

Prologue

I opened the door and stepped into the well-appointed office, closing the door behind me. The room was intimately lit by incandescent table lamps instead of institutional fluorescent overhead lighting. An oriental design rug covered the floor, and two upholstered armchairs sat facing a massive dark-colored wooden desk. Glass-fronted oak bookcases lined the walls. Behind the desk sat a small man, slightly balding, wearing a dark brown, high quality suit, and glasses.

"Hello, Will," he said. "It's been a while."

"Yes," I said simply.

"Sit down, please," he motioned toward the chairs and smiled encouragingly. I sat down on the closest one. "What's on your mind?" he prompted.

"You said when I was ready to talk to call you."

"And you're ready to talk now?"

I nodded.

"Why now and not before?"

I shrugged.

"Just ready? Or did something happen that made you change your mind?"

"Something happened..."

He sat, waiting for me to elaborate.

"I don't even know where to begin," I said. "So much has happened since I saw you last. I need to talk to someone. I feel like I'm going crazy."

"Will," he said softly, "you are not going crazy. Instead of starting at the end and working back, why don't we start at the beginning? Pretend we've never talked before. Tell me everything."

The beginning. It seemed like so long ago now. Could it really have been only a few months? "That could take a while," I said.

He shrugged and pushed a button on his intercom.

"Yes?" the receptionist answered.

"Linda, cancel the rest of my afternoon appointments, please."

"Yes, sir," she answered.

He looked up and smiled, his kind eyes radiating understanding. "Now we've got plenty of time," he said to me.

I took a deep breath.

Chapter 1

Nothing can stay the same forever. We get in trouble in life when we think it can and will. Everything changes, or as King Solomon said in the Bible and The Byrds sang in the '60s, to everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven. It's not a particularly easy lesson to learn or a fun one for that matter. I learned it the summer between high school and college, and my life would never be the same.

We burst into the house, laughing and shoving each other playfully. We were both sweaty from playing basketball on the driveway. The black macadam drew heat like a magnet. For what must have been the millionth time I looked at Joey and thought about how different we were. We were a study in contrasts, a true testament to the old adage that opposites attract. We'd been best friends since we were toddlers, but we couldn't have been more different. Joey was tall, a little over six feet, and I was...well, short. If I wore my Airwalks with the thick soles I just managed to eke out five foot six. He had poker-straight pale blond hair that he wore cut off bluntly just above his shoulders. Today he had pulled it back into a ponytail, but half of it had fallen down and was stuck now to his face. My black hair was so curly I had to keep it cut short or it sprung out into an afro. Joey had a year-round tan that darkened to a golden brown on the first day of summer. I had pale white skin that burned over and over, never tanned, turned an unflattering shade of red if

you even looked at me funny, and broke into freckles across my nose at the first hint of sunlight. Joey had these huge puppy-dog brown eyes while mine were a deep blue.

Actually, my eyes are my favorite feature. They are so dark they are almost violet, and these incredibly long black lashes frame them. My other best friend, Laura, is always saying that she would kill to have my eyes.

The differences didn't end at the physical, however. Even our personalities were polar opposites. Joey was gregarious, while I was shy. He was caught up in popularity games, while I was content to hide in the background. Joey took everything at face value and rarely looked deeper, while I tended to be introspective, always looking for a deeper meaning.

Laura, Joey, and I were almost inseparable all through high school. We'd grown up in the same neighborhood and played together since we were old enough to walk. Everyone at school had called us the three musketeers.

Since we'd graduated though, things had started to change. We didn't see each other nearly as much as we used to. Laura had met Gabriel, or Gabe as he preferred, and they had started dating. Over the summer, they had grown closer and closer. I had been dating Beth on and off all through high school and I guess you could say things were semi-serious between us. Beth was from the neighborhood, too, and while she had never really been a part of our little clique she'd been around enough that when we had started dating no one was really surprised. She was a year younger than the rest of us, but she was always the most serious one in the bunch.

The latest blow to the three musketeers had taken place two weeks earlier when Joey and Laura started college at Pemberton University, a local school here in town. Both had been accepted at other schools, but picked Pemberton when I decided to take a year off to work before going to college. My main reasoning behind this decision was that I hated school and really couldn't see jumping right into more studying just as soon as I was finished with high school. Actually, my intense dislike of school had less to do with the academics — I'd always gotten above average grades with very little effort — and much more to do with the fact that I'd never done well in the complex social environment that was the public school system. So Joey and Laura had stayed in order to keep the musketeers intact. The only problem was I had hardly seen them since classes took up. Today was the first day Joey and I had really been able to spend together. I was surprised how much I missed him, and without thinking, I suddenly grabbed him in a tight hug.

"Dude!" he said, pushing me away roughly. "What the hell was that for?"

"Language!" my mother called from the next room.

Joey rolled his eyes, and I shrugged. "I dunno," I answered, choosing to ignore my mother. "I guess I just miss you."

"Yeah, well, I miss you, too, but you know I don't like all that touchy-feely stuff."

That was another difference between Joey and me. I was from a very affectionate family, and I wasn't afraid to show my affection; Joey was very reserved emotionally, the typical macho man who never showed his feelings.

"Let's get something to drink," he said as he headed for the kitchen, dribbling the ball as he went.

"Don't bounce the ball in the house," Mom called.

I trailed after him, mentally kicking myself all the while.

"God! When are you going to get out of here?" he said as soon as we were in the kitchen. "It's like we're still twelve. You make enough at your job that you could get an apartment, especially if you had a roommate."

"I would definitely need a roommate," I told him. "I don't make that much. So that means it's pretty much out of the question."

"Why?"

"Because I don't really know anybody."

"Well, it just so happens that I do."

My eyes lit up. "You?"

"No, not me, dumbass. You know every penny I make goes right to ye olde tuition fund." I felt my face heating up and knew I was turning red. Thankfully, Joey had his back toward me as he hunted in the fridge for something cold. He came out with a carton of orange juice, grabbed two glasses out of cabinet, and proceeded to pour OJ all over the counter as he tried to get it in both glasses at once.

"Jeez, Joey, wreck the kitchen, why don't you," I complained.

"You sound just like your mom," Joey grumbled as he mopped up his mess with a towel. "Anyway, as I was saying, there's this guy at school, his name's Aidan, and he has this two-bedroom apartment so he's looking for a roommate. I told him I'd ask you."

"Why'd he get a two bedroom if it's just him?"

"I don't know, Will, what difference does it make? Are you interested or not?"

"I don't even know this guy...what's his name? Adam?"

"Aidan. And I do know him. He's a really nice guy. I think you two would get along. Look, he just moved in and he's having a kind of housewarming party tonight. I'm supposed to go; why don't you go with me? That way you can meet him, see the apartment, see if you like him...the whole nine yards."

He handed me my glass of OJ and started gulping his down.

"I won't know anyone there," I protested.

"Yes, you will. Laura and Gabe will be there. Gabe knows him from last year; they had some classes together or something. There'll only be a couple other people there, so you don't have to worry about your terminal shyness."

"I don't want to crash his party, especially if there aren't even that many people going." I was getting weaker, and Joey knew it.

"He said I could bring a friend." I hesitated, and he moved in for the kill. "There's going to be someone there I want you to meet besides Aidan."

"Who?"

"Come and you'll find out."

I played my last ace. "I'm supposed to go out with Beth tonight."

"So cancel!" he yelled, throwing his hands up. "Come on, Will. You just said you missed me. Here's your chance to spend some time with me plus meet some new people and maybe find some new digs. Live a little. Bethie will get over it."

I sighed and Joey grinned. He knew he'd won. Why he still got any pleasure from it was beyond me since he always won. You'd think he'd be used to it by now, the manipulative bastard.

"What should I wear?"

"Whatever you want. It's just a party, not a debutante ball."

"A what?"

"Look it up."

"Oh, so you don't know either."

"Shut up." He laughed and punched me in the arm.

"Ow!" I shoved him back, and soon we were wrestling around the kitchen, crashing into the table and knocking over a chair.

"No roughhousing inside!" Mom called.

We froze and looked at each other, then collapsed into a giggling heap on the floor...just like old times.

An hour later, I stood in my room with a towel around my waist as a puddle of water collected at my feet. I stared at the phone, wondering if there was any way I could avoid picking it up. I had been getting out of the shower when Mom called up that Beth was on the phone. I dreaded the inevitable confrontation when I broke off our date tonight...for the third time in a row.

As I said earlier, Beth is my on-again-off-again girlfriend — more off than on. Not because of Beth; she would have us engaged if she had her way. I was always the one who put things on hold, and Beth was always the one who talked me into going out again. I was content just to hang out with Joey and Laura. In fact, Beth was the only girl I had ever dated. Going to dances with Laura because she didn't have a date doesn't count. Laura says I have a problem with commitment and maybe I do, but I really think I've just watched too many romantic movies. I want that kind of romance where you light up when you hear their name and melt down when they walk into the room. That just wasn't there with Beth. We got along fine; she was comfortable — but there was just no...spark.

I sighed and knew I couldn't put it off any longer.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Well, it's about time," my mother joked as she hung up. My parents loved Beth to no end.

"What happened? You fall down getting out of the shower?" Beth said.

"No, I guess I got lost in thought," I said lamely.

"Oh? And you were thinking about me, of course," she teased.

"Actually, yes."

"Don't sound so excited."

"Listen, Beth, about tonight..."

"No! Will!" she interrupted. "Don't do this to me again. Tonight was going to be special. You promised. Just you and me."

"Something came up." I was dying, and I knew it.

"Let me guess, it has something to do with Joey, right?"

"What does Joey have to do with anything?"

"Everything with you has something to do with Joey. Joey always comes first with you. When is it my turn? You treat me like you treat Laura."

"What's that supposed to mean? What's wrong with how I treat Laura? She's one of my closest friends."

"That's just it, Will." She sighed. "Laura's your friend. But I'm supposed to be your girlfriend. And what's wrong with how you treat both of us is that anytime Joey wants to do something, we both get shoved aside. At least Laura has found someone who knows how to treat her."

"Did she...did Laura tell you this?"

"She didn't have to. Look, Will, this obviously isn't working. You aren't committed to us. I think we should take a break until you figure out what you want."

"Wait a minute; you're breaking up with me?"

"You can call it that. Just don't call me until you've figured things out. It's your move this time."

"Figured things out? What's to figure out? What I want is that...that spark of chemistry. That feeling that everything is all right when you're with them, that you're finally home. Don't you want that?"

"Yes, Will, I do," she said quietly, "but the thing is, I thought I had it — with you. I'm sorry you don't feel the same way. I hope you find it. I really do. Goodbye."

"Beth..." I tried, but she'd already hung up.

I stood there with the phone in my hand for several minutes replaying my conversation with Beth in my head. She had said so much it took a while for it all to sink in, and when it did, I didn't know whether to be angry, laugh, or cry. Maybe all three would suffice.

The car horn sounded, letting me know that Joey had arrived to pick me up for the big shindig at Aidan's. I checked myself in the mirror and was somewhat surprised to see that I was wearing jeans and a short-sleeved dark blue pullover shirt and leather sandals. I didn't remember choosing that particular outfit, but then I had been kind of preoccupied with my thoughts since Beth's phone call. At any rate, it would do. At least the blue brought out my eyes.

"Hey," I said as I slid into Joey's Jetta.

"Hey," he gave me a close look, then threw the car into reverse and backed onto the road.

"Ok, what's wrong?" he asked as soon as we were moving forward.

"What do you mean?" I tried for the dumb approach.

"Give it up, Will. We both know you're a terrible liar and I know you well enough to know when something is bothering you. Is it this whole apartment thing? 'Cause if it is, I'll back off. It's not that big a deal. Your parents are just a drag sometimes..."

"It's not that," I cut him off. "Beth and I broke up tonight."

"So? You guys break up like every other week. It's a tradition. You'll be dating again next week."

"I don't think so. This time was different. She broke up with me."

"Whoa!" He looked over at me to gauge my reaction.

"Look at the road, please," I said automatically. Having driven with Joey before, I knew we needed all the help we could get.

"So, what happened?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"You? Mr. Let's-talk-about-our-feelings?"

"It's just...I need some time to think about stuff. She said some things that...I don't know. I just need to think about it."

"She really upset you, huh?"

“Yeah.”

The rest of the short ride was spent in silence. The apartment building turned out to be a renovated turn-of-the-century brick warehouse down by the newly rejuvenated river district. It looked like it once served an industrial function of some sort. The renovation project had included installing an elevator that was cleverly designed to look like a grain lift, complete with a wrought iron gate. I was thankful for the elevator considering the building was four stories and Aidan's apartment was on the top floor.

We knocked, and after a moment, a young guy around our age opened the door. He had wavy dark blond hair and the greenest eyes I had ever seen. I wondered if they were contacts. He was taller than I was, of course, but shorter than Joey, so that would put him at about five foot ten.

“Hey, you made it!” he said, breaking into a wide grin bordered by twin dimples.

“Aidan, this is my best friend, Will Keegan,” Joey said.

We shook hands as Aidan said, “Hi Will. I'm Aidan Scott. I've heard a lot about you.”

I forced a smile. “Well, you're ahead of me.”

He laughed and stepped back to allow us in. We entered a large and airy room with high ceilings and rough brick walls. Enormous floor-to-ceiling multi-paned windows with the original wavy glass still intact lined the outside wall. Sparse furnishings made the room look even larger: The overstuffed sofa and recliner's only company was a large entertainment center that housed a state-of-the-art system including a TV, VCR, CD player, and DVD player. The latest R&B dance groove blasted from the surround sound speakers. Laura and Gabe occupied the sofa, sitting so close a sheet of paper couldn't have slipped between them. A leggy blonde had draped herself over the recliner like a carefully positioned model in a La-Z-Boy commercial. Laura waved to acknowledge our arrival then went back to her conversation with the blonde.

“It's not much, but I guess it's home for now. At least for one year according to the lease,” Aidan said.

“Are you kidding? It's awesome,” I said sincerely. “This place must cost a fortune.”

“It's not that bad. You want to see the rest of the place?”

“Sure. You coming, Joey?”

“Nah. You go ahead. I'm gonna go say hi,” he said as he headed toward the living area.

I shrugged and turned toward Aidan.

“Now, for the grand tour,” he said. “On your right you will notice the lavishly furnished living area. If you turn to your left, you will enter the large and spacious kitchen complete with all the gourmet accoutrements one could ever desire. Julia Child, eat your heart out.”

I laughed since the kitchen was barely large enough for the both of us. A built-in table and the three chairs around it took up most of the space.

“Small, but functional,” I said helpfully.

Aidan narrowed his eyes. “Have you been talking to my real estate agent?”

I laughed again, and Aidan motioned me back into the living room.

“As we continue with the guided tour, we will now be going through the door just to the right of the kitchen door which, as you will see, leads to this marvelous hallway.” He switched now to a game show host voice. “Well, Will, what will it be? Door Number One? Or maybe you'd like to try Door Number Two? Or how about trying your luck with Door Number Three?”

Three doors opened off the hallway, one straight ahead, and one each on the left and right.

“Can I use a lifeline?” I ventured.

“Do I look like Regis?”

“Um...no...let's try for Door Number Two.”

“Oh, jeez, Will. I'm sorry, but you chose the bathroom. But we have some lovely parting gifts, don't we, Jimmy?” He dropped his voice an octave and boomed, “That's right, Aidan. We'll be sending Will home with a lifetime supply of Charmin. It's squeezably soft.”

I laughed so hard I snorted, which of course caused my face to begin to burn. I imagined I must have been pretty close to the color of a tomato. Aidan acted as if I hadn't just made a rude porcine noise and went on with his game show host shtick.

“But the game's not over yet. Try again, Will.”

“Door Number Three.”

“Excellent choice,” he said as he swung open the door, “and may I just say that is a lovely shade of red you are wearing. Very flattering.”

The room we walked into now was apparently Aidan's bedroom, and it was huge. It held a double bed, two dressers, a computer desk outfitted with a brand new computer, and an open closet full of clothes...and there was still room to spare.

"If you decide to be my roomie, your room will be across the hall," Aidan said in his normal voice. He opened that door, and I stepped in expecting a copy of the room I had just seen. I was surprised to find it was half the size and stacked to the ceiling with boxes.

"I, uh, haven't finished unpacking yet," he said sheepishly. "I know this room is smaller, but I needed the extra space for my computer desk. And to make it fair you would only have to pay a third of the rent instead of half."

"Are you sure you can afford that?" I asked automatically.

"Oh, money's not really a problem. That's not why I wanted a roommate. It's more for company. I'm from a big family, and it's weird going from that to living by myself. I thought I could offset the culture shock some by having someone else live here. I mean I have the extra room so it made sense. Not that I'm expecting you, or whoever moves in, to be my best bud or anything. I know you and Joey are really tight, but it'll just be nice having someone else here. Oh yeah, I almost forgot, there is a bonus to having the smaller room. Check this out."

He shoved boxes aside until he had cleared a path to the window. I followed him and looked out. I had to give it to him; the view was spectacular. The window overlooked the river, the lights from the apartment building sparkling and dancing across its black surface. An iron fire escape just outside the window formed a sort of balcony that would be awesome on a summer night.

"I guess we should get back to the party before they think we ditched them," Aidan said after a moment.

"Do you have a boat?" I asked him, still looking out the window. I was reluctant to leave the scene and even more reluctant to return to the group. I wasn't in a party mood even though Aidan's good humor had lifted my dark mood somewhat.

"No. I wish I did, but that's a little out of reach right now. Especially with rent and tuition."

"Too bad," I said. I pulled myself away from the window and followed Aidan back to the living area.

The music had moved on to something a little softer, and the mood seemed to be as mellow as the music. Laura and Gabe were still sitting closely on the couch with plenty of room for another person, but Joey had perched himself on the arm of the recliner. The leggy blonde was resting her hand rather possessively on his thigh.

"Hi, I'm Will," I said pointedly, since no one seemed to be planning on introducing us anytime soon.

"Nice to meet you, Will. I'm Shelley," she said. "I've heard a lot about you from Joe here," she added, giving his leg a little squeeze to punctuate her pronouncement.

I lifted one eyebrow and tried to make eye contact with Joey, but he seemed to suddenly find the carpet pattern extremely fascinating.

"Joe seems to have been doing a lot more talking about me than to me, because I'm afraid I've never heard anything about you."

For a moment, everyone froze; a very awkward silence followed. I forced a laugh in an attempt to undo the damage, and everyone smiled uncertainly. Joey was still busy trying not to look at me.

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't mean that the way it came out. I've had a bad day."

"It's ok, I understand," she said graciously. She had a rather pronounced southern drawl that I couldn't quite place. I guess she was pretty if you liked the type: long white-blond hair, big blue eyes, pouty lips, and big boobs — she had the whole package.

Personally, I thought Laura was much prettier. Her father is black, and her mother is a full-blooded Cherokee. The results were quite stunning. Her flawless skin was the color of caramel, and her large almond-shaped eyes were a dark chocolate brown. She had high cheekbones and her jet-black hair hung almost to her waist. She and Gabe made a striking couple. Gabe was Hispanic and quite handsome. He was only a year older than Joey, Laura, and I, but he seemed much more sophisticated. Maybe that was just because I hadn't known him all his life as I had Joey and Laura. I didn't have any milk-shooting-from-the-nose memories about him. He seemed to be good for Laura; he complemented her in every way. He wore his straight black hair short and spiky, and his dark good looks matched hers perfectly.

"So you had a bad day?" Laura asked after a brief but loaded pause. Leave it to Laura to pick up the one thing that I didn't want to talk about.

I waved my hand dismissively. "I don't want to talk about it. So, Shelley, do you go to school with Joey...er, Joe?"

I ignored the looks on everyone's faces: the dirty look Laura shot me, the curious ones from Gabe and Aidan, and the uncomfortable expression on Joey's face. I kept my focus carefully on Shelley's pointy little face.

"Yes, we're both in Professor Strauss' American History class. That's where we met on the first day of school. He asked me out the next day, and we've been going out ever since. But it's only been two weeks, so I guess that's why you haven't heard of me," she added quickly. She cast Joey a look that clearly said, "Help me out here!", but he was still engrossed in plush pile.

Well, that explained why Joey had been so busy the last two weeks. I was surprised how hurt I was.

"Yeah, you're right," I said with venom in my voice. "Two weeks is not really long enough for a best friend to tell someone they have a new girlfriend." I stood up and almost had to sit back down as my knees buckled. "If you'll excuse me, I think I need some fresh air."

"Will!" Laura said sharply.

"I'm...I'm sorry. I'm going to...go take a walk...or something," I mumbled haltingly as I stumbled toward the door. Tears were threatening to spill over before I could make my escape. I paused at the door long enough to say, "I've had a bad day, really."

I found my way out of the building and wandered into the back yard. The wooden bulkhead edging the river made a great seat. I had just about gotten myself under control when I felt someone come up behind me. I didn't have to look up to know it was Laura.

"Ok, that was appalling. What the hell was that all about?"

"I've had a bad day," I repeated softly.

"So you keep saying. Wanna tell me about it?"

"No."

"How 'bout you do it anyway." She sat down next to me and swung her long legs out over the water.

"Beth and I broke up today."

"So? You're always breaking up or getting back together. Call her tomorrow, and tell her you're sorry."

"It's not like that this time. She broke up with me."

"Oh...oh, my gosh."

"Yeah, I got the feeling it was pretty permanent this time."

"Will, I don't know how to say this tactfully..."

I snorted. "Since when have you been tactful?"

"Point made. Ok then, have it your way. Why are you so beat up about Beth dumping you for a change? You've dumped her enough times. You don't like being on the receiving end?"

"It's not that. Actually, I don't really care about Beth that much. She was comfortable, familiar...I mean we've been together for years...but..."

"A 'but' is never a good sign, sweetie, and there was always a 'but' with Beth."

"Yeah."

"So what's really bothering you?"

"Something she said. She said that I always put you and her second."

"How did I get into this?"

"She said that I always put Joey first. Do you feel that way too?" I looked over at Laura for the first time. She was looking out over the river, the reflected light playing softly over her even features. For a moment she didn't answer. When she began to talk, I had to lean in closer to catch what she was saying.

"You never knew this," she said. "I never told anyone really, but I've had a huge crush on you for the longest time."

I opened my mouth, but she shook her head before I could speak. "Let me finish. I used to get so hurt whenever I would call you to do something and the answer was always 'Joey and I are doing this' or 'Joey and I are doing that.' It was even worse when it was 'Joey and I *might* be doing this or that.' I wasn't even competition with a possibility. After awhile, I guess I just accepted the fact that Joey would always get top billing when it came to you, but I still wanted to be close to

you, so I infiltrated your little club. We became the three musketeers, and we lived platonically ever after. All for one, right? As long as Joey was 'the one'. I got over you eventually. Now I wouldn't trade your friendship for anything. Gabe knows I exist. He treats me right, and I love him. But to answer your question, yeah, I do feel as if I always came second to Joey."

"Why...why didn't you ever say anything?"

"Like what? Hey, Will, I'm in love with you but you treat me like dirt? Hey, Will, why is Joey so great? What's wrong with me? Hey, Will, acknowledge that I exist, dammit? What was I supposed to say?" She swiped angrily at the tears that were rolling down her cheeks. I had only seen Laura cry a few times as long as I had known her. It unnerved me worse than anything she had said.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, "I'm so sorry, Laura."

"It's ancient history," she said taking a deep breath. "I moved on. Like I said, Gabe is the greatest. I really do love him. Maybe I'm not as over you as I thought, but I am moving on."

We sat in silence for a few minutes.

"Did you know Joey and Shelley were dating?" I said at last.

Laura sighed. "He still comes first doesn't he?"

"I didn't...it's just..."

"It's ok. I should be used to it by now. Yeah, I knew."

"Why didn't he tell me?" I tried to keep the whine out of my voice, but I still came out sounding like a petulant five-year-old.

"Maybe because he knew this would happen."

"What do you mean?"

"Will, every time Joey has ever had a girlfriend, you've been jealous. You do nothing but pick them apart and criticize their every move. Maybe Joey wanted a little grace period with Shelley before you started in on her."

"I'm not jealous," I said defensively.

"Oh, please, then what was that whole scene up there?"

"I was just surprised. I mean, you saw the way she was all over him. 'Joe has told me all about you,'" I mocked.

"See, there you go."

I opened my mouth to argue, but Laura hurried on, "Look, Will, I have a very serious question I need to ask you. I want you to be honest with me. Please, I've never asked anything of you. And I don't want you to answer until you can give me a one hundred percent sure answer."

"Of course, Laura," I said indignantly. "You know I would never lie to you."

"Not on purpose, maybe."

"What's that mean?"

"Never mind. Here's my question." She took a deep breath. "Are you in love with Joey? I mean romantically — 'in love' in love. Because if you are, you need to face it and deal with it and figure out what it means. You can't just keep on hurting everyone around you. You know I'll always love you no matter what."

"Are you...are you asking if I'm *gay*?" I asked in amazement.

"Will?" We both turned toward the voice. It was Joey up by the parking lot. "Hey, Will? Laura? Are you guys out here?"

"We're down by the water," Laura called back. She turned back to me, reached out, and touched my cheek for just the briefest moment. I almost didn't feel it. "Think about what I said, and remember I love you."

She jumped up and ducked into the shadows as Joey approached.

"I, uh, didn't interrupt anything, did I?" he asked.

"No, we were finished," I said slowly.

"So, uh...what did you think of the apartment?"

"It was great — airy and light with a great sense of the original integrity of the building. Great color schemes and tastefully decorated. Everything a guy could want," I said sarcastically. "Why'd you come here, Joey? It wasn't to talk about the apartment. Or are you that eager to foist me off on Aidan?"

"Will, it's not like that, and you know it. Shelley thought I should go see..."

"And when were you going to tell me about her? Was I going to be invited to the wedding?"

"We've only been dating two weeks! I was going to tell you tonight. I told you there was someone I wanted you to meet. Do you think I'd be that stupid as to invite you to a party she was going to be at if I wasn't going to tell you about her? I would have told you sooner but...I guess I needed some time with her just to myself first."

I looked out across the river. "We're growing apart," I said softly. "Laura and Gabe, you and Shelley...me with nobody."

"We're not growing apart, we're growing up. You're my best friend, Will, and you'll always be my best friend. Nothing will ever change that. But we're not fourteen anymore. We can't spend all our lives together. We're all going to have families and careers. It can't be just the three of us forever."

"I don't want things to change."

"Everything changes. If you don't change, then you're dead. Make the most of it. Now that Beth is out of the picture, date new people. Try some new things. Get out there and live. You can start by moving in with Aidan. He's a great guy; you won't find a better roommate. I think it would be good for you to be more independent."

I sat for a few minutes thinking about everything that had happened today, especially what Joey had just said. Finally, I stood up, dusted the dirt off my bottom, and started for the building.

"Where're you going?" Joey asked, trotting to catch up.

"To see if that roommate position has been filled."

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