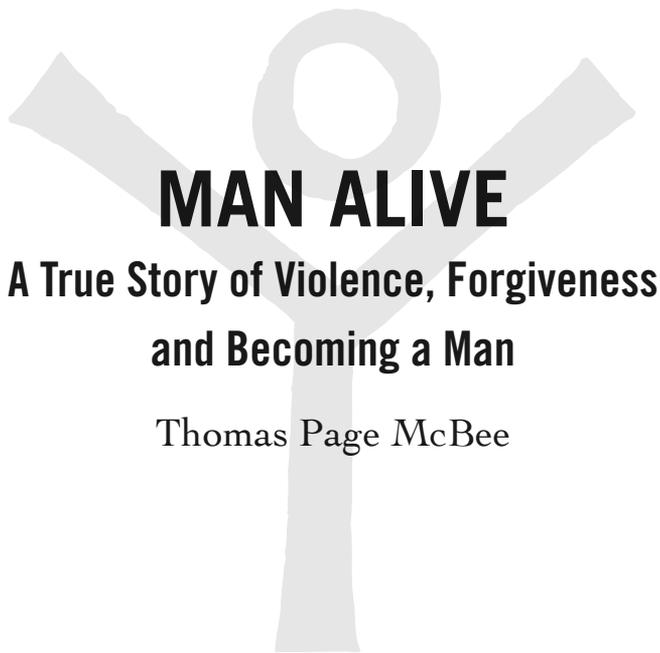




# Man Alive

A TRUE STORY OF VIOLENCE, FORGIVENESS AND BECOMING A MAN

Thomas Page McBee



# MAN ALIVE

**A True Story of Violence, Forgiveness  
and Becoming a Man**

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City Lights Books | San Francisco

# South Carolina

August 2010 • 29 years old

What makes a man?

It's not that I haven't studied them: their sinew, their slang, their beautiful bristle; but before I was held at gunpoint on a cold April day, I couldn't have told you.

A real man, a family man, the Marlboro man, man up.

The man in the mirror.

I loved that Michael Jackson song, growing up. Used to forget my girl-hips, used to sing it to my best imagination of myself.

What makes a man? The need to know led me to my father's hometown in hot-damp South Carolina. The story starts there because that's where I went when I could no longer afford to leave the question alone, to let it rear up every few years, when I'd had too much to drink and it was just me and my reflection and my hungry ghosts. And so I steered my rental through the swampy South with my cap pulled low. I had that teen-boy swagger, scars like smiles across my chest, and a body I was just beginning to love.

But the story also begins the night I almost died, back in April of 2010. And in 1985, when my father became a monster, and in 1990 when my mom found out he was one.

"Men," she'd said then. And I'd learned to say it the same way, a lemon in my mouth.

In South Carolina I could smell it through my open window: alligators and secrets; the embers of Sherman's march, the Klu Kux Klan, my father's farm, burning. It smelled like my animal fear and the spicy deodorant I used to cover it.

*Men*, I thought with that old bitterness, but I already knew my body was shifting. In fact that's why I was there.

A good man is hard to find.

The windshield blurred; the road was inky, the rain biblical. The cheap motel off the highway seemed like not such a hot idea after I passed my fifth gun-racked pick-up, but there wasn't any turning back.

Once a body is in motion, it stays in motion. My mom's a physicist; she told me that.

The truth is, this is a ghost story. No, this is an adventure story.

This is an adventure story about how I quit being a ghost.

# City Lights



**Freeze**

**City  
Lights**

# Oakland

April 2010 • 29 years old

Here's what you need to know about Parker: she *hummed* with a magic that vibrated her long strides, her quick-wit, her dressings-down. Though softened by Southern manners, her mood could turn sharp as a knife's edge, and it wasn't too hard to find yourself on the sticking side of it. I'd seen her make a cat-caller wither and call a real dick of a roommate a piece of shit, repeatedly, until he just sort of disappeared, his stuff packed and gone within the month.

It was like loving a hurricane.

That night she was wound-up, the plastic bag with a new pair of shoes tossed over her shoulder. We'd spent the day in San Francisco, bumming around and seeing a play neither of us cared much for—something about three generations of women—it felt like those sorts of plays were always about three generations of women. As we left the BART station and headed to our neighborhood in Oakland, Parker outlined her issue with associating women with domesticity in the sort of hilariously acidic free-association tirade she'd go on just for kicks.

She was in her French New Wave phase, and it suited her: short hair, shirts thick with nautical stripes. She looked like Jean Seberg in *Breathless*, her blue eyes big as saucers. She could be merciless in her assessments, but beneath that

lay a kindness so clear it was almost painful to observe. I squeezed her hand, and she startled into holding my gaze.

“What?” she asked.

I shook my head. Six years in, she knew.

Mostly, she was a smart-ass. “I have an opinion on everything,” she’d say.

“How about whales?” I’d ask.

“Love them! Key to the ecosystem; smart.”

I’d try to think of the most innocuous, boring subject. “Row houses?”

“Depressing in brick, cute in wood.”

Parker also had strong opinions about walking home so late at night, and I knew why: our friend who discovered a man under her bed, our friend who was bound to a chair during a home invasion, our friend who got punched in the face in broad daylight for no good reason.

That night was the worst kind of foggy: you could breathe it in, feel it stick. I pulled my collar up, my hat down, my hood on. We walked because we were too broke to take a cab, because we couldn’t afford to be afraid and for me that meant being fearless, and mostly because she was in a good mood and I’d convinced her to.

We started down 40th, and I ignored my twitchy heart, and walked tall. If I’d learned anything since I was a kid, it was that if I wanted my life to start, I needed to show up for it.

Foolish, maybe, but I’d peacock through a warzone before I’d admit to that twitch.

# Pittsburgh

1990 • 10 years old

“You can tell me anything,” Mom said, her eyes wide, a flush creeping up her neck. Her cursive was bubbly, effervescent, recording everything I said. *1985–1990*. The dates, she said, were for her records.

I told her, then, about Dad’s fingers in the pool, in the car on the way to her brother’s funeral, Sunday afternoons when she left for the grocery store and he parked Ellie and Scott in front of the television, when he knew no one would come for me. Ellie and Scott and I were each two years apart but it seemed we lived in three different houses then, with three different Moms and Dads, each of us in separate, abutting childhoods.

Mine was chocolate milk, science fairs, camping, and the rituals that kept Dad’s hot breath distinct from the rest of it. I sat on the floor of the closet and threw shoes at the wall. I ran like a deer through the woods behind my house. I picked one tiny thing to look forward to and fixated on it. From his bedspread I jumped into tomorrow and felt the soccer ball connect with my foot and fly, high and sweet, into the corner of the net.

There are the facts of what happened, but the story is in parts. It is still hard to capture the salty terror of the worst

of it, the freeze, the split: how I lost a body, or how I conflated the two ways my body was lost to me.

I was born female, that's a fact. I saw myself as a boy, but that made a certain kind of sense. It wasn't until much later that the complex facts of my anatomy needled at me. Later, people would say that my manhood was always there, blueprinted in my torn-knee jeans, my He-Man castle, my short hair. Maybe that's true, but let's not make this the kind of story where I know all the answers.

What you need to know is that afterwards I'd read a book in my bathtub, and my little legs, hands, torso would return to me eventually, and that was what it meant to be alive: clean and immersed in a library book I could make sense of, breathing in the sharp smell of soap, touching the warm boundary of my skin to the scratchy bottom of the tub.

I never felt lonely when I had the damp pages of *Great Expectations* to keep me company, but I couldn't expect anyone to understand the way my body spangled back to life when I saw myself in Pip's tragic, romantic hope. I admired his dogged faith, even in failure. I liked that he believed in something. Mom called me Pip for years, but I never knew if we saw the same resemblance. After my transition, she'd call me "sweet boy" once, uncharacteristically, and I'd realize that maybe the similarity, for her, had been as simple as that.

I didn't tell Mom about the bathtub ritual, intuiting that to do so would encourage the cloak of guilt to hood her eyes, making her spooky and deaf to me. I didn't want her to go mix herself a strong screwdriver and leave the lamp off in the failing light.

Instead, I allowed her translation of the story to go forward in blue ink as her hand moved assuredly across

the notebook pages, sheaths of paper stacked neatly into a folder she said she'd use to ensure that we were never left wanting. I didn't understand it then, but we were sinking into bankruptcy, and she wanted to keep my father tethered to us. This was her version of vigilante justice, protecting us financially by hanging the threat of this story over him. In the end, it wouldn't be my story but my silence that would keep me, all of us, alive.

"Just tell me the truth," she'd said, but I knew even then that most people don't mean that exactly, so I didn't tell her about the day in the living room, the way I retched, the terrible taste of him and the way I washed my mouth with soap and water but never got clean.

I stared out the window into the trees beside our house, my knees scratched and my brain pulsating in a stinging drone. *In 10 years, I'll be okay*, I promised myself. Ten years seemed impossibly far away, double my lifetime, but something to hitch my hope to. My heart felt strung up in my chest. Panic choked me whenever I met Mom's eyes: she looked like a stranger. Beyond her, the house seemed tilted and too bright. I'd had a life of poetry and swim meets despite my father's searching hands, and now I wasn't sure what, exactly, I was about to lose.

"I hate him," she announced, startling me out of the gauzy silence. I nodded, but didn't respond. I couldn't explain to either of us why I didn't.

"Try to remember the first time it happened," I heard her say, her voice businesslike, as if she were quizzing me ahead of a math test. "You can tell me anything," she added again, softening her tone.

I couldn't help but think of the photographs I'd taken all summer of sticky stray dogs with matted fur and scabbed

noses. The world seemed to me a place of beautiful, damaged things and I wanted to love them all.

I fiddled with my shoelaces and met my mom's gaze. I felt movement in my ragged chest, a whole flock of birds gearing up to depart. I let myself go.

"I was four," I began. "At the old house."

I sounded like someone else. I didn't know how to translate the calm alongside the fear, to explain that afterwards I'd remind myself that I was stronger than him, that I could contain all of that wildness and terror until it was hard and small, until it sparked like a firework in my gut, until I could find something lovely in its wake.

I watched her face bunch in pained concentration as I spoke about where and when and how he touched me. I felt like a marionette, otherworldly and wooden, as I watched her transcribe each sentence, letting my eyes slowly cross until the letters blurred together, until the words quit being my own.

# City Lights

# Oakland

April 2010 • 29 years old

Somehow, despite the sweaty wool cap pulled to my eyebrows and the Carhartt jacket zipped tight across my flat chest, despite the swagger in my walk and the way I'd pitched my voice, still the hostess at the fancy Spanish place on Valencia Street had called me "ma'am." She'd tossed the word over her shoulder like a grenade as she led Parker and me to the table by the window, and though it had been hours I ruminated darkly on every detail of my outfit: where had I gone wrong? I didn't need her to look at my narrow face and slim frame and see a man exactly, but how could she think "woman"?

Parker was tired of this conversation. It made her antsy. She was annoyed by the late hour, now frustrated by the choice we'd made not to take a smelly cab that last mile home from the BART station, the sheen of foggy cold sticking to her face.

"I hate it here," she announced.

"I know." I thought of the woman's pleased expression, how much easier it might be to live someplace that wasn't a stronghold of lesbians with short hair and big biceps, a place where the beginnings of laugh lines or the slight flare of my hips wouldn't tip anyone to the fact that I wasn't a teenage boy.

A black plastic bag stuck to the chain-link fence surrounding the BART's parking lot fluttered, its crinkle the only noise on the street. The hairs rose on my arms as a skateboarding teen rattled past us. Up ahead, a college-age woman walked alone, headphones on, easy prey.

"You think she's going to be okay?" I asked, suspecting myself of sexism.

"As okay as anybody is," Parker said, her look confirming it. "Let's cross."

We'd always head over to 41st because 40th was the dicier street, more shuttered foreclosures despite the brand-new mac-'n-cheese restaurant and fancy bike store.

Once we passed the sad donut shop in the sagging old strip mall we turned toward the single-family homes and new condos of 41st. I couldn't shake my unease, the fog niggling its way under the collar of my flannel shirt. Balls and garden tools lay abandoned in front yards, tricycles knocked on their sides as if everybody had already fled what I was just beginning to sense.

I knew something in my body: a sharp, growing buzz. I heard him before I saw him: light footfalls, too fast.

We turned to look, like two sea birds facing a tsunami. We were all of us at the four-way stop, as he walked away from 40th and the girl I'd worried for. He wore no earphones, carried no bag. He was just a silhouette in a black hoodie under the broken streetlight. I saw his face, fleetingly, in passing—handsome, a little crazed—and then Parker and I crossed and continued up 41st, leaving him behind us.

I told myself not to be weird.

I loved Parker's no-nonsense stride; she'd moved like that since college. She'd learned to carry a knife in her boot,

to throw a punch; she prided herself on her unflinching competency, and it was all there, in that walk.

I could hear him moving in rhythm with her. Something about his gait bothered me: it was direct, too contained, too hurried for an empty street. The neighborhood sounds receded, the televisions and barking dogs. A tiny bell rang a warning: *Run*, it said.

I ignored it. Parker. I tried to focus, this was important. I loved her for more than the knife in her boot. I loved her for the ways she was when no one else was looking, and I wish I'd said it, I'd meant to say it, but

I was shoved, my teeth clattering,  
Parker, turning toward me  
hands like hot irons on my shoulders, I  
flew and I was  
released.

# City Lights

# Pittsburgh

1990 • 10 years old

“Your dad’s a bad man,” Mom said, studying herself in the bathroom mirror. I watched from the stairs of the walk-in closet, the light a sickly glow through the tightened blinds beside the tub. She was beautiful in an offbeat way: chunky purple necklaces, thin brown hair, infectious cackle. She applied her mysterious makeup, rouges and liners and then hair spray, a noxious cloud. She was a scientist used to being the only woman in a room, or on Air Force Two, briefing Ted Kennedy on structural physics; at General Electric, taking the wives out to dinner so they didn’t think she had designs on their husbands.

“He wants to apologize,” she told me, painting a purple on her eyelids the color of our summer sunsets in North Carolina. I felt myself disappear, thinking instead about up-turned buckets of sand and crabs we’d caught ourselves for supper, dangling ropes strung with slimy turkey necks off the dock.

She turned to me and I made my face neutral. I hated her concern, and how much I wanted it.

I used to imagine a car accident when she’d leave for the grocery store and Dad would come for me. At her funeral, everyone would hold me gently while I cried. Feeling guilty at the memory, I watched her watch me, saw myself in

her round cheeks and Slavic nose, but not the silky pleats of her dress or the wet mist of her Chanel bottle with the little black pump.

What I had were questions. Like: how could the distant, sleazy man who pressed himself against me then break through the weird blankness of his eyes to help me build a model engine that same night? Do we all have two people inside of us?

I mean, do I?

Mom stopped brushing her hair, and I felt the tremble in the room. If the story were up to me, she'd never cry. "I just want you to have a normal childhood," she said, pulling me close, her breath minty, her belly warm, her fear in what she didn't say, wouldn't say but I knew it anyway: that she worried for me, that she stayed up at night convincing herself it wasn't already too late.



I could tell that Dad charmed people. Everyone gravitated to his lilting Southern accent, his aw-shucks smile and his good manners. He seemed youthful, refined, and so it was easy to overlook his silver halo, forget that he was in his fifties, way older than Mom.

But people can hold their true selves at bay for only so long—I knew that from *Batman*. Today, he looked worn out, exposed, waiting for us in the leather chair, his remaining hair unkempt, gray stubble crowding his face. His knuckles were thick, swollen as an old man's, and he wore his exercise clothes: a gray tracksuit, coffee-stained.

He looked like the raggedy dog he'd once shot in the butt with a BB gun for crossing onto our property one too

many times. “What are you doing?” Mom had said on the sunny porch that afternoon a few years before, her voice laced with alarm; maybe she’d never seen that side of him, but I knew it intimately, and how he’d look when he turned around, smiling that dumb, menacing smile. Of course one man can become another. Where two sides meet comes the potential for ghosts: dissonant smears, rips in the story.

“It was only his ass,” he’d said in that gentle accent, unloading the BBs carefully into his palm. “Just teaching him a lesson.”

The dog never did come back.



Today he wasn’t that man or the model-engine one; he was even worse, in a way: more desperate, primal. “I’m very sorry,” he said, his head bowed.

We all faced each other like sacks of skin.

“My parents would’ve been so disappointed in me,” he added, oddly. There was a tremble in his voice. “I’m sorry to you, to them, to your mom.” He sniffed.

Somehow, I felt worse in the living room than I had the whole time he’d hurt me. *Hurt*, that’s what the therapist called it. All of these adults choosing the wrong words, missing the language, missing me.

When he wasn’t holding me down on a bed, I was hauling around the junky camcorder, dressing up the neighborhood kids and making horror movies with ketchup and bald-head caps. Or I was building a fort in the woods, a hiding spot with books and a flashlight, dried fruit, cookies.

What he did didn’t hurt. It disconnected, it made two

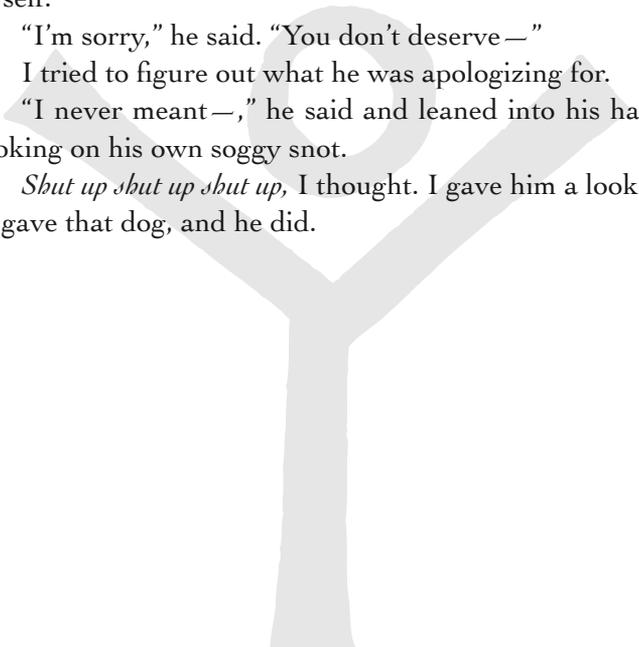
of me like there were two of him. It made me a stranger to myself.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You don’t deserve—”

I tried to figure out what he was apologizing for.

“I never meant—,” he said and leaned into his hands, choking on his own soggy snot.

*Shut up shut up shut up*, I thought. I gave him a look like he gave that dog, and he did.



# City Lights

# Oakland

April 2010 • 29 years old

I crashed to the sidewalk. My palm bled a little, my body vibrated with ghost hands and a dark hum of a different time.

“Up,” the man attached to the fists said.

I pushed myself off the concrete, moved to the balls of my feet.

“Not all the way up!” he barked.

I froze, arms raised, my back to him, on my knees.

“Turn around.”

I pivoted clumsily. His eyes were warm, kind even, but spastic. His hands were deep in the kangaroo pocket of his sweatshirt. He towered — Darth Vader with a goatee.

“Stay down,” he whispered, raw like a scream.

*Shut up shut up shut up*, I thought.

Parker, all lean muscle, appeared behind him just then, a miracle, her bag aimed at his skull. She’d gone head-to-head with a shitty stepdad for most of her teens, and as she cocked her arm back I thought, briefly, that we might have a chance.

He sensed her and, turning with the grace of a ballet dancer, pulled a handgun from his kangaroo pocket and motioned her downward. She dropped, and the scene bent into a posed tableau: me on my knees with empty eyes, the gun extended toward us, and Parker’s mouth with her snaggle-

tooth poking out, forming a tight “O” as she crouched into herself, knowing what I know, what I wish she’d never had to learn: how to disappear.

He turned back to me, his mouth moving in slow motion. My heartbeat grew sluggish, I could hear it *ca-thunk, ca-thunk*.

I felt warm, full of energy and particles. It was almost spiritual, but for the familiar haze, the awareness that I was splitting, abandoning myself to a gun and a mumbling man.

*Come back*, I thought.

He kneeled down beside me. I focused on the whites of his eyes, his teeth. I smelled dog shit, exhaust, dirty clothes. I wiggled my toes dully. Nothing.

The air was electric with his strange frustration, the waving gun. I handed him my wallet and he threw it to the ground. I looked for Parker but all I saw was her crouching shadow.

I couldn’t move and I couldn’t even think, except to note, dully, that I was immobilized, a bystander to my own story.

# City Lights

# Pittsburgh

1990 • 10 years old

“Crocodile tears,” Mom said the day after Dad apologized. I didn’t know what that meant, but it made me picture him slithering toward me, so I shut my eyes.

“I could just cut his brakes,” she said, nodding toward his sedan in the airless garage. We were in the van beside it, underneath a swinging light cord. I stared at his car like it might rear up to defend itself.

Here’s a story I don’t remember: in the bathroom, I told my red hairbrush about Dad. Had I wanted someone to hear? Sometimes we are mysteries, even to ourselves. My live-in babysitter walked by, pressed her ear to the door. She’d held me like a big, gangly baby and asked careful questions in her honey voice.

“Try to forgive him,” she’d said on the last day I ever saw her, holding my hand and fingering the cross around her neck.

“She must have felt guilty,” Mom sighed when Susan left in the middle of the night, speeding off in her sporty Mazda. A loneliness settled in my chest. I was an astronaut, floating farther and farther away.

The truth was, I kind of wanted Mom to kill him. I watched her in the half-light, knowing she wouldn’t. I thought that no one could really ever forgive anyone, and

I looked at her face: unfamiliar, trembling, clenched. I worried the hole in the knee of my jeans. What would a normal kid say?

“Maybe you’d get in trouble?” I offered. She looked at me, her face crumpling.

“Hey,” she said, pulling my hand away from the fraying fabric. “You’re safe now.” We were quiet for a minute, but I thought about the scramble of words: how if you repeat something enough times, the meaning disappears.

*Safe, I thought. Safesafesafesafesafesafesafesafesafesafe.*

# City Lights

# Oakland

April 2010 • 29 years old

The way the mugger looked through me, I knew he was gripped by that same zombie energy that had made my father's eyes go vacant, and that's what tipped me to the fact that I could die. People die every day for less.

The part of me still present, the part that wanted to move, saw another truth: everyone still had a chance. Parker could run, Vader could let us go, Dad could be a different man, I could live.

Down on 40th, a car honked an irritated staccato, breaking the spell. Vader grabbed my bag and skittered a few feet off, clutching it to his chest.

*Wake up wake up wake up.* I felt the pain radiating waves from my knees, the bruises forming.

Several blocks away, headlights began to make their dull way toward us through the fog. Vader studied the car's approach with agitation, turned toward it and then away. "Don't move," he warned, backing away with the gun trained on me, not Parker.

The headlights grew brighter. Suddenly he was back, a blast of stale-smelling clothes. He grabbed my collar, dragged me from the sidewalk into the bushes of the side street, under the broken lamp. I could finally see Parker,

just a couple of feet away. Her eyes, blue and green, met mine. The fear in them was disorienting.

*That's not a real gun*, I tried to tell her without words.

"Stay," he said. He crossed the street just as the car approached, and then ducked behind a parked truck.

*We should run*, I thought dreamily.

The car slowed, the tires sticky on the damp pavement. Vader had miscalculated the scope of its headlights and I found myself illuminated, hallelujah, on my knees on a residential street, blinking into the light.

I held my breath and shook out a little wave. The car lingered for a minute, mid-intersection. I gestured one more time, the ache of my knees surfacing again into my consciousness, my back pulsing, my body thawing back into place.

I listened for Vader as I'd learned to do with my father, but all was still beneath the sound of the Volvo's rough engine.

I closed my eyes and the car squealed off, a spooked horse.

*No one will rescue you*, I told myself. Somewhere far away, a siren screamed into the night.

# City Lights

# Pittsburgh

1990 • 10 years old

“The police chief’s here to talk to you,” Mom said. I was alone in my room, still trying to build the model engine Dad bought me, but it was way harder without his help. For a brief moment I imagined she’d actually killed him while I slept, but I could hear the distant sound of the riding mower and smell the cut grass through my window.

The police chief reeked of Old Spice, Dad’s aftershave, and I disliked him immediately. Anyone could be a molester, I knew: Mom had grown increasingly suspicious of friends’ fathers, even relatives.

Every man could turn, like sour milk.

I was obedient, keeping track of who to tell what, how to behave. But I hadn’t been briefed on a police chief, on what sort of truth he might require. I looked at Mom, but she just gave me the same sad expression he did.

He sat at our dining room table, sleeves rolled up, a half-smile under his mustache. A recorder sat like an insect between us on the table in front of me. I didn’t like the way his hair crowned his head, didn’t like his straight teeth or his scruff.

“Your mom wanted you to tell us what happened—” he seemed unsure of how to go on, and I didn’t like that, either. The worst thing in the world was a nervous adult.