angry that God took him away from me. I don't like being angry." He looked at us looking at him, and he fidgeted with his hands. "But it's starting to wane. I have less animosity toward God than I did. But I'm not over it yet."

“You don’t need to rush. Losing someone you love is excruciating,” Bishop said. “Take your time, Jackson. Don’t rush healing,” he added.

As the fire died down, we set about washing the dishes from dinner and getting ready to sleep. Cooper, Jackson and I agreed the spaghetti must have been spiked with truth-serum. The three of us moved off the main riverbed into a dried side-pool to try and escape Bishop’s snoring. Jackson said the only thing he could compare it to was the Muppet Fozzie Bear saying “wocka wocka wocka” and we laughed. Jackson had already set up his tent to block the strong wind coming into the basin. As I set out my mat and sleeping bag, I asked, “Cooper, where are you sleeping?”

“I was going to sleep in the tent with Jackson,” he replied.

I felt jealous immediately. I didn’t know why I was attracted to Cooper, but he was just so handsome. Jackson was married and he and Cooper had been friends for years, so it wasn’t weird for them, but I still felt not quite right about it. The two of them together got my emotions stirring, which frustrated me. I imagined the tantalizing draw of being that close to Cooper’s body and simultaneously felt sick to my stomach for feeling that way.

“I’ll be back.” I excused myself. “Zach said he had a sleeping bag liner I could borrow so I won’t be as cold.”

When I got back, they’d taken the tent down. “What’d you do that for?” I asked.

Jackson said, “I didn’t want you to feel left out.” *Had I been that obvious about my feelings?*

I was grateful Jackson went out of his way to make sure I felt included. But that didn’t stem the tumult of emotions still swirling as I got in my sleeping bag. I put my arms behind my head and tried to make out some constellations to get my mind off everything that had happened.

Next morning, I hung back to speak with Cathy, at her pace. Slow and easy. Bishop was with her too.

“Cathy, I’m proud of you making it this far. You’ve really proven yourself keeping up with all these people so much younger than you.”

She laughed. “I’m old and out of shape, but I’m a go-getter.”

“Sorry to hear about your estrangement from your mom.” I’d found the courage to say everything I’d meant to two days ago. “I wanted you to know that I know some of what you’re

going through, and I know how hard it can be.” I told her my coming out experience and the difficulties I’d had with my parents.

“You know I’m proud of you for making it this far?” She repeated my words as a question; like I should have already known, even though I didn’t.

“What?”

She laughed. “For making it this far in your journey of honesty. About who you really are.”

“Thanks,” I said.

I wasn’t sure what else to say, but she did. “I have a gay brother.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. He’s great.”

She sounded so calm about it, like it wasn’t a big deal at all. I wondered briefly how she got to that place, but didn’t ask. I moved the conversation back to her. “I wanted to tell you I’m also impressed by what you shared about your history of abuse. How you stopped it. That kind of bravery...” I breathed out heavily and shook my head. “One of my cousins was abused and she resolved to not be that way with her own kids. It would stop with her and not go to the next generation. She endured and emerged stronger for it, and now it’s done.”

“Good for her.”

“That kind of power, especially over other people, it scares me.”

“Scares you?” Cathy asked.

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s absolute. We can be anything. Do anything.”

“Mhmm.”

I quoted from my “coming out” journal entry. *I can be anything I want. Like a homosexual transvestite in New York City if I want.*

“That’s what’s so incredible about our agency,” Bishop chimed in.

“It’s amazing,” Cathy agreed.

“You can be anything, Daniel. Anything at all. You’re only limited by what you don’t become.” I smiled. I liked that phrase and made a mental note to remember it.

As we hiked, I spotted Cathy on the sheer parts and she told me how she'd come to finally understand her brother and strengthen their relationship. I actually convinced myself that if she fell, I'd find the strength to save her. I took her pack from her about a half-mile out, so she'd have an easier time. I also helped Jordyn by giving her a hand down on some steeper rock faces. Around two o'clock we arrived at "E.T. Cave." It really did look like the alien E.T., with two depressions for eyes and the cave as his mouth.

Bishop split us up into two groups. Zach, Bobbie, Jordyn, Will, Tyler, Cooper and Jackson were sent off to a place called "Death Hollow." Bishop asked Cathy, Brennan, and myself to stay with him for a solo campout. Before the others left, Bishop pulled me aside and said, "God will love you no matter what you choose. Boyfriend or gospel. No matter what."

But would it be worth it? That was the lingering question. Exploring, getting a boyfriend, could only come at the expense of the gospel. Keeping the Church seemed only possible with a denial or refutation of my desires and attractions. And if whatever I chose ended up being wrong, could I go back? I wasn't sure I saw a way.

I was sad to be separated from Jackson, and especially, Cooper, but I knew Bishop had something in mind for us that was more intensive than what the others would experience. The four of us spread out along the canyon. Bishop sent me up a hill to an overhang where he said he'd done his first ever solo. He told me Indians had been there as well, which I thought was cool.

I found some cave drawings of people-like figures with triangular heads and what looked like horns. There were animals too, probably bison. The rock face itself was tan, the drawings etched in a lighter cream color. Some drawings had bows and arrows and there were some square-shapes I couldn't decide what they were supposed to be. The carvings fascinated me and I traced some of them with my hand. But I didn't find any arrowheads or the grinding stones Bishop said would be there.

My first item of business was finding a spot to sleep. I didn't want to be caught in the dark without being set up. I ended up clearing away some loose stones and kind of wedging myself between two rocks. After a nap, I started writing about the campfire discussion.

At six-fifty I was startled by voices. I thought maybe Zach had come back for something, but I looked down at the valley floor and didn't see anyone. *I know I heard someone.* If it wasn't

Zach then they weren't part of our group, but we hadn't seen anyone else the whole time we'd been here. I put on my shoes and did some more looking around. No one. I felt a little creeped out.

I went back to writing and ate my meager dinner. The sun started going down and it would be dark in an hour. I started getting a little scared. I realized that I'd never been alone like this before in the middle of nowhere. Whenever I camped, sometimes I'd go off by myself for a bit, but I always slept near someone else. I kept my knife close.

As the sun started to go down, I picked up the book I was reading, *Goodbye, I Love You* by Carol Lynn Pearson. She's a Mormon whose husband Gerald is gay. Because he's a Mormon also, he runs from his feelings. He gets married, has kids, and tries so hard to sacrifice himself for his faith. But he slips up and cheats, with a man. Their marriage survives, but Carol Lynn wonders constantly if it will happen again. Finally, Gerald decides he can't do it anymore and needs to be free. Carol Lynn lets him, but the divorce doesn't go well, and they manage to remain friends only because of all their years together. After multiple partners, Gerald tries to settle down at the same time the AIDS epidemic is sweeping California. Gerald's lover contracts HIV from someone else and passes it on. When Gerald's health fails he decides to return to Carol Lynn. She nurses him until he dies.

I related to Gerald's attempts at balancing his Mormonism with his sexuality, but was especially struck by a scene where Carol Lynn goes to see her husband in a gay choir and they sing "Amazing Grace." *I once was lost / but now am found / was blind / but now can see.* Carol Lynn remarks, "Oh, who is lost and who is found? I knew so little anymore. Gerald felt that he used to be lost and was now found. Others were certain that he is lost now and may be lost forever" (142). I felt so much like that. *By embracing homosexuality am I becoming lost or found?* I wasn't sure. It got dark before I was done, so I ended up reading by flashlight. I finished the book about ten o'clock, wiped my tears, and got ready for bed, pondering its message. I slept fitfully, and each time I awoke I marked the progress of the full moon across the sky. The detail on its silvery face seemed so vibrant, like all the details had been amplified to crystal-clarity. I took comfort in the moon's light as a constant beacon against the darkness.

At seven-thirty, I woke up with a bloody nose and was immediately annoyed, as this wasn't the way I'd planned to begin my meditative day. The sun was already coming up and

birds were chattering in the trees nearby. I let my nose drip for a bit on the rocks since I didn't have any tissue, then tried to put pressure on the bridge of my nose until it stopped. In the hollow I could hear running water so I knew there was a river close. I descended my perch, scouted my way to it and washed the blood off my hands and face as best I could without a mirror. Then I went back up to eat breakfast, write, think, and reflect. So many questions. So many puzzles.

I decided since the weather was nice I wanted to write from on top of my overhang for its superior vantage point. As I climbed, I saw Bishop heading in the direction Cathy had gone for her solo. Once I got up top, I spent some time simply taking in the grandeur of my surroundings. It really was breath-taking. The slick rock stones with the trees and grass, nature untouched by modern civilization. I loved that I could tell from the way the trees were arranged in wavy, meandering rows of green that there had once been a river flowing in from the adjoining canyon.

Next thing I knew Bishop was coming back without his pack and waving at me. I scrambled back down to meet him as fast as I could. "I wasn't expecting you yet."

"Cathy is still asleep it seems, so I doubled back."

"I see." I pursed my lips, thinking. "I haven't had time to write everything yet, or get anywhere in my search really."

"That's okay. We can still talk." He invited me to sit with him inside the overhang, right above my bed and pack, with our backs against the wall that had the drawings.

"How was your solo?"

"Sleeping by myself last night was scary. I woke up a ton, and watched the moon moving across the sky."

"I slept like a log."

"I'm sure you snored."

"I'll bet I did." He smiled. "I wanted to talk a bit about the campfire, if that's alright."

"Yeah, sure."

"I wanted to repeat what I said before. This should be about acceptance."

"Acceptance." I repeated, trying to jump ahead in my mind to where this would lead.

"You need to accept how you feel."

"I feel like scum."

"You shouldn't. It's not going to change, Daniel." He shook his head. "It's not going away; you need to embrace it."

“I’m same-sex attracted and I hate it.”

Bishop only sighed at my remark.

“Well, I do,” I insisted.

“It’s not something you chose—”

“—And it’s not something I want, or something I asked for,” I interjected.

“It’s not something you can ignore either.”

“So I’ve realized,” I said, folding my arms.

“You’re resisting. I want you to accept yourself.”

“I don’t want to be evil.”

“Daniel, you’re not evil. You’re not an abomination. You’re okay. You’re fine.”

“It’s unnatural.” I looked away.

“There’s not a lot of evidence to support that, it’s not been proven.”

“Does it need to be? It’s doctrine.”

“Please stop fighting. Just because you’re same-sex attracted doesn’t mean you’re consigned to a fate of un-commitment, promiscuity, and death by AIDS.” He seemed to be approaching this more scientifically than religiously.

“Does it not?” I looked right at him. I thought back to my conversation with Cathy the day before. *I can be whoever I want.* “I know inside I want to explore the new world before me. I do, I really do.” I took a deep breath and almost didn’t let it out again. “I’m scared, Bishop. I’m scared to be wrong.”

“Wrong?”

“Yes, wrong. I feel so dichotomous. I see only two paths. I can either be self or god-serving.” I stopped to think. He didn’t say anything, just stared out at the landscape. I went on. “It can’t be that easy though, can it?”

“You can do both.”

“What? How?” I felt my emotions soar suddenly. “It’s like right and wrong. There’s two choices. You can’t do both.”

He nodded and looked at me. “Let me tell you a story. A dear friend of mine—” He stopped and moved away from the wall slightly, bracing his weight on his hands before looking out again. We were lucky to be there, and have the view we did. From the glorious red rock

backdrop and the green trees dotting the landscape to the wind blowing gently, to the sun shining on us at the right temperature, not too hot or cold.

“—A dear friend of mine got married a few years ago. Her marriage wasn’t easy but she made it work and had two kids. Then she left her husband for a woman and they’ve been together thirty years.” He looked at me sharply. “Think about that, Daniel. Thirty years.” I nodded, but didn’t say anything. My parents hadn’t even been together that long. “Every day all she does is help people. Others first. That’s just the way she lives. There’s an argument for her decision being self-serving, but that’s not all there is to it.”

I wondered but didn’t ask about her husband and the broken marriage. It made me think of Trent and the discussion we’d had the week before. “Bishop, you remember I told you about meeting Trent and his commitment to the gospel? Well, we had a conversation about learning and he knows that he learns by experience. He told me ‘I have to put my hand on the burner to know it’s hot.’ I want to explore who I am. But I don’t know how without losing everything. Everyone else I’ve met who has been with other guys... they did all that before temple covenants.”

“Do you believe in those covenants?”

“I don’t know anymore. I doubt.”

“I don’t think if you found a partner you could be condemned for sinning against the greater light. Maybe sinning against hope, but not greater light and knowledge.” I knew he was referencing Doctrine and Covenants, section 82, verse 3: “For of him unto whom much is given, much is required; and he who sins against the greater light shall receive the greater condemnation.” Basically, the more I understood truth and righteousness and what was sin, the more I condemned myself if I went against it.

I still had doubts, and wasn’t sure about my testimony or anything anymore, so maybe I hadn’t received enough of a sure witness to be condemned for going the other way? I didn’t really know what Bishop meant by everything he said.

As we sat there, I realized that even after my openness and willingness to talk to the people on the trip, I *still* wasn’t sharing my *real* hurt. So I showed Bishop the lyrics of the song “Welcome to my Life” by the band Simple Plan.

Do you ever feel like breaking down?

Do you ever feel out of place

Like somehow you just don’t belong

*And no one understands you?
Do you ever wanna run away?
Do you lock yourself in your room
With the radio on turned up so loud
That no one hears you're screaming?*

*No, you don't know what it's like
When nothing feels all right
You don't know what it's like
To be like me.*

*To be hurt
To feel lost
To be left out in the dark
To be kicked when you're down
To feel like you've been pushed around
To be on the edge of breaking down
And there's no one there to save you
No, you don't know what it's like
Welcome to my life.*

*Do you wanna be somebody else?
Are you sick of feeling so left out?
Are you desperate to find something more
Before your life is over?
Are you stuck inside a world you hate?
Are you sick of everyone around?
With their big fake smile and stupid lies
While deep inside you're bleeding.*

Deep down, I hated myself and homosexuality only made that worse. That's why they could say all those nice things about me and I would hear them and reject them. Because I hated me.

Bishop read Alma 7:11 “*And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind.*” Do you believe that?” Bishop asked.

I didn't answer. I was thinking of what I had written on February 6th, 2006. *Every kind?* That seemed too much. I opened my journal and starting reading to him. About struggle, about question. I went over Asher Lev. I read what I wrote about Christ. *Every kind.*

“Christ's atonement is the most important thing that's ever happened to us, Daniel. He gave his life and took upon him our sins so that we can be reconciled unto God. He suffered, that we might live. You don't believe that?”

“When it’s about porn, or masturbation, yeah, I believe. I can repent. And the atonement works. I believe.” I looked out at the landscape as I spoke. “He suffered and died to take my sin away. I get that. But homosexuality changes everything...”

“How so?”

“It...I dunno, it puts a wrench in my gears.”

“Is it a necessary wrench?”

I said out loud then what my conversation with Will made me think before. “I wonder if I chose homosexuality in the pre-existence because I knew I could beat it and others couldn’t. Who knows?”

“The One who will never stop loving you, no matter what you do.”

I looked at Bishop, unsure what to say next. He was always supportive.

“Daniel, you need to believe that He understands, that He knows what you’re feeling.”

I sighed, struggling to push my belief that far. “Let’s try something.”

“Okay.” I agreed without hesitation. I trusted Bishop both as a religious leader and a counselor, in part because of his psychology experience.

“I want to do a visualization with you. Close your eyes.”

I shifted a bit, but closed my eyes. This was going to be weird, I could tell already.

“Now I want you to picture people. Just a group. People who care about you.” I furrowed my brow in concentration as I tried to bring a group together. “Who are they?”

I went slowly, giving faces to bodies. “Elena. Emily. Ashlynn. My Mom and Dad. Shannon. Vicki. Keith.”

“Is there a spokesperson for the group?”

I looked at the group. I chose Kim. Each had their own reasons for loving me, but when he asked, she was the one. She was more sister to me than my adopted sister, Quinn. Bishop had me ask Kim questions and then give the answer.

“Do they love you?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I love them, and they want me.”

“Why do they love you for being different?”

I swallowed hard and took my time with the vision's response. Not only why did they love me, but why did they love me for being different. "Because it makes me who I am."

"Do they love you no matter what?"

"Depends."

"Why?"

"Well, it depends on who. Some of the group see my staying in the Church as restrictive."

"Is there a spokesperson for that part of the group?"

"Shannon."

"Do they love you?"

"Yes."

"Would they love you if you stayed in the Church?"

"They always have."

"Would they love you if you restricted yourself?"

I thought carefully. "Yes."

"Look beyond your group. Go to the edges. Who else is there? Do you see anyone dead or unborn?"

I was too far in now to push back against the strangeness of what he was asking of me. I looked. "I don't see anyone."

"Why not?"

"I... I dunno. I don't know who they are?"

"Look again."

I tried. I really did. This time, I saw my brother Carter, who already left the Church and chose the ways of the world instead. As far as my parents were concerned, he was lost. Carter was pacing, shuffling back and forth. He paused to look at me. *What the fuck are you doing?* He was disgusted. Then I saw them. Dead and unborn. I drew in my breath sharply. What was this? My heart beat faster. I saw kids. I knew they were my kids. Four of them. Three boys, one girl. Her name was Melissa and she was jumping up and down. *Daddy, I love you.* I was reeling.

"Is there a spokesperson from the spirits?"

A woman stepped forward.

"My Aunt."

“Does she have a name?”

“Ellen.” *Do I even have an Aunt Ellen? What the hell.* If I do, I need to learn more about her.

“Do they love you?”

“Yes.”

“Do they have faith in you?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m not a quitter.”

“And you never have been. The evidence shows that. Can you picture Christ being there?”

“Yes.”

“What does He look like?”

“He’s light, glowing. Like the pictures I’ve grown up with.” My mind wouldn’t conceptualize him any other way: Long brown hair, bearded, and wearing white robes.

“Does He love you?” I let the question hang in the air for a few seconds before answering.

“Yes.”

“Does He understand you?” Again, I let the question sit in the open air, no sound between Bishop and I except the stirring of the wind among the grass and leaves. I wanted to say no, but honesty forbade me.

“Yes.”

“Maybe ask to see His hands and wrists. What do you see?”

I was so far in now I had to hold back tears. I felt overwhelmed by emotions. I saw the marks of the nails from the cross. Answering Bishop’s questions cost me more each time.

“Sacrifice and love.”

“Why did He do it?”

“Because He loves me.”

“Why does He love you?”

“Because He wants to.” I couldn’t believe where this had led: because He *wants* to.

“Yes, He does. He wants to and does.”

Time seemed to stand still for a few moments, though it may have only been a few seconds that silence passed between us. I could feel tears trickling down my cheeks.

“Before we end, is there anyone else you want to single out? Anyone else that wants to speak?”

I wiped at my still-closed eyes and chose Carter, even after he glared at me. “Carter. He doesn’t understand me. He really doesn’t. And so he won’t accept me.” You have to understand to accept. Is that why I have trouble accepting myself?

“Slowly, I want you to come back. Open your eyes.”

I half-opened my eyes, then blinked rapidly against the brightness.

“How do you feel?”

I resisted the answer, but couldn’t. “Loved.” *Dammit, I felt loved.* I would try and hold onto that feeling as I went back to finding a solution for my quandary.

Bishop thought our talk had gone really well, but he knew I needed space and time to reflect on it, so he got up to go see Cathy. Before he left, he told me he was getting released from his calling as Bishop in July or August. I was going to lose the only person at church who understood me. *Then what? Back to my silent suffering?* He would definitely stay on as a friend. I *knew* he cared.

Once he’d gone, I returned to my earlier vantage point. I took another moment to just marvel at the slick rocks and trees stretching for miles toward the horizon. The landscape was so vast and made me feel so small. I wrote down as much of what we’d discussed as I could recall, then tried to build from there. Not just on what we’d discussed, or the vision, but the repercussions. If I accepted my same-sex attraction and moved forward, tried to get a boyfriend, have a relationship, how far would I go? I made sacred promises. Oaths. Covenants. As much as I pretended to know with surety what was truth and what wasn’t, I didn’t really know. I didn’t. Somewhere deep down, I still harbored the belief that everything I was doing was wrong. I couldn’t bear to be wrong. The stakes were too high. *Not worth the risk.*

I thought of a quote by Hermann Hesse I’d heard in my Child and Adolescent Psychology class: “I wanted only to try to live in accord with the promptings that came from my true self. Why was that so very difficult?” By casting away the temple and promises I made, I wasn’t sure what that left me. I now believed God would love me no matter what. But how many

of my mission buddies would still accept me with a partner? How many would only see someone completely deceived by Satan? Damn, I only saw the road getting harder.

I felt so confused. Bishop made it feel easy to be loved until fear and doubt came back to oust it; until people who wouldn't understand like Carter entered the equation. I flipped back randomly in my journal and found my entry from August 12, 2005. I looked at what I wrote about Ana.

I gave her everything today. Makes me sad. Especially the ones who receive the truth and then 'change their minds.' Argh. Those are the frustrating ones. I feel for her and want to help her. But God nor I can force her to keep the truth that she has received – and forgotten.

Funny how the way I judged her then was where I stood now. I said something similar to Elder Adams at the farewell fireside, a testimony meeting held for members and converts to see outgoing missionaries one last time and hear them speak, at the end of my mission. *In ten years' time, will your mission be a dream or the foundation you used to become who you are?* In that moment, I sure as hell thought I'd be using it as a foundation. But now, only six months later, I choked on my own words. I came back to the question: Why does the road only get harder from here? I felt like I had suffered enough. I wanted to take something away from my time alone, from this trip. Something that would change me.

Hopefully new male friends in Brennan, Cooper, and Jackson. *Hopefully that I can believe God does love me and understand me. I know what I want, even if that scares the hell out of me.* I had been holding onto the idea of marriage in the back of my mind but *Goodbye, I Love You* had shaken that up. Carol Lynn suffered so much because of who Gerald was. I wasn't trying to do that to anyone.

I looked back over my mission entries, the eight months I had with me in that volume, anyway. I'd already changed and I hadn't even done anything with homosexuality. When it came up with Juan in Hollister, I wouldn't let it come between me and the gospel.

Now my conviction and commitment to the Church were hanging in tatters around everything else I was becoming. And I didn't know where to go next. I had no plan, no map, and no guide. The future was foreign. I felt scared, but something kept me going. I would press on, despite the unknowns. Even when every step toward embracing same-sex attraction seemed another step away from the Church.

Around two o'clock, I went back down to the cave with the carvings. I studied them one last time, pausing with my sleeping bag half-stuffed inside its bag. What had life been like back then? I imagined the native people occupying that same space, making the drawings, building tools, preparing food; I couldn't help smiling at my wild imagination.

Once I was packed, I had some trail mix and then went to find Cathy. I sat on a stump as she packed up, and we talked about her kids. She told me about the death of her son as we headed back toward E.T. Cave, and I didn't really know what to say. Was I meant to feel bad? Offer condolences? I had no idea she'd been through so much and was glad she trusted me enough to share parts of her past.

Brennan and Bishop eventually joined us and we chatted as we made dinner on the tiny gas stove. Stirring the pot of beans with a silver ladle, I stared at the tiny flame and found myself thinking again about our ember conversation and the amount of suffering I'd gone through since coming home from my mission. I asked Bishop suddenly if I could share some insights on suffering from my journal. He agreed and I passed the stirring off to Cathy.

An entry dated *September 29, 2005* stuck out in my mind. It was from the end of my mission and talked about Holocaust survivor Viktor E. Frankl finding meaning in his suffering; why suffering mattered. *What was the meaning of Christ's suffering? Reconciliation and another chance for mankind. When I suffer, what meaning? Growth. Added insight. Fortification. Suffering is necessary. Especially when it comes to the eternal perspective.*

I then drew a parallel from Frankl's words to a talk Spencer W. Kimball gave to BYU students, entitled "Tragedy or Destiny?" where he said: "Is there not wisdom in His giving us trials that we might rise above them, responsibilities that we might achieve, work to harden our muscles, sorrows to try our souls? Are we not exposed to temptations to test our strengths, sickness that we might learn patience, death that we might be immortalized and glorified?"

Mortal life could be hard, it could burn us or scar us, but its challenges and difficulties had purpose. *My same-sex attraction is just another trial to prove and strengthen me.* "President Kimball goes on: 'Being human, we would expel from our lives physical pain and mental anguish and assure ourselves of continual ease and comfort, but if we were to close the doors upon sorrow and distress, we might be excluding our greatest friends and benefactors. Suffering can make saints of people as they learn patience, long-suffering, and self-mastery. The sufferings of our Savior were part of his education.'"

I paused to look at everyone. They were riveted to my reading, all other activities forgotten, including dinner though Brennan had had the sense to take the pot off and turn the flame off, so nothing burned.

“President Kimball thanks God for not giving him limitless powers. With such an ability, he more than likely would have saved Book of Mormon prophet Abinadi, from the flames, quote ‘and in doing so I might have irreparably damaged him, He died a martyr and went to a martyr’s reward – exaltation,’ end quote. He talks about Paul and Joseph Smith the same way, then says, quote, ‘with such uncontrolled power, I surely would have felt to protect Christ from the agony in Gethsemane, the insults, the thorny crown, the indignities in the court, the physical injuries. I would have administered to his wounds and healed them, giving him cooling water instead of vinegar. I might have saved him from suffering and death, and lost to the world his atoning sacrifice.’ The impact of our succor sometimes has the opposite effect.”

When I finished, Bishop said, almost to himself, “Maybe I was wrong about you going against greater light.”

I balked at his statement. *What was he saying? That being homosexual was going to condemn me? That I couldn’t make the same explorations Trent and others have made because of how far in I was? How many promises I’d made? Doctrines I’d dissected? The level of understanding I’d achieved?*

I held myself together and simply replied, “I have one more I want to read.” I turned to my poem “Becoming God’s Gardner” that I wrote as the culmination of my two-year missionary experience.

When I was fine with gardening forever,
 And never wanting another endeavor
 One day, to my great dread
 The landlord came to me and said:
 "My boy, you've done so much
 With your delicate, loving touch.
 You may never fully understand nor know,
 Just how much you helped my flowers grow."

~ ~ ~

"A job well done, but now you have to go."
 I pleaded with the Landlord, "No!"
 Wishing that it wasn't so,

But knowing, his garden would still grow.
 Sadly, I stomped off all the dirt
 Cleaned my face, hands, and shirt
 Left the garden, gave back my tools
 Realizing it was the school of schools.

~ ~ ~

My time had come, I had to leave
 I wiped my tears onto my sleeve.
 As I walked away, leaving the garden behind
 In a fit of selfish selflessness, I felt inclined
 To turn and go back, at a run.
 Refusing to accept my work was done.
 Whirling, I cried out in surprise
 At the scene before my eyes.

~ ~ ~

Roses, roses, roses, filled my sight
 Reds and pinks, and brilliant white
 In all their glory I saw them blossom
 All I could muster was: "That is awesome."
 As I walked on, day by day
 The thorns and tears faded away
 Engraved in my heart and mind
 Was an image of a different kind.

~ ~ ~

Roses, roses, roses, all around
 Sacred, precious, so profound
 Even in winter's darkest night
 Those sweet roses are my light.
 God's garden is the best place on Earth
 Where my converted soul attained new birth
 With a magnitude of love that overpowers
 Brightening the blossoms of my forever flowers.

Cathy was crying. Brennan kept quiet, pensive. Bishop ran a hand through his short hair. I assumed he still meant what he'd said before. My self-loathing deepened. *I had something. And I lost it. It's there, in that poem. When I was a missionary, when I had my badge, I had it. A testimony, a belief, something I can't pin down or put into words, and now it's gone. Suffering is*

meant to make me stronger, make me better, but as far as I can tell it's only battered me to pieces.

“Where do you stand right now, Daniel?” Bishop asked after a moment had passed.

“I really want to start over. With the gospel. Learn to pray. Find the desire to read my scriptures again. Enjoy church. The little things that make the gospel matter.”

Right before dinner was ready Zach, Bobbie, and Jordyn hiked into camp, returning from Death Hollow. The others would hike directly out to get the cars from Boulder Airport and meet us at Escalante Trailhead. I tried not to let on I was disappointed the others hadn't come back.

I slept fitfully again, plagued by Bishop's snoring and mosquitos. When we were up and had finished the last of the tortillas and peanut butter and jam for breakfast, Bishop said we had a four-mile hike to the trailhead. And he wanted us to do it in an hour. *Ready, set, go!* We started off super-fast, but after twenty minutes and two river crossings, Bishop sent me back for Zach, Brennan, and poor Cathy who were lagging. Jordyn and Bobbie pressed on with him.

I asked Cathy for her pack, but Zach was against it. “Everyone carries their own pack.” He hadn't been here, what did he know? I'd carried it before. But I couldn't say anything, he was an adult and to him I was just a stupid kid. Finally, he conceded that if she agreed and we took turns, he'd allow it. *Game on.* I put her pack on my front and took off. Missed a turn and had to double back. More river crossings, sand everywhere, even in my shoes. I got forced to pass on the pack. Zach passed it on to Brennan. We pushed Cathy hard. I cheered her on throughout. “Forty-nine and she's so fine / Twice my age and still keeps time / Sound off. One. Two.” This was the home stretch and we'd attain the goal together, united.

After crossing the river for the sixth time, Brennan was a little ahead with Cathy's pack. I decided they'd each had a turn, now I needed to prove myself. We were at thirty-seven minutes, but past halfway Zach said. I wanted to be the ‘helper’ because I felt it would help me validate my worth to others, which in turn would let me hate myself a little less. I took the pack and booked it. Rapid pace, sipping water, breathing hard, two packs. Left them in the dust. I got really tired and wanted to rest, but I couldn't let them catch up to me. I willed myself on. Endure to the end. My shoulders burned but I continued. Suddenly I saw Bishop. There! Finish line. Made it with two minutes to spare. Fifty-eight baby! And two packs.

At the final river-crossing the water was knee-high, fast-flowing and the light brown color of mud. Even better, the bottom was made up of rounded black rocks. I went first and managed to get across. Bobbie was pulling up the rear and slipped. Jordyn was just in front of her and caught her but dropped her specially-made, carved walking stick in the process. She cried out as it drifted away, but I was already dropping both packs. Bishop hollered to me about a bridge, but I was already running, plowing through the underbrush. I jumped over bushes and sprinted until I saw a way down. I tripped and fell, banging my knees, but scrambled right back up. I got down the bank and out into the swift water without hesitation, looking both ways. *Had I missed it? No. There.* Coming downstream. I grabbed it and then made my way back to shore. Jordyn was coming, fearful I hadn't been able to find it. She was so grateful. Cathy, Brennan, and Zach arrived with a final time of one hour, fourteen minutes. So close. Amazing for Cathy being forty-nine. I was impressed and told her as much. We sat down to dry out and wait for the cars.

Jordyn thanked me again for saving her walking stick and I caught Bishop's smile before he could hide it. He knew this trip had highlighted my selfless nature and that it helped me feel more positive about myself, even if only slightly.

Yes, there'd be more challenges ahead with reconciling same-sex attraction and Mormonism. There would be more work to rid myself of my deep-seated self-loathing. But I'd tested the waters of acceptance here and survived. Instead of scathing rejection like I'd imagined, I had been offered admiration and empathy. I wasn't naïve enough to believe that was how it would always go, but it was an important start.

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