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### Rites of Passage

"Hey, Phillip, are you ready yet?" Jamie yelled as he took the stairs two-at-a-time. "Mom said to tell you Dad and Carrie will be here any minute. . ."

Slightly out of breath, he paused briefly in the doorway. Arms folded across his chest, he regarded his older brother with a slightly bemused expression. Half-sprawled across the top of a large packing box, Phillip King, star athlete, appeared to be waging a losing battle with a particularly stubborn tape dispenser.

"Uh, it usually works better if you use that on the lid," Jamie teased as he observed his brother's fruitless attempts to extricate the sticky packing tape from his right hand.

"Thanks for the tip," Phillip grumbled, letting out a few more choice words as he waved his fingers back and forth in frustration. "Well, don't just stand there, Worm Brain," he challenged in a louder voice, invoking the hated boyhood moniker. "Give me a hand, will you?"

"Sure," Jamie returned calmly, wading gingerly through the clutter. He took in the discarded scissors, the half-closed box and the old trophies and scrapbooks that littered the floor in a sweeping glance. "Looks like you could use more than 'a' hand here. . . Pip."

Phillip groaned, his arrogance immediately melting into chagrin. "All right, all right, I get the point," he muttered under his breath. "No more names." He fell back on the soft carpet, his free hand running unconsciously through his hair. "Just help me fix this, okay?"

"Okay," Jamie echoed as he dropped to his knees, turning his head to hide his grin. There was a time when that nickname had been an instant battle cry, but that had all ended last year when little Matthew had started to talk. Still smiling, Jamie offered up a silent thank you for his baby brother's endearing inability to clearly pronounce certain sounds.

"So," he continued, using the scissors to cut through the sticky tape, "how did you get this in such a mess, anyway?"

"I don't know, I guess I just got carried away." Phillip let out a hearty laugh. "Must be an inherited talent."

"Don't let Mom hear you say that," Jamie warned, peering into the box his brother had been packing. Shaking his head, he deftly rearranged the contents to make room for the rest of Phillip's junk. "It's tough enough around here these days without you adding any more fuel to the fire."

"I've noticed," Phillip laughed as he gathered up the last of his possessions. "I think poor old Lee slept on the couch for the second night in a row."

Jamie chuckled lightly. "That's because Mom turned up the air conditioning unit in their room again." Shivering slightly, he added, "I swear, it was like a freezer in there this morning." He pushed down on the contents of the box, struggling to make the two long cardboard flaps meet. "Grandma says it's normal to feel all hot and stuff when you're almost nine months pregnant," he moaned, "but geez. . ."

"You can say that again," Phillip empathized with a grim laugh. Life had been pretty rocky at home lately. As their mother's waistline expanded, her patience seemed to grow correspondingly shorter. "I sure hope you guys survive the next week."

"Yeah," Jamie moaned with a heartfelt sigh. "At least it's almost time." He had a sneaking suspicion he and Phillip weren't the only ones who couldn't wait for this ordeal to be over. Lee had hung a big calendar on the refrigerator last month, and every night his mother religiously crossed off the remaining days until her due date with a bright red pen.

Frowning slightly, Jamie turned his attention back to the mission at hand. Fiddling with the lid again, he leaned across the top of the box, his weight forcing the edges firmly together. "Here, you keep it closed," he instructed Phillip dryly. "I think I'd better tape."

"Good idea," Phillip replied, taking his brother's place with a sheepish grin. He watched him snip the long, clear strips of tape and proceed to efficiently secure the lid. "I guess I, uh, never thought to use the scissors."

"Oh, those serrated edges on the tape dispensers never work," Jamie laughed. "I learned that the hard way when I helped Grandma move into the carriage house." He gave his brother a sideways glance. "You might know that, too, if you were ever around. You seem to have acquired knack for disappearing at the most convenient times."

Phillip laughed again. "I studied with the master. You know, I think Lee's managed to successfully evade every single Spring Cleaning ritual since we moved into this house." Phillip shook his head in grudging admiration. "You gotta respect that, you know?"

"Yeah," Jamie agreed, giving the tape one final swipe. "I may ask him for a few pointers myself this year." His task completed, he sat back on his heels, quietly surveying the now-empty room. "You taking all this stuff with you to school?"

"God, no. I got a look at the freshman dorm at pre-registration. I'll be lucky if I can fit one-tenth of my stuff that room." Phillip sat cross-legged on the floor, resting his back against the metal bed frame. "I thought I might as well pack up everything so you wouldn't have to do it. You know, since we're gonna be roommates again when I come home from school."

Jamie smiled faintly. "Thanks, Phillip, that was pretty thoughtful of you."

"Well, that's just the kind of guy I am, little bro."

"Of course you are," he rejoined, giving his brother a knowing look as he scooted over to sit beside him. "So Mom made you box it all up, huh?"

"Uh, yeah, there was that, too." Phillip grinned ruefully. "She wants to get the room ready for the new baby."

"I know. I'm helping Lee put the crib together later tonight." He chuckled softly. "He seems to be as domestically challenged as you are, big bro."

"Trust me, it's a gift." Stretching his arms over his head, Phillip took a long look around the room. "I guess it'll be like old times when I come home, huh? Bunking in together again, I mean," he added quickly in response to Jamie's questioning look.

"I guess it will," Jamie agreed, wondering if Phillip was having second thoughts. After their mother and Lee had announced the surprise addition to the family, it was Phillip who'd pulled him aside and quietly suggested they share a room again.

"I know it was my idea," Phillip reiterated before he could ask. "I mean, I'm gonna be away at school most of the time, and in a couple of years, so will you. It just makes sense."

"Yeah," Jamie responded, smiling softly to himself. It was a logical plan on the face of it, but he'd instantly understood the feelings his brother couldn't seem to put into words. Since he'd been such a pain when their mother was expecting little Matthew, Phillip needed a concrete way to let her know that he'd put his problems safely behind him. Giving up his room for the new baby was the perfect gesture.

Smiling slyly, Jamie turned to his brother. "Hey," he asked, "you don't still talk in your sleep, do you?"

"Nah, not recently." Phillip nudged his brother smugly on the arm. "But if I do, you might find it a little more interesting now."

"That's true," he agreed, returning his brother's playful shove. With his ever-expanding list of past and present girlfriends, Phillip's current dreams were probably more intriguing than those boyhood nightmares about Pretzel the Clown.

He watched his brother look around the room again, taking silent inventory one last time. Deciding to give him a little space, Jamie looked away, leaning back against the bed. His finger rubbed against the bridge of his nose, and, momentarily surprised not to find his glasses resting there, he acknowledged his error with a rueful grin. He'd been wearing contacts for almost a year now, but the ingrained habits of his childhood remained.

Realizing his brother had grown abnormally quiet, he stole a quick glance out of the corner of his eye. "Hey, Phillip," he prodded gently, scratching that spot on his nose again. "You okay?"

Phillip let out a long breath. "Yeah, I guess. I just realized how different things are really going to be."

"I know what you mean," Jamie commiserated, catching his brother's somber mood. He'd always hated change and that churning feeling in the pit of his stomach that seemed to go along with it. It was probably the reason he'd reacted so strongly to Lee's appearance in his life. Jamie laughed softly to himself. If he'd been inconsolable when his mother served goose instead of the traditional Christmas turkey, then poor Lee certainly hadn't stood much of a chance.

Feeling his brother's eyes on him, he attempted to lighten his mood. Phillip probably had enough concerns about his big move without adding any more to the mix. Turning to him with a grin, he told him with a teasing voice, "Hey, you know what Grandma would say. . ."

"What?"

Jamie grinned. "There's always a silver lining."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah," he laughed again. "For one thing, it'll be a whole lot quieter around here now without your elephant feet pounding up the stairs. I might even get some homework done before dinner."

"Now there's a plus," his brother kidded, getting into the spirit. "And here I thought you'd be happier about finally having a clear shot at the 'Vette."

"Yeah, right," Jamie moaned. "Only in my dreams. Thanks to your little escapade at graduation, I'll be old and gray before Lee lets me take that car out alone." He bumped his shoulder good-naturedly against his brother's. "You had to hit that tree. . ."

"I only sideswiped it," Phillip countered defensively. "And it's not like I meant to do it."

"All you had to do was keep your eyes on the road. How hard was that?"

"With Julie Richards sitting next to me, pretty damn hard," his brother stated. "She has that little thing she always does with her hair. . ." Phillip looked away, quickly clearing his throat. "Stop complaining. You aren't the one who had to spend all summer working to pay Lee for the repairs."

"That's true," Jamie laughed. "Guess you're gonna be on a pretty tight budget this semester, huh, Stud?"

"Let's just say I won't be impressing too many girls with my bankroll, that's for sure."

"Then you'll just have to rely on charm."

Phillip raised his eyebrows expressively. "Yeah, I guess so." Laughing, he glanced at his watch. "Hey, help me get this last box into the corner, will you?" he asked, scrambling to his feet as he noticed the time. "You know how Dad gets about the traffic."

Nodding, Jamie rose, leaning over to stretch the kinks out of his back. Phillip tipped the box in his direction, and he grabbed hold of the sides. "Are you gonna survive the trip to school with him?"

Phillip shrugged, bending down to grasp the bottom of the well-filled box. "Carrie will be there, too. I just hope I don't have to listen to a two hour lecture about how important it is to choose the right major."

Jamie smiled as they deposited the box in the corner with the rest of Phillip's stored items. "He means well."

Phillip sighed. "I just wish he wasn't so free with his advice, that's all." Leaning against the top of the box, he ran his hand through his hair in frustration. "Maybe if he and Carrie had some kids of their own, he wouldn't be so . . . focused. . . on us. You know, act more like. . ."

"Yeah," Jamie smiled knowingly. His father and stepfather had distinctly different parenting styles. "Carrie would have liked to have a baby, too," he added philosophically.

Phillip looked skeptical. "She told you that?"

"Of course not," he laughed, "but haven't you noticed the way she looks at Matty whenever they come over? And she sure didn't object when he 'insisted' on coming with us last time we went over to Dad's."

"Yeah," Phillip said with an embarrassed grin. "He was pretty vocal about it, too."

"You can say that again," Jamie laughed, remembering the fit little Matthew had pitched in typical two-year-old fashion. For some unfathomable reason, Matthew had always been crazy about his big brother 'Pip'. "That little guy's really gonna miss you, ya know?"

"I'll kinda miss him, too," Phillip mumbled, suddenly inordinately interested a mark on the wall. "You'll give him some extra attention for awhile?"

"Sure," he promised, trying not to laugh. Phillip tried to be so macho, but underneath it all he was nothing but a great big marshmallow. "I don't think I'll ever take your place, though, 'Pip'. Maybe I'll have a better shot with the new baby."

Phillip's face clouded over. "Jamie, can I ask you a favor?" He ran his finger along the narrow smudge. "Brother to brother?"

"I guess so," he replied cautiously, alerted by Phillip's tone.

"If anything happens. . . you know, with Mom and the baby. . ." Phillip looked down at the beige rug, rubbing his foot across the circular soda stain their mother had never quite been able to get out. "Well, you'll let me know right away?"

"Sure, but Lee said he'd call as soon as it was over, right?"

"Yeah, but if something goes wrong, I mean, like. . ."

He watched his brother grind his toe deeper into the carpet. "Phillip, it won't be like last time," he assured him. "Mom and Lee have both said everything is fine."

"I know," Phillip sighed. "It's just that she almost. . . well, I just wish I was going to be here."

"Yeah, I know," Jamie told him, laying a hand lightly on his brother's shoulder. "I promise, I'll call you first thing." He took a deep breath, shoving his hand back into his pocket. "At least we won't have to go through this again."

Phillip looked up. "What d'you mean?"

Jamie smiled to himself. "I 'accidentally' overheard Mom telling Grandma she was making sure that this baby was definitely the last. Hey, don't look at me like that," he added in an aggrieved tone. "Sometimes you just gotta take matters into your own hands around here."

"And Mom always worries that I'm the one who wants to join the 'family business'," Phillip teased. "Little does she know, you're the real spy in this house."

Jamie laughed. "I do what I can."

"Hey, guys."

Caught off guard, they both jumped back in guilty surprise.

"Oh, uh, hi, Lee," Jamie murmured, meeting his stepfather's cryptic smile before quickly looking away. "We were just, uh, talking."

Lee nodded. "Your dad and Carrie are here," he told Phillip with an air of perfect nonchalance. "We've finished packing the car. You all set?"

Jamie caught his brother's eye, and they both heaved a silent sigh of relief.

"Yup, everything's that's going was in the garage," Phillip answered in kind.

"Then I guess it's time," Lee grinned, adding wryly, "Before your mother starts to cry again."

Their laughter broke the awkward moment, and they all headed downstairs. The rest of the family had gathered on the front lawn, and Jamie mumbled a quick hello to his dad and Carrie as he followed his brother and stepfather outside into the bright August sunshine.

"Pip, Pip," his little brother cried, wiggling vigorously out of Carrie's arms to run to Phillip. "I wanna go, too."

"Not this time, Pal," Lee put in, deftly intercepting the small blonde missile before it acquired its target. "You've got to graduate from nursery school first." Matthew drew a shuddering breath, the usual prelude to voicing his displeasure. "Besides," Lee added conspiratorially, turning the small boy upside down so his chubby hands could pat the ground. "We're gonna get fast food for lunch. Hamburgers."

Matthew squealed with delight as his father deposited him in a heap on the grass. "Fries, too?" he demanded, his small hazel eyes alight.

"Fries, too," Lee laughed. "With lots of ketchup."

"Yeah, and then you're going to be the one taking care of him when he gets sick later," Jamie heard his mother warn in ominous tones.

"Yes, dear," Lee muttered, putting his arm around her shoulder as he leaned in to whisper in her ear. Jamie watched his mother roll her eyes, her hand rubbing over her stomach as her frown melted into an incredulous smile.

"I guess it's official," Phillip stated solemnly, breaking the momentary silence. "I've been replaced by a French fry." As they all laughed, he bent to pick up Matthew, giving the small boy a quick hug as he handed him over to his Grandmother.

"Bye, Grandma," he said, grinning as he watched her cuddle her youngest grandson tightly against her. "Keep working on that pilot's license. I'm gonna expect to go for a ride when I get home."

Dotty smiled wryly. "One of these days, Phillip, I'm going to surprise you and take you for that ride." She reached out, balancing Matthew on her hip as she gave Phillip a one-armed hug. "Bye, bye, love."

"Yeah," he replied, turning abruptly to Lee as he tried to disguise his self-conscious grin.

"Have a good time, Chief," Lee advised as they quickly embraced. "And don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"What he means is," his mother broke in quickly as she gave his stepfather a friendly slap on the ribs, "don't do anything he DID do." She smiled as she pulled Phillip as close as her belly would allow. "I wish I was taking you," she whispered with a hint of sadness. "But I'll see you soon. Lee and I will be down in October for Parents Weekend."

"It's okay, Mom. But don't worry if. . ." Jamie saw his brother swallow hard. ". . .if you don't feel up to it."



"Phillip King, I absolutely will feel 'up to it'." His mother looked his brother directly in the eye. "Okay?" As Phillip nodded mutely, she added, "Besides, you know I won't be happy until I can picture you in your new surroundings."

Phillip's worried expression relaxed into a lopsided grin. "I love you, too, Mom," he whispered shyly as he hugged his mother once more. Clearing his throat, he turned to his brother, slapping him soundly on the back. "Well, Worm Brain, take care of things around here for me, will ya?"

"Yeah, sure," Jamie replied, kicking an imaginary pebble as he let the nickname slide. Wrinkling his nose, he added, "Don't flunk out, I wanna come for a visit one of these days."

"I'll try not to," Phillip laughed, winking at Lee as he turned to his Dad and Carrie. Eyeing the overloaded Wagoneer that they'd borrowed for the trip, he laughed lightly. "Think there's room for us? You and Lee packed it pretty tight."

"Oh, I think we can squeeze in somewhere," his dad laughed as he started to reach out to ruffle Phillip's hair. He stopped himself, though, his hand wavering for just a moment before he jammed it into his pocket. Turning to Amanda and Lee, he shrugged his shoulders. "We'll have the car back on Sunday night," he promised, smiling briefly as the trio piled inside.

"There's no hurry," Amanda replied, pushing the car door firmly shut. "I seem to be grounded at the moment. Have a safe trip." She slowly backed up, resting one hand on the small of her back and the other protectively around Jamie's shoulder.

Jamie cleared his throat, shifting from foot to foot, but he didn't pull away. They stood that way in the driveway for a long moment, until the car disappeared around the corner and the sound of the engine had slowly faded away.

"I'm hungry," Matthew announced loudly from somewhere behind them. "I wanna eat ketchup and fries."

The somber mood broken, they all joined in the laugh. "I guess that's my cue to make a Marvin's run," Lee said, running a hand softly through the little boy's fine hair. "I'll be back."

Halfway to the car, he stopped abruptly, and Jamie watched his stepfather slowly turn and catch his mother's eye. The pair exchanged a brief smile, and Lee sighed. "You know, I just remembered something," he stated solemnly. "I have to put in a quick call to work." He cast a questioning look in Jamie's direction. "Would you mind getting lunch?"

"Ah, sure, I guess," he replied, turning towards the house. "Just let me grab the keys to dad's Buick."

"I'm, uh, not sure where they are," Lee said quickly, reaching into his pocket. "Here, you'd better take the 'Vette."

Jamie grinned broadly as he caught the car keys. "You really mean it?"

Lee smiled back. "Yeah, I really mean it. Just remember - not. . ."

". . .one scratch," they finished in unison.

"I got it," Jamie promised, his eyes sparkling as he sprinted over to the sleek silver sports car. Pausing by the driver's seat, he fingered the keys almost reverently, his lips curling up in an enigmatic smile.

Maybe. . . just maybe. . . change wasn't such a bad thing after all.

**The End**