

Snow Angel

Six Months After *Outfield Menace*...

November 1952

Kurt

I sat in Ryan's garden staring down at Angel's letter. A chill breeze blew across my neck, making me shiver. The letter trembled slightly in my hands. I'd been trying ever so hard not to miss Angel, but I yearned for him with all my heart. I had read his letter so often in the past weeks it was beginning to separate at the folds. It had been six months since Angel left, and I felt as if a hundred years had passed. I looked down at the letter and read it once again in the bright autumn sunlight.

Dear Kurt,

I hope you get this letter before you go to school. I had a talk with Noah Taber last night, and I gave him a letter to pass around at school. I know you're not going to like it, but the only way I could think of to make everything okay for you is to make everyone think I'm the queer. I couldn't bear seeing you abused any more. I've been a coward. I know I should've stood by you when all this started, but I just didn't have the courage. I couldn't take everyone hating me. It wasn't all cowardice, though. You see, Adam and the others killed Matt Taber because they found out he was like us. I was afraid they'd come after you, and the only way I could think to save you was to pretend I hated you, too. I even managed to convince Adam that I especially had it in for you and made him promise I'd get to be in on the "fun." Adam bought it and said it was a chance for me to redeem myself and prove my loyalty.

I was there the night they killed Matt, but as I told you, I didn't do it. I tried to stop it and nearly got myself killed. I didn't know what they were going to do to him until they started beating him. That's when I tried to put an end to it, but they held me back. I fought, but with them holding each of my arms I couldn't break free. There wasn't anything I could do. I had to just stand there and watch them kill him. I really think they would've killed me, too, if Adam

wasn't so obsessed with baseball. Jesse wanted to kill me. He argued hard for it, but Adam told him 'no,' and what Adam says goes. If I wasn't a kick-ass first baseman, I think they would've offed me. It's kind of weird, isn't it, that baseball saved my life?

I had to watch it after that. I wanted out of Adam's little gang, but if they even suspected I might tell about what I'd seen, they would've killed me for sure. That's why I wouldn't talk to you about the night Matt died. I didn't want to put you in danger. I would've taken the secret to my grave, probably, if it hadn't been for them coming after you.

I know I should've gone straight to the cops after they'd killed Matt, but I was too scared. I just didn't know what to do, and Adam said he'd make sure he took me down with them if I ever opened my mouth about it.

I sent a letter to the cops before coming here tonight, telling them exactly what happened the night Matt died. I gave them all the names. Hopefully, it will be enough to put Adam and all those assholes behind bars for a long time, but who knows? If not, they'll kill me for sure, so I have to leave.

I'd take that risk to stay with you, because I love you more than anything, but there's more to the situation than that. Me being here wouldn't stop the name-calling and abuse. Even if I admitted to being a homo, too, it still wouldn't stop it. Maybe it would be easier to take because we were in it together, but it wouldn't end it. The only way I could think of to end it is to take the blame myself. In the letter I gave to Noah, it says that I'm the queer, not you. It says...well, you'll read it, so you'll know.

I told Noah who killed his brother. I told him how I had wanted to stop it, but couldn't. He actually thanked me for trying to save his little brother. I wish I could've. Anyway, it feels good to get it all off my chest.

I love you, Kurt, more than anything else. I'll always love you. I'd give my life to stay with you, but Blackford isn't ready for two boys in love. Even if there was a way to save you without everyone thinking I'm a queer, they'd catch onto us eventually. I mean, they're not *that* stupid. Maybe the world will change some day. I hope so. Anyway, what I want most of all is for you to be happy. I love you, Kurt. Be happy.

Angel

P.S. Look for me on graduation day. I know it's a long time off, but I'll be there. No matter where I end up in the world, I'll come back, and maybe when I leave again, you'll come with me.

A shadow fell across the letter just as I finished reading it. I looked up into Ryan's wise eyes. I did my best to smile, but my heart was breaking. I put the letter aside, jumped up, and grabbed Ryan around the waist.

"It will be okay, Kurt. He'll come back," Ryan said.

I cried softly into Ryan's shoulder. He wrapped his arms around me and held me close. As always I felt safe in Ryan's embrace.

"It's a little chilly to be sitting out here. Let's go inside. We'll talk and have something hot to drink," Ryan said after I'd gotten myself under control.

I nodded, still too choked up to speak. Ryan led me from the stone patio into his Frank Lloyd Wright style house. I sat in one of the comfortable club chairs while Ryan walked on to the kitchen.

"Hot cocoa or hot tea?" Ryan asked.

"Cocoa, please."

"Good choice."

I loved Ryan's home. It was one-story, with a high, peaked roof, and it looked as though it had just kind of grown there instead of being built. The lower halves of the walls were rough stone in a reddish-orange hue, and the upper parts were some sort of dark wood I didn't recognize. There were lots of windows, adding to the beauty of the house. The patio extended out from the back porch, flowing into the garden, so that it was difficult to determine where one ended and the other began. Even in November, the garden was beautiful.

I looked out the windows into the garden. It was dormant now, but the statuary of beautiful youths, small spruce trees, and boxwood made it far more cheerful than most other gardens at this time of year. In the summer, Ryan's garden was no less than a paradise. Its beauty had helped ease my heart since my boyfriend left. I'd worked among the hostas, geraniums, and black-eyed susans, losing myself in their beauty so as not to dwell on the sense of loneliness that had threatened to overwhelm me.

There were so many plants inside near the south-facing windows that it looked as if the garden had crept inside to spend the winter near the fire. Ivy crawled up the walls and above the windows. A large banana tree, a dwarf lemon tree, and something Ryan said was a kumquat tree added a touch of summer to the indoors.

Ryan's living room felt like something out of a ski lodge, with its great stone fireplace, exposed wooden rafters, and huge art-deco rug. The room was filled with comfortable, leather club chairs and love seats. I snuggled back in my chair and extended my hands toward the crackling fire. The scent of wood smoke tickled my nostrils.

I heard Ryan's familiar step behind me and turned to see him carrying a tray holding two extra-large mugs of steaming cocoa and a bowl of marshmallows. He set the tray down on a low, wooden table between our chairs and handed me a mug.

"Thanks," I said as I plopped a marshmallow into my mug.

That was the last word spoken for quite some time. We just sat there sipping cocoa and gazing at the fire and the indoor garden. My eyes wandered to Ryan from time to time. He was looking very handsome in his black-wool, cable-knit sweater. There was a time when I'd had some sexual thoughts about Ryan, even though he was old enough to be my father. My heart belonged to Angel now, however, and Ryan had become my mentor. He was like a second father, too, and I could talk to him about things I'd never dare speak of with my dad.

"I really miss him," I said, stating the obvious. I felt as if I might begin crying again.

"I know you do, Kurt, but Angel will come back."

“At graduation? I’m a sophomore! I feel as if he’s been gone forever. How can I survive waiting three whole years?”

“By taking it one day at a time, Kurt. Don’t look so far down the road. Hold your love for Angel in your heart. Think of his return as a wonderful, distant event, to be anticipated with joy. Until you can be together once more, focus on your own life—school, work, and fun. Time will pass much more quickly if you don’t dwell on Angel’s absence. Enjoy what you can of your life now, Kurt, and the days will speed by. You only get to be fifteen once, after all.”

“Yes, but three years!”

“Look at it this way, Kurt. There is nothing you can do to change the situation. Angel made a great sacrifice to turn back the clock, so to speak. I’m sure I don’t have to remind you what your life was like when everyone believed you were a homosexual. Now, only a few of us know the truth. You’re safe now, Kurt, because of Angel.

“You owe it to Angel to be as happy as you can be. You know he wants you to be happy. You won’t be able to help missing Angel from time to time. I’m sure he’ll miss you, as well. Things are as they are, however, so you must make the best of the situation. Life is too short to waste even a moment, Kurt. I know. I feel as if I was your age only yesterday. The years fly by, Kurt. I’m not saying you should forget about Angel. You can’t and you shouldn’t, but do your best not to be so sad. Remember the good times with Angel, and look forward with eager anticipation to when you can be together again. I know you don’t feel like it now, Kurt, but you’re a very lucky boy. You’ve found love when you’re young. Some people go through their entire lives without finding love. It’s especially hard for guys like us. Even though he can’t be with you right now, Kurt, you still have Angel. Remember that.”

I nodded.

“You’re right, of course, but it’s still hard.”

“I know it is. The important thing is to look at the situation as positively as you can. The difference between happiness and sadness is most often perception. You are only as happy or as unhappy as you believe yourself to be. You have a wonderful, handsome boyfriend who loves you so much he sacrificed himself to save you. Beyond all hope, the nightmare you were living has ended. Angel saved your life—literally and figuratively. You can walk through the hallways of your school now without being hated. You’re free to enjoy your life as you have not been since the trouble began. Look around you, Kurt, smell the flowers, and gaze upon the trees. Enjoy your friends and your family. Spend time with your coin collection. Do all the things you enjoy. Angel sacrificed himself so that you could enjoy your life, so do so until you can share your life with him.”

“Thanks, Ryan,” I said.

“You’re very welcome. Dispensing wisdom is what we old guys are for.”

I laughed. “You’re not *that* old.”

Ryan was right. I missed Angel terribly, but there was nothing I could do to change the situation. Angel and I simply could not be together right now. Even if I knew where he was, I couldn’t just run away and join him. To do so would be to undo the sacrifice he’d made for me.

“I hope he’s okay,” I said.

“Angel is a very bright and resourceful boy. He’s also the most courageous boy I’ve ever had the honor of knowing. Angel can handle anything life throws at him. I’m sure he’s treating his life right now as a big adventure. You can rest assured that he’ll keep his promise. He will return to you, Kurt.”

“I know he’ll come back,” I said. “I can feel it in my heart.”

“Trust your heart, Kurt. It will never lead you wrong. Even when your thoughts attempt to lead you astray, your heart will remain true.”

I nodded. Ryan had a way of putting things in perspective. He never tried to sugarcoat anything for me, but he helped me look at things in the proper way. I didn't know what I'd do without him. Every young homo needed an older mentor like Ryan—someone more experienced and wiser who wouldn't take advantage.

I shuddered to think that Ryan had very nearly been lynched by a mob for the murder of Matt Taber. Ryan was entirely innocent, of course, but Danny Mackwoods had turned him in because his car matched the one supposedly seen trailing Matt shortly before Matt was brutally murdered. It was my own fault Danny found out about that. He overheard me talking to Angel about the car in Ryan's garage. Even before I found out who really killed Matt, I didn't truly believe Ryan was guilty. Still, I'd nearly cost Ryan his life. Thank God he had forgiven me.

Angel had saved Ryan, too. He was still on the inside of Adam's gang then, pretending to be one of them. It was Angel who called the cops and tipped them off that a lynch mob was coming for Ryan. Angel had saved my life and Ryan's. He was a hero.

Ryan and I sat and sipped hot cocoa for a good long time in silence while thoughts of Angel flowed through my mind.

Eventually, we stood. I gave Ryan a hug and thanked him for helping me through another dark hour. I felt a good deal better as I walked toward home. It would be many long months before I laid eyes on Angel again, but he was with me in my heart, so he wasn't truly gone. I wondered what Angel was doing at just that moment and if he was thinking of me.

Angel

A mile isn't far when speeding down the road in a car, but it seems a good deal farther when one is walking. Oh, how my feet ached in those first days of my flight from Blackford, Indiana. I walked all night, every night, for an entire week before I felt safe enough from prying eyes to venture out in the daylight. I couldn't even begin to guess how far I'd walked during those nights. Distance didn't mean much in the dark.

My heart ached in those early days, for each step took me farther away from Kurt. My departure meant he could go back to living his life unmolested, and that made our separation worth it. I loved Kurt with all my heart and would have done anything to take away his pain. Exiling myself from Blackford for a few years was a small price to pay for his happiness. If only we could have remained together...

There was no use dwelling on “if only,” so I gave that up quickly. Although my heart ached with longing for Kurt, I was happy. I'd saved him: first, from Adam, Chuck, Danny, Jesse, Travis, and Joshua, who would have happily murdered him for being homosexual; and second, from all the other jerks who were making his life a living hell for the same reason.

With any luck, Adam's gang was behind bars now and wouldn't have the chance to murder again. I was sure the family of Matt Taber would do all they could to see that the gang was punished. I was concerned for Kurt's safety, but if Adam's gang wasn't already in jail, they would avoid Kurt like the plague. Adam wasn't stupid. He'd know the cops were watching Kurt just in case the gang came after him. Kurt was too obvious a target. If the gang wasn't behind bars, I was sure the cops had Kurt's house staked out. It was quite a different story where I was concerned. If I'd stayed in Blackford, Adam would have come after me no matter what. I'm sure he would gladly have risked

prison to make me pay for turning him in. I halted for a moment. What if he saw Kurt as an opportunity to punish me? It was a chilling thought. No. I knew Adam. He wouldn't risk his own neck or that of any member of the gang for anything less than me. Kurt was safe. I was not.

No matter where the situation with Adam stood, I couldn't go back home. My name was mud back in Blackford High School. I'd publicly announced I was a homosexual with the letter I'd left behind and had told all my classmates they could go fuck themselves for being prejudiced bastards. I smiled when I thought of their rage and frustration at not being able to lay their hands on me.

I wondered what my parents thought of me. I'd left them a letter, too, but one quite different from the letter I'd left for my classmates. I told my parents I loved them and that I was sorry to have to leave. I told them the truth about me: that I was attracted to guys instead of girls. I hoped they wouldn't hate me for that, but if they did hate me, then they weren't the parents I thought they were. I was sure my mom, at least, was worried about me. I was sorry for putting her through that worry, but I had no choice. The only way to save Kurt was to leave Blackford behind.

My stomach growled. I'd tried to save as much of the money I brought with me as possible, and I'd picked up odd jobs here and there, but it was hard for a vagrant like me to find work. As a result, I skimped on meals even when I had a fair supply of cash. My future was uncertain, and I didn't want to find myself with nothing. Better to skimp now than starve later. Besides, as long as I had a little money in my pocket, I wasn't broke. Having absolutely nothing would've left me feeling too desolate. I'd read somewhere that Mark Twain was down on his luck for quite a spell and refused to spend his last dime. He kept that dime no matter what, so he wouldn't be penniless. Who would've thought that Mark Twain and I would have something in common?

I had enjoyed walking in the night during those early days, with the stars above and the owls hooting in the near and far distance. It was still more pleasant to travel in the daylight. After a week of nighttime travel, I'd figured I was far enough away from Blackford to risk hiking along in the daytime. I wasn't a fugitive after all. The police might want me to testify against Adam's gang, but I doubted they would expend any great effort to find me. They would just have to make do with the letter I sent naming Matt Taber's killers.

I was sure one of Adam's gang would crack under the pressure and tell all. That would seal the fate of Adam & Company. My parents might be searching for me, but I'd figured they would give up after a week. After reading my letter and discovering I was a homosexual, they might be glad to be rid of me. I wondered how Mom and Dad were holding up under the stares of the townsfolk of Blackford. Most people there couldn't bring themselves to say the word "homosexual," much less think one had actually walked the streets of their hometown. I hoped I hadn't caused my parents too much trouble, but I couldn't help being what I was. God had made me attracted to boys instead of girls, and I could no more change that than I could change into an eagle. If only I *could* change into an eagle! Then I could fly instead of walk! My mind took many flights of fantasy as I walked along lonely stretches of dusty road.

Six months had passed. All those long weeks of travel, of never staying in the same place for more than a few days, had made my legs strong and my feet accustomed to long hikes. Still, my legs, feet, and the rest of me were tired by the time the sun dipped below the horizon. The nights were becoming cold, and I wondered how I'd get on when fall truly gave way to winter. I guessed I'd deal with that when it happened.

I left the gravel road and lay down under the stars, hidden by a few small cedar trees that filled the air with their woody scent. Nearby, wisps of fog twisted and rose from a small pond. The

fog crept up the slope toward me like small, insubstantial spirits.

I thought of Kurt as I lay there. I wondered if he was snug and warm in his bed at home. I was tempted to write him a letter, but I wasn't sure it was wise. My parents could force me to come home if they found me. I would not be so foolish as to include a return address (even if I had one), but the letter would be postmarked.

No one had a clue as to where I was now. I wanted to keep it that way. I had traveled first south, then east, and finally north again just to jumble any attempt to find me. Of course, there might be no one searching for me at all, especially after all this time, but I just couldn't risk it. If I was forced back to Blackford, I'd be forced to attend school. A living hell awaited me if I ever returned to B.H.S. No, I couldn't risk a letter or even a phone call. Phone calls could be traced—at least they could be traced on radio cop shows and probably in real life, too. I wished I could let Kurt know I was okay, but it was just too risky.

I thought about the day when I would return. There would be Kurt, eighteen-years-old instead of fifteen. He'd be taller. He might look quite different. How he looked didn't matter, but it would feel odd meeting him again after all that time. Would he even be the same person? We would both legally be adults, and no one could stop us from going wherever we wished then. Would Kurt wait for me all those years? Three years was a very long time. I felt as if an eternity had already passed, and yet only a sixth of our waiting time was over.

“He'll wait on me,” I said out loud to the darkness. “I can feel it in my heart.”

I awakened the next morning to the singing of cardinals. Birds and animals were often my companions on the road. I had awakened before to find raccoons, rabbits, and deer nosing about. I often spotted them as I walked along. They paid me little mind, as if they knew I was no threat. Once, I'd awakened to find myself face to face with a skunk. He was quite a beautiful creature really, but I dared not move a muscle. I watched him as he slowly waddled away. I was glad he hadn't taken a dislike to me. I had no idea how long it took the stench of skunk spray to wear off.

Great fluffy flakes fell from the sky. The fragrant cedars had kept most of the snow off me, but the ground was covered in white. I stood, stretched, and zipped up my leather jacket as far as I could. I dug in my pocket and pulled out a hard roll I'd purchased two days before. I nibbled at the stale, buttery roll as I made my way back to the road. I hoped I'd come across some sign of civilization soon or I'd have a hungry day and night. Going without wasn't so bad really, but I didn't like missing too many meals in a row. That had happened a handful of times when the little towns and farms had been too far apart or when everything was closed because it was a Sunday or a holiday. I tried to carry a supply of food in my pockets, but sometimes one outpost of civilization was too far from the last.

I was chilled from sleeping on the ground, but I began to warm up as I walked along. I was heading north. I was many, many miles north of Indianapolis already. I'd stayed there a few days, but it was too big a city for me. I preferred small towns like the one I'd left behind far to the south.

The wind got up, turning the chill into a deep freeze. Fall turned into winter before my eyes. I shivered and was thankful for my warm leather jacket, my flannel shirt, and my long hair. I had considered cutting my hair to disguise myself, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. I wouldn't feel quite like myself if I didn't feel my long blond mane on my neck and shoulders. Hair as long as mine was quite a rarity so it would probably have been wiser to cut it, but I'd made it six months

without doing so, and I wasn't about to chop it off now. I got quite a few odd looks as I traveled and I was sure it was the reason I was seldom offered a ride, but I'd never been bothered by what others thought of me. Now, I was doubly glad I hadn't cut my hair. It helped keep me warm in the growing cold.

I trudged along through the snow, mile after mile. I was hiking through some beautiful, if rather flat, country. I wasn't entirely sure where I was, but I was somewhere north of Logansport. I guess my location didn't matter all that much as long as there was some kind of town not too far ahead. The problem was, I didn't know if the next town was two miles away or twenty. Even a map wouldn't have helped a great deal. It would be hard to figure out how far I was from the next town when I wasn't sure where I was.

I kept on walking. The movement helped me keep warm. Fond thoughts of hot cocoa, hot tea, hot *anything* danced in my head. What I wouldn't have given for a steaming bowl of chili, or vegetable or potato soup.

I heard a car coming up behind me. It was only the third one of the morning, and I'd been walking for some hours. Not many souls were brave (or stupid) enough to venture out into the falling snow. As it drew nearer I looked back and saw it wasn't a car at all, but a shiny-green Ford pickup. The driver slowed as he neared and pulled the truck to a halt as it came even with me. He motioned for me to open the passenger-side door.

"Would you like a ride?"

"Definitely! Thanks!"

"It's turning nastier out there by the minute. You shouldn't be outside. The radio says we may get a regular blizzard in a few hours."

"I'll ride it out in the next town."

"So, where are you headed?"

"Anyplace that's warm where I can get something to eat," I said.

Perhaps I should've lied, but I hated lying. The truth was probably as good as any story I could make up, and it was a good deal easier to remember.

"Oh, I didn't introduce myself. I'm Jack. Jack Selby."

"I'm Angel."

"Angel," Jack repeated. A look of profound sadness crossed his handsome features, but it was gone almost before it appeared. "Now, that's an interesting name."

"Yeah, there aren't many Angels around."

Jack put the truck in gear. I could hear the snow compacting under the tires as the truck moved slowly down the road. I looked at Jack as he steered. He wasn't quite thirty. He was younger than my dad, in any case. He had dark hair and was rather good-looking. His face was a bit stern, yet kind. I liked him. I could just tell he was a good person. I felt completely at ease riding in his truck.

The snow fell steadily down, sometimes whipped around by the wind. The wipers were kept busy keeping the fluffy white stuff off the windshield. I reveled in the warmth of the cab as I watched the passing scenery.

"Nice truck," I said.

"Thanks. I'm very proud of her. She's only a few months old. This is my first new vehicle. She's quite a step up from the old Model A truck I had before."

"Model A? From the 30s?"

"Yeah, she was almost an antique, but a vast improvement over my first car."

“What was that?”

“A Model T.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. The top speed was twenty-five miles per hour, downhill. On a flat road I was lucky to get her up to twenty. It was all I could afford at the time. I bought her at an auction for \$35.”

“That’s all? Wow, \$35 for a car!”

“Well, she’d seen better days. She ran perfectly, though. I fixed her up until she looked like new. I actually still have her stored in the barn. I’m not quite sure why I keep her.”

“Does she still run?”

“Probably not. She had a few problems near the end, and she’s been sitting for a long time. That’s not good for a car.”

“What happened to your old truck?”

“It’s sitting out behind a shed on the farm. She was my dad’s. He was a farmer, like me. He drove that truck everywhere. When Dad passed away I inherited his truck, along with everything else. I used her until this spring. She threw a rod, and that was that.”

“Where do you live?” I asked.

“Outside of Verona.”

“Is Verona far?”

“No. It’s just a few miles up the road, although it will take a while to get there in this snow. It’s the next sizeable town.”

“Is there a restaurant?”

“Oh, yes. More than one. There’s a drive-in. It’s the hangout spot for teenagers, but it’s closed for the season. There’s also Rector’s Soda Shop, which serves burgers, hot dogs, and sandwiches in addition to ice cream. The best place to eat is Edna’s Diner on Main Street. No matter what you like, you’ll find it at Edna’s. If she doesn’t have it, she’ll get it.”

“That’s where I’m headed then. Edna’s sounds like Heaven.”

“How old are you, Angel?”

“Fifteen.”

“What are you doing out all by yourself on a day like today?”

“That’s kind of a long story. I, uh, had to leave home.”

Jack didn’t ask me why. He just nodded. I liked the way he didn’t pry into my business. He didn’t treat me like an ignorant kid. He treated me as if I was his age.

“So, what are your plans, Angel? Beyond Edna’s that is.”

“Well, I, uh, usually look for someplace to sleep. I’ll see if I can pick up some jobs shoveling snow or doing whatever. I do a lot of odd jobs to pay my way.”

“Have you been doing that long?”

“For a few months now.”

“That sounds like a rough way to live.”

“It’s not so bad. The cold is the only real problem. I guess if I was smart I would’ve headed south for the winter, instead of north.”

“It’s warmer down south, I’m sure. I hear Florida is nice this time of year. I’ve never been there myself, but I’ve read about it.” Jack paused. “You know, I could probably find you some odd jobs to do around the farm tomorrow. Maybe I can save you the trouble of looking for work.”

“Really?”

“Why not? There’s a spare room. You can sleep there tonight if you’d like.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

We drove on through the snow. It was warm enough inside the cab that I unzipped my jacket. Even my toes were toasty warm. I was relieved I wouldn't have to sleep outside or in a barn tonight. Cold is bad enough, but the wind would've made my night miserable. Thank God Jack came along and was kind enough to give me a ride.

We passed through a small town that wasn't terribly different from Blackford. It did seem a bit larger, with more stores, but it could've easily been named Blackford-North.

Soon, Jack turned off on a winding gravel drive. I could just make out a large farmhouse and a big barn beyond. The driveway wasn't terribly long, but the swirling snow reduced visibility a great deal. I was relieved when we'd reached our destination. The snowstorm was growing more intense by the minute. Soon, Jack wouldn't have been able to see past the hood of his Ford.

I followed Jack around to the back of the house. He led me inside.

“Emma! I brought something home!”

“Not another stray,” said a woman's voice coming down the stairway. Soon, the voice was followed by Emma herself, who must've been Jack's wife. She was rather pretty, with beautiful blonde hair and blue eyes. She was obviously surprised to see me, but she smiled.

“Hmm, not the kind of stray I was expecting.”

“Emma, this is...Angel.”

“Angel?”

Emma and Jack exchanged a look, but I couldn't figure out just what kind of look it was. Emma looked back to me.

“It's very nice to meet you, Angel.”

“Angel is going to help me out with some odd jobs tomorrow. I thought he could use the guest room tonight.”

“I was just about to start supper. Do you like fried chicken, Angel?”

“I love it.”

“Good. It will be an hour or so before it's ready. You look tired. Perhaps you'd like a bath and a little rest. I'll come for you when it's time for supper, or send Jack.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“Come on. I'll show you where everything is,” Jack said.

Jack led me upstairs to a large bedroom. There was a big double bed, an old dresser, and a rocking chair.

“Here it is,” Jack announced. “I hope you like it.”

“It's great!”

“The bathroom is just down the hall. I'll set out everything you need.”

“Thank you so much, Jack. I really appreciate this.”

“Think nothing of it.”

With that, Jack departed, closing the door behind him. I sat on the bed for a moment, trying it out. I sank back into it, nearly toppling over. It was a feather bed. I struggled to my feet and walked to the window. There was nothing to see but swirling snow. Jack was right; a blizzard was coming, if it hadn't arrived already.

I shivered as the wind shook the window panes. The very sight of all the blowing snow made me cold. I was truly grateful to be inside out of the wintry storm. I'd really lucked out when Jack picked me up—fried chicken, a hot bath, and a warm place to sleep! Life didn't get any better than that!

I left my cozy room and walked down the hallway to the bathroom. There I found not only a towel and washcloth laid out, but a set of clothes as well. I stripped and filled the tub with water as hot as I could stand it. A couple of minutes later I eased myself into the tub. Ahhhh!

I'd warmed up on the ride to the farm, but the hot water really did the trick. I could feel the heat penetrating me, easing my muscles. I sank down in the old-fashioned tub until the water was up to my chin.

I had a good wash, shampooing my hair twice, and then I lay back and relaxed in the tub. Pure luxury. I think I could have stayed forever. I grew sleepy after a few minutes and nearly nodded off, so I thought it wise to climb out. I didn't think drowning in the Selby's tub would be a good way to repay their hospitality. *Oh look, a dead boy in the tub. How nice.*

I stood and let the water run off my body as the tub drained. I grabbed the towel and dried off. The clothes were rather too large for me, but they were clean, warm, and comfortable. I took my belt out of my jeans and used it to hold up the jeans Jack had left for me. Without the belt, the jeans might've fallen down. That would be truly embarrassing.

I gathered my dirty clothes and carried them back to "my" room. I set them on top of the dresser. Jack had included a flannel shirt in the pile of clothes he'd left for me, and I snuggled into it gratefully. I had so much to be grateful for that I felt like it was Thanksgiving.

I lay back on the bed, telling myself I'd just rest for a bit. I must've fallen asleep, for I was awakened by a rap on the door what seemed only moments later. I rose up on my elbows, more or less. It was rather difficult raising myself off the feather bed.

"Yes?"

"Supper is ready," Jack said.

"I'll be right out!" I said.

I was famished. I squirmed my way to the edge of the bed and quickly pulled on my shoes. I rushed to the door where Jack was waiting.

"Thanks for loaning me the clothes," I said as I followed him down the hallway.

"I thought yours could probably use a wash. We couldn't have you running around naked, now could we? For one thing, it's much too cold."

"Too embarrassing as well," I added.

Jack laughed.

I caught the scent of fried chicken and freshly baked bread halfway down the stairs. I was suddenly twice as hungry as before. Real food!

The scent was even more heavenly in the kitchen itself.

"Have a seat, Angel," Emma said. "Iced tea?"

"Yes, please."

"Help yourself, Angel," Jack said.

Never one to be shy, especially not when I was starving, I reached out and took a drumstick. Next, I put a small mound of mashed potatoes on my plate, followed by green beans, and cooked apples. Emma cut me a thick slice of hot-from-the-oven bread. I smeared butter and strawberry jam over it.

I took a bite of chicken.

"This is so good," I said, forgetting not to speak with my mouth full.

"Thank you, Angel."

"Emma is an excellent cook," Jack said. "Her blackberry pie takes first prize at the county fair every year."

“I’ve only entered for the last two years, Jack. To hear you talk, you’d think I’d won annually since I was six.”

“If you had entered, you would have won. I’m merely giving credit where it’s due.”

I liked the easygoing way of Emma and Jack. They seemed just right for each other. They seemed appreciative of each other, too. There was a touch of sadness to the pair. It was subtle, yet detectable. Perhaps it was something in their eyes as they looked at each other. Perhaps it was their tone of voice. I don’t really know, but a sense of shared tragedy was noticeable even when they were smiling. I didn’t give it a great deal of thought. It’s a wonder I even noticed. My attention was almost wholly focused on my plate.

It was only with effort that I was able to keep from devouring everything on my plate like some wild boy. It had been some time since I’d had a real meal. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d eaten so well.

I found myself talking more after I refilled my plate with everything. I didn’t even realize I was doing it at first, but I was telling Jack and Emma the whole tale of my troubles with Adam and his gang. I’d shot my mouth off about Kurt before I could stop myself. When I realized I’d given myself away my eyes widened in surprise.

I’ve done it now. They’ll kick me out for sure. One just doesn’t announce he’s a homosexual to people he’s just met.

“It’s okay, Angel,” Emma said.

I realized I must have had a look of shock and terror on my face.

“I didn’t mean to tell you that,” I said. “I’m sorry. Do you want me to go?”

“Of course not,” Emma said.

Jack said nothing. I wasn’t quite sure what he thought about my announcement. He didn’t look pleased, yet he didn’t look ready to toss me out on my butt, either. Emma gave him a look, and he finally spoke.

“You’re welcome here, Angel. Don’t worry about that. Now, why don’t we try some of Emma’s blue-ribbon blackberry pie?”

“Thanks,” I said.

I breathed a sigh of relief. How could I be so reckless? I didn’t usually let my mouth run off like that. I wasn’t one bit ashamed of what I was, but I wasn’t stupid, either. I knew what most people thought of homos. In all the months since I’d left Blackford, I’d never once told anyone about me until right there in the Selby kitchen. I guess I was just so comfortable and relaxed I forgot myself.

Our talk shifted to the Selby farm while we ate dessert. I could easily understand why Emma’s blackberry pie won a blue ribbon at the county fair every year. I was quite stuffed, but I just couldn’t quit eating that pie. It might just have been the best pie ever. It was even better than Mom’s, although I’d never tell Mom that. I felt a touch of sadness as I thought of my mother, but I let it pass.

Jack excused himself to take care of the animals when we’d finished. I offered to help, but he told me to stay put. Emma made us some hot tea, and we sat in the table and drank it out of Golden Wheat cups. I remembered that Kurt’s mom had a set of that china pattern. It had real gold around the edges.

“Do you think Jack’s okay with...what I told you...about my...boyfriend?” I asked.

“I think you took him by surprise, that’s all.”

“You’re a lot nicer than most people.”

“My father once told me there were two rules to judging others. Rule number one is to judge others by what they do, not by who or what they are. Rule number two is not to judge others.”

I smiled. “I like that.”

“I get a feeling about people when I meet them. You seem like a nice boy, Angel. You’re not the first homosexual I’ve met, either. I must admit my first encounter was disturbing in the beginning. I’d heard so many nasty stories. I have to see something for myself before I believe it, and well, what I saw was a kind, considerate soul, not unlike you. I learned to relax, and when I got to know him a bit, I discovered he was much like everyone else.”

“A lot of people hate me for what I am, but I don’t understand it. I know in here,” I said, pointing to my chest, “that I am as I was meant to be. I’ve always been completely comfortable with who and what I am.”

“You’re a smart boy.”

“You really think Jack’s okay with it? He’s been so nice to me. You both have.”

“Don’t worry about it, Angel. Jack isn’t the judgmental type. That’s one reason I married him. Knowing Jack, he’s already forgotten what you said. He doesn’t consider things like that important. Now, if you’d said something about growing corn or raising chickens, *that* he would remember.”

Emma gave a small laugh. She was very easy to talk to, so I ventured to speak with her about something I’d been wondering about.

“Both of you reacted to my name,” I said. “I know it’s an unusual name, but I feel like there’s more to your reaction than that.”

“You’re not from around here, so you don’t know, but...there was an Angel in our lives for a short time: our son.”

I swallowed. I was suddenly fearful I’d brought up a painful topic.

“I guess he’s...not here anymore.” I chose my words carefully.

“No. We lost him to pneumonia when he was five. He had blond hair and blue eyes, just like you. His hair wasn’t as long, of course, but...”

Emma was on the verge of tears. I took her hand.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No. No. It’s okay. Angel is in our thoughts always. You’re not bringing up painful memories. Those memories are always there. I try to remember the happy times with him and be thankful that we had those five years with him.”

Emma looked into my eyes.

“Your features are quite similar to his. I wonder if our Angel would’ve looked like you if he’d survived. If so, he would have been a handsome young man.”

I squeezed Emma’s hand.

“That’s why you and Jack seem sad,” I said. “Even when you’re laughing, there’s a little bit of sadness there.”

“You’re more perceptive than I thought. Yes. Even happy times have an edge of sadness, because our Angel isn’t here to share them with us. We keep him alive in our hearts, however, and always will.”

I wondered if losing their son made Emma and Jack more accepting of me. I don’t mean because our names were the same, but rather that they would probably have given anything to have their son back. They wouldn’t care if he was heterosexual or homosexual, as long as he was there. Maybe people really did have to lose something before they understood its worth. Of course, Emma

and Jack might have been just as accepting if their son was alive and well and sitting at the table with Emma and me. I wasn't the first homosexual to cross their path, either. I wondered about that, but I'd already asked too many questions. In any case, the Selbys were one in a million, or at least one in a thousand. The world needed more people like them.