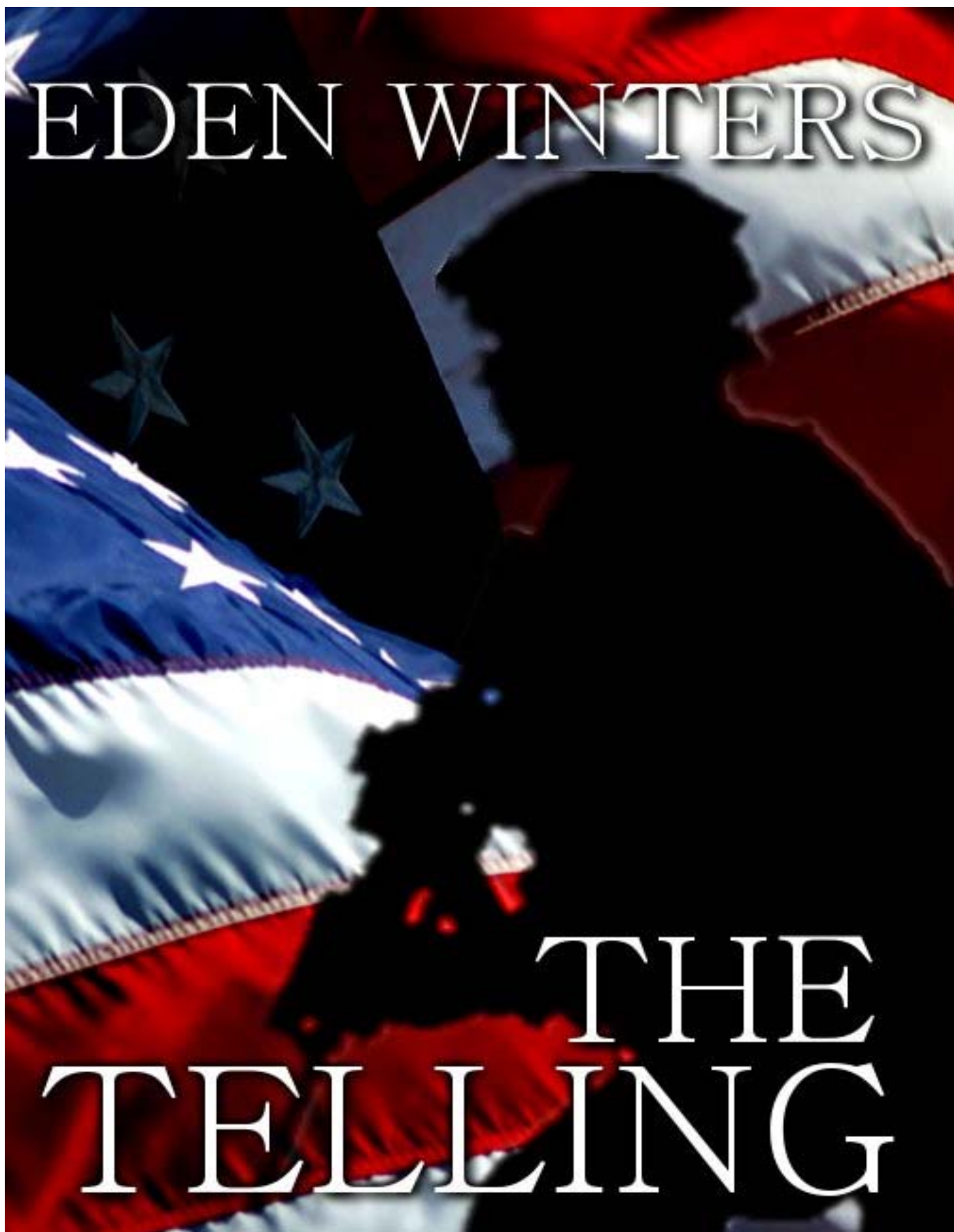




Warning

This ebook contains adult language and themes, including graphic descriptions of sexual acts which some may find offensive, particularly, of the male/male variety. It is intended only for mature readers, of legal age to possess such material in their area.

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The Telling

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Chapter One

Don't ask, don't tell. Just four short words that hadn't meant much the first time Michael had heard them. Oh, but the lessons four short years had taught. Back then he'd thought himself on the other side of the equation, even if he had nothing personal against those who weren't.

But the United States Military's 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy toward homosexuals wasn't the reason the former Army corporal was returning home a civilian after just one hitch with Uncle Sam. After all, they'd never asked and he'd never told, even after managing to figure it out.

No, the reason for his homecoming was that, after carrying out his orders the best he could, the Army judged him unfit, having lost the hearing in one ear. A minor infirmity, but one that effectively ended his military career. Compounding the problem was the malady that plagued many a combat soldier -- post traumatic stress. He'd done his patriotic duty and served his country only to be chewed up and unceremoniously spit out. At least he'd survived, unlike so many others.

After being poked, prodded, analyzed, and re-analyzed, he'd found himself stateside, riding out the remaining months of his service with the governmental equivalent of '*Don't call us, we'll call you.*' Now, four years after enlisting as a naive teen, he was returning home -- war-torn, battle-weary, and carrying far too many memories that ended in guilt and sorrow.

Making his way through the Atlanta airport, carry-on bag slung over one broad shoulder, he reacquainted himself with the place that had borne silent witness to a major milestone in his life. It had the distinction of being the last place that Michael Ritter, the kid, had been seen when he'd said goodbye to his family and boarded a plane for great adventure, or rather, boot camp. Now Michael Ritter, the man, was coming home to see if life had anything left to offer.

Disjointed thoughts rattled around in his weary brain like marbles in a tin can as he passed assorted restaurants, shops, fellow travelers, and airport personnel in a blur of sights, smells, and sounds, never noticing any details. An ingrained auto-pilot directed him safely out of harm's way whenever the chant of "Excuse the cart please" announced the passage of a tourist-laden airport transport, or when encountering other pedestrians who weren't watching where they were going, all busily on their way to 'anywhere but here.'

It didn't seem so long ago that he'd been in pursuit of 'anywhere but here,' leaving behind a small town upbringing to escape from a life gone stale, a dictatorial stepfather, and prospects he didn't want to deal with. Now, enlistment completed, he was right back where he started. Cookesville, Alabama, wasn't where he'd spent his entire childhood, due to his mother's tendency toward a nomadic lifestyle, but like a homing pigeon she always returned to her childhood home; at least until she grew restless and left again.

Since his grandparents and sister were there it was the place he thought of when anyone mentioned home.

On a happy note, for Michael at least, his mother had finally dumped the loser stepfather, removing his reason for staying away while also providing an excuse not to re-enlist, as his 'old lady' needed him to come home and help out. He hadn't wanted to tell his peers that, due to his medical issues, re-upping wasn't an option. It was preferable for them to think he'd left under his own steam for something as old-fashioned as going home to take care of Mom, than to know that he'd outlived his usefulness as far as the United States Army was concerned.

The guys had ribbed him at first about his 'decision' before grudgingly admitting they'd do the same for their gray-haired, aging mamas. He prudently kept it to himself that his mother was only forty-three, didn't have a single gray hair, and was still young enough to line up another stepfather or three if no one was around to keep an eye on her. She was an amazing woman, but damn, she just couldn't pick 'em. It never seemed to occur to her that living a solitary life was an option, either. Until now, that is, but better late than never.

All the more reason to come home even if he didn't intend to stay. He'd miss his unit and the friends he'd made, but he'd left to see the world and experience new things. Shaking his head he remembered the old adage, "Be careful what you wish for." Having seen more than he'd bargained for, now he wished desperately that he could forget it all.

Without realizing how he'd gotten there, he stood at the baggage carousel watching the other passengers reuniting with loved ones, fighting with cranky kids, or man-handling baggage off the overloaded turntables. He ran his hand through his dirty-blond, government-issue military cut, then scrubbed it over his face. The hair there was nearly as long as that on his head. God, was he ever tired, and he knew his eyes were probably more bloodshot than blue at the moment. Thanks to his well-meaning comrades, he looked and he felt like hell; last night's going away party was definitely something to remember. The boys knew how to give a guy a proper sendoff, that was for sure, even if the stripper had been a bit much.

At least his disheveled appearance was useful. Opening one bleary eye in annoyance at his chatty seat-mate on the plane gave her the idea that a tired, hung-over, ex-G.I. Joe was better off peacefully asleep. She was barking up the wrong tree, anyway, with her feeble attempts at flirtation.

Too bad he wasn't still the skinny runt he was four years ago. He wouldn't have been as intimidating, but at least he would have fit much better in the tiny coach seat. Now, at a sturdily built six-feet-two inches tall and two-hundred-ten pounds, there just wasn't enough room to be comfortable. During his enlistment his shoulders had broadened to the point where he wished he had a dollar for every time someone asked him if he was a linebacker, and coach class commercial airline seats didn't adequately accommodate someone of his size.

A shrill cry of, “Mikey!” caused him to turn just in time to catch the armful of exuberant redhead that launched herself at him, screaming, “Oh God, I missed you!”

There was a lot about Alabama that he didn’t miss, but he’d sure as hell missed his older half-sister. Enveloping the petite woman in a bear hug, he lifted her off the floor and spun her around, laughing happily for the first time in months. “Michael!” she wailed as she wriggled to get free, prompting him to set her down. She didn’t release her hold on him, however, seemingly unwilling to let go.

Disentangling himself from the clinging redhead, he stepped back and looked her over appraisingly. She matured since he’d last seen her and now looked even more like their mother, whereas he looked like the pictures of a father who’d disappeared seventeen years ago. Just another of his mother’s losers. “Damn, Angie, but it’s good to see you!” he exclaimed.

The slim female was taking the opportunity to look him over, as well. “You’ve filled out, Mikey,” she commented, then added with a grin, “I’m gonna have to beat ‘em off with a stick if I expect to spend any time with you, aren’t I?”

He ignored her comment, unwilling to talk about his love life, or lack thereof. “I can’t wait to get home,” he said simply.

Tactfully dropping the subject, if only for a few minutes, she made the usual small talk while they continued to wait for his bags. “How was your flight?”, “So and so got married,” and “Got a girlfriend? I can fix you up if you’d like.” Well, usual if you were talking to Angela Cooper who, like his mother, couldn’t resist matchmaking at every opportunity. He supposed it must be a woman thing.

“Are we gonna stand around looking pretty all day or are we gonna get the hell outta Hotlanta and back to Bum Fuck, Alabama where we belong?” She sighed and added with mock angst, “Sorry, but it hasn’t changed much. Okay, it hasn’t changed any.” Appearing to think it over, she finally clarified, “I take that back. It has changed — for the worse!”

“I was afraid of that. Very afraid,” he said, only partially kidding.

“It’s a dirty job but somebody’s gotta live there. Now let’s get back and liven things up before the place gets even more dismal.”

He exaggerated a sigh and whined, “Aw, do we gotta?” Again they shared a laugh. Neither was very fond of their hometown. Personally, Michael would have preferred any of the last three places he’d lived with his mom and the loser, but he was glad to be close to Angie and his grandparents — a least for a little while. Definite plans had yet to be made, but staying in Cookeville wasn’t even an option.

“Yes, brother mine, we have to get back and keep Mom outta trouble before she lines up another husband.” They gave each other a long-suffering look and another put-upon sigh before she giggled and rose up to her toes to press a sticky, lip glossed kiss to his cheek. “It’s good to have you back, kiddo. I’ve missed you.” All humor now gone from her eyes — a rare occurrence — she stated quietly, “It just isn’t the same without you. Glad you got to come home in one piece.”

“Yeah, me too,” he replied, his expression saying, *‘I don’t want to talk about it.’* But since she’d invoked it, there it stood; the nearly tangible presence of the elephant in the room. His family knew of his condition, but sometimes he wished he’d never told them so they’d go back to treating him normally instead of like something that could break at any second.

In reality he wasn’t the same, and never would be again. Now, at the age of twenty-two, he should be a slacker at Mom’s, attending the occasional college course and partying until he was sick like most of his old high school buddies were doing. Instead, he was returning from serving his country, bringing home a head full of horrors. Iraq and fallen brothers had no place here in the moist southern air and he was determined to leave their ghosts behind and reconcile himself with the land of the living. A task much easier said than done.

His sister, thankfully, interrupted his unpleasant reverie. “Ah, that must be it,” she exclaimed, glancing behind him to the now mostly-empty baggage carousel. “That hot pink number, right?”

Grateful for the derailment of the thought train bound for Hell, Michael turned to look at the offending luggage, which wasn’t hot pink. It was his standard green, government issued duffle, full to bursting with his clothes and other necessities. Thanking her quietly with his eyes, he reached out a muscular arm and snagged his bag, slinging it over his shoulder with his carry on. He dipped his head in a ‘lead on’ gesture.

Angie giggled and gave a quick squeeze to his impressively bulging bicep. “Look at you! So big and strong!” she exclaimed before turning to lead the way to the sliding glass doors that led outside.

Outside. Even the thought made his breath hitch. How stupid was it to be afraid to walk out of a door? Steeling himself as if for a physical impact, Michael took a deep breath and followed his sister through the door—and underneath a covered walkway. Though the sides were open, for some reason the flimsy covering offered some measure of security. Funny, in all the anxiety about what was on the other side of that door he’d forgotten that it wasn’t completely exposed to the elements. It was exposed enough, however, that cool humidity settled upon his skin, a welcome change from the harsh dryness of his environment for the past few years.

Ahhhh, Georgia in the spring time, so different from the fort in California, and worlds apart from Iraq. A light mist was falling and the overcast day offered a bit of the chill of

retreating winter. He'd always considered the southern United States to be fairly warm, but if this was warm then he'd left Hell a few months back. Again he pushed back thoughts that were best kept secured in their tightly locked mental box. It was then that he noticed he'd stopped walking. When he looked up Angie was patiently waiting a few feet away, questioning him with one cocked eyebrow. His face flushed as he realized that she must have been watching the whole time and probably noticed his reluctance to leave the terminal building. She didn't miss much.

"Sorry, sis. I guess I'm just a bit tired. Jet lag and all that," he lied, hoping she'd just let it go.

She stood for a moment studying him, then nodded and reached out to wrap a warm hand around his. Pulling his arm over her shoulder she huddled into his side, seeking to share his warmth. "Come on, bro; you might not mind getting rained on but I'm freezing! Truck's that way," she added.

Her comment about the rain wasn't entirely accurate since they were under a covered walkway and shielded from most of the moisture, but he supposed that, being used to the climate, she was taking it for granted — something he vowed never to do again. Her light, pink sweater, blue jeans, scuffed boots, and lack of jacket probably had a lot to do with her discomfort, in his opinion. He saw a strong resemblance to their mother in this younger version of her, in more than just appearance. Dressing to impress some man, no doubt, as if it took more than just batting her lashes over those sea-green eyes she'd learned to play up from childhood and swishing that long curtain of coppery hair over her shoulder with a practiced hand.

It took several minutes before his sister finally located her aging Chevy S-10 in the airport's massive parking garage. "Damn, girl; you mean this old thing still runs?" he asked, surprised. Opening the passenger door — left unlocked, much to his dismay — he stowed his bag in the little area that optimistically promised room for additional seating. Maybe for a small ten-year-old. He climbed in and futilely attempted to adjust the seat to some semblance of comfort, only to discover that the latch didn't work. One of many on a growing list of things he knew to be broken on the truck, and that was just from memories from his last visit. He was quite certain that nothing had been removed from the list since then. The women in his family lived by the concept of 'driving 'til the wheels fell off' then buying a new vehicle, or rather, one a little better off than the poor, unfortunate machine they had just allowed to die in the driveway.

"Well, it beats the hell out of what you're driving," she shot back as she arranged herself in the driver's seat, fastening her seatbelt and somehow managing to light a cigarette at the same time.

He ignored the jab about the Chevy Cavalier he'd totaled just before his enlistment and countered with, "Don't tell me you're still smoking? Don't you know those things will kill ya?"

“Yeah, yeah, yadda, yadda,” she replied, taking a deep drag and simultaneously flipping him off. He sighed. Some things never changed.

Cigarette dangling unflatteringly from her lips, she turned to look over her shoulder and dropped the stick shift into reverse to vacate the two parking spaces she had claimed. After navigating around the airport and paying the parking toll, she exited the mazelike roads to open space on the highway.

“Whoo-hoo! I knew you were good for something,” she declared. “With you in here I get to drive in the HOV lane.” With a face-splitting grin she slipped the little truck into the far left lane of traffic reserved for ‘high occupancy’ vehicles with more than one passenger, quickly passing dozens of single-occupant cars and trucks.

“Nice to know I still have a purpose in the world,” he muttered.

Settling into the seat, pointedly ignoring his sister’s driving — which tended to involve sudden, unexplained jerking of the steering wheel — Michael felt the silence between them grow uncomfortable and searched for a rather safe, for him, topic of conversation.

“So, have you seen Ruth Ann lately?” he asked. Ruth Ann had been his high school girlfriend, the proverbial girl left behind, in most of the community’s eyes, anyway. In truth, he’d viewed her more as a friend than a girlfriend, but apparently his sister thought differently. Ruth Ann had thought differently, too. Just another reason to enlist before becoming trapped into a life he didn’t want and couldn’t escape from. As soon as Angie started talking, though, he wished he’d accepted the silence or chosen something else to discuss.

Worried eyes shot his way. Angie exhaled deeply and extinguished her cigarette in the ash tray, then reached out to pat his hand reassuringly. “Baby, you know she moved on; don’t let it get to you,” she said, her rueful eyes suggesting that this bit of non-news would somehow hurt him, misreading his question as genuine interest instead of the desperate gambit for small talk that it was.

“I’m just asking,” he replied defensively, wishing he’d started a conversation about shopping instead, knowing Angie would talk happily for hours and not try to find hidden pain in his every word. In all honesty it was a relief that Ruthie had found a local boy, married, and had a kid or two. He shuddered inwardly when he considered how close he’d come to being that local boy now married to the former Ruth Ann Dunwoody — if only to live up to the expectations of the community.

Angie’s eyes left the road again to study him, causing him a moment of panic, but she finally turned back to the task at hand. Moving her hand from his to shift gears she suddenly exited the HOV lane and crossed three lanes of traffic to make her exit, just in the nick of time. The blaring horns from passing cars had no effect on her whatsoever, and it occurred to Michael that home might not be the safe, secure place he thought it was.

Oblivious to the blood draining from her passenger's face and his hand frantically clutching the 'oh shit!' handle for dear life; she continued her narrative of the life and times of Ruth Ann Simmons, nee Dunwoody. "She's due in August; says it's a girl this time." Angie glanced over at him and snickered before adding, "Better her than me."

Suddenly Michael was doubly sorry for bringing up that particular topic, as the smile and laughter didn't quite meet his sister's eyes. Angie laughed at other women's pregnancies and told horror stories about the kids she dealt with at the hospital where she worked, calling them little monsters, snot nosed brats, and other unflattering but equally disgusting names. But he knew deep down how devastated she was when she lost her own baby. Pregnant at seventeen, she'd dropped out of school, married a kid barely older than she, and then had promptly miscarried. Her new husband waited all of a week before dropping her off at their grandparents' house and never looking back.

Once the initial shock wore off she went to work for minimum wage at the local burger joint. It took three years and three bad relationships for her to decide that she wanted something more out of life. Michael had to hand it to her, once she made the decision to better herself she worked hard, saved up, and with the little help his mom and grandparents could manage, earned a high school diploma and put herself through nursing school at the local community college.

Her first taste of nursing suited her so well that she went back for more; she was currently enrolled at Avery University and due to graduate at the end of the spring term. He was grateful he'd be there for her graduation, very proud of all her hard work.

Angie rambled on about Ruth Ann, her worthless husband, and her adorable son while pointing out the kid would be much better looking if Michael had been the daddy. That was Angie, always sticking up for him even when he didn't want or need her to. She could berate him all she wanted, but no one else better try it while she was around. It reminded him of a flea defending its dog.

She went on to rail about how Ruth Ann was a fool to leave him and how unpatriotic it was of her to abandon him when he was joining such a noble cause, even though they both knew that he'd been the one to call it quits.

Tired eyes drooped and he finally gave in to his fatigue, certain that even if his sister did notice, once she was on a roll a little thing like having no coherent audience wasn't going to stop her. Her thick southern accent buzzed pleasantly in his brain and combined with the soothing rhythm of the truck motor to lull him into a light but welcomed doze.

Chapter Two

Michael dreamed of this homecoming for months, envisioning all that he wanted to do and see once back on American soil. A meal at one of Atlanta's premier restaurants figured largely in those dreams. When he woke and noticed their direction, it was obvious that it wasn't on the agenda. How he would love to once more eat a steak at The Riverboat and be able, at last, to legally order a drink named after a famous southern hero. The day he had graduated high school he, Angie, and their mother (sans her loser-of-the-moment) had gone there for a private celebration before the ceremony. He could still remember every detail of that memorable evening, just weeks before his departure for boot camp; he'd replayed that memory often in his mind while a home-sick recruit far from home.

But of all the wonderful restaurants that Michael remembered Angie had to take him to one that, though familiar, hadn't entered his mind at all.

"The Sausage Shack, Ang?"

She shrugged apologetically. "As much as I'd love to spend the afternoon with you I have to get to work. Besides, it's cheap," she said as she killed the engine and hopped out of the truck without bothering to wait for him, once more wrapping her arms around herself to ward off the cold.

He'd fully intended on paying, having racked up a nice little bank account of paychecks that he hadn't had the opportunity to spend yet, but if she wanted to treat he'd see to it that he made it up to her. Climbing from the truck, he followed his sister across the parking lot, focusing on her to avoid the panic that being outside caused. Once he caught up to her he earned a glare for attempting to hold the door. Apparently, her 'I am woman, hear me roar' philosophy to 'out-dated chauvinistic gestures' was still alive and kicking.

"I suppose it would be too much to ask that the menu changed while I was away," he muttered as they claimed a booth away from the windows and perused that grease-splattered plastic laminates on the table. *Nope, no changes here.*

Still, he found his prospects looking up when a harried-looking, middle-aged waitress approached and asked a question that was music to his ears: "What can I get you folks to drink?"

Like she had to ask? He was a tried and true southern boy who'd been away far too long. Though his doctor had told him to limit caffeine, the devil on his shoulder effectively bound and gagged anything wearing white and looked out for his best interests. Without hesitation he replied, "Sweet tea." Angie nodded agreement.

As far as he was concerned the glass of amber liquid placed before him was the nectar of the gods and he quickly forgave Angie for her restaurant choice.

“Good, huh,” his sister commented, grinning, as he raised the glass and nearly drained it before setting it down and gesturing to the waitress for a refill.

Smiling and nodding, he explained, “Some of the guys in my unit thought I was crazy when I’d talk about sweet tea — they’d never even heard of such. Hell, some of them only drink tea hot.” They shared a grimace.

“One of my roommates does that,” Angie replied. “She never could grasp that a good glass of sweet tea is a thing of beauty.” She sighed dreamily. “Grandma’s could probably be used as pancake syrup in a pinch.”

Yes, there was sweet tea and then there was Grandma’s sweet tea, the epitome of sweet tea, in Michael’s book. “Ya know what else I missed? I missed grits, and biscuits and gravy.”

“Oh, you poor thing,” his sister sympathized. Fanning her face theatrically with one hand, she donned her best southern belle voice. “I do declare! However did you survive?”

With an equally dramatic sigh, in keeping with his sister’s performance, he replied, “It wasn’t easy, I can tell you that.”

“Well, they serve breakfast here 24/7 so you no longer have to be deprived. What were they thinking,” she exclaimed, the twinkle in her eyes belying the outrage in her voice, “to deprive a poor southern boy of the basic necessities of life?”

“Yeah,” he agreed, nodding emphatically. “Whatever were they thinking?”

The waitress returned and Michael gave in to his cravings, ordering grits, eggs, bacon, and biscuits and gravy. Then they sat in companionable silence for a while, Angie sipping and Michael guzzling tea. He was on his third glass when their meals arrived.

Still tired and hung over, he chewed mechanically, barely tasting anything but his beverage, which he took the time to savor. With eyes full of sand he hoped to sleep a bit on the drive down to Cookeville, caffeine high notwithstanding. He now saw the wisdom of his sister’s restaurant choice; he wouldn’t have been able to appreciate fine cuisine in this state.

“Michael? Mikey?” Angie’s concerned voice broke through his weary haze.

“Huh?” he responded automatically, only to realize that she’d woken him up.

She smiled and shook her head. “I guess we need to get you home and let you get some sleep. I take it you got a decent going away party?”

Smiling sheepishly, he mentally revisited the sendoff from the night before — both the official and unofficial ones. He fervently hoped she didn’t notice his reaction as his mind

turned to the events that transpired later in the evening, the memory of which resulted in a beet-red face. Those thoughts were best put away for awhile. It wasn't a good idea to be hashing over those details with his brain so fuzzy. Later, he'd pull them out and examine them at length; now was neither the time nor the place.

"Yeah, it was all right," he replied after a too-long hesitation. He put excessive energy into an accompanying grin, hoping she wouldn't pry.

Thankfully she didn't, appearing more intent on getting back to Cookeville than in tormenting her brother. She summoned the check, paid the bill, and herded him out to the truck, her good-natured fussing once more reminding him of their mother.

Having missed a good deal of sleep the past few nights and, with his belly contentedly full, Michael slept most of the way to Cookeville, too tired for the caffeine to have much effect. He was awakened by his sister explaining that construction had slowed their time and she would have to drop by her place and get ready for work. One of her numerous roommates would see to it that he got over to the store after their mother closed her shop for the day. The apartment located above it was where he was going to be staying until he figured out what to do with the rest of his life, or until Cookeville drove him stark raving mad and he fled screaming.

Angie pulled her truck into the driveway of a huge older home, one of many vehicles strewn haphazardly around the large, tree-shaded yard. Most of the old houses on the street had been divided into apartments or torn down, but this one was still intact. Michael had always loved the aging three-story building, from its rusting tin roof to its constantly damp basement. Unlike the other surviving houses on the street, it hadn't been updated to siding and the peeling white paint today would be the brittle flakes that covered the porches like snow tomorrow.

When he was younger he daydreamed about buying the place and restoring it to its former glory, but that was before. Now all he could think of was figuring out what he wanted to do with the rest of his life and getting the hell outta Dodge.

Angie lived in the old, drafty house with an ever-changing roster of college student roommates, she herself taking classes while working at Mercy General over in Hanley as a Licensed Practical Nurse. It was hard for him to believe that in a few short weeks she'd be graduating and sporting a shiny new Registered Nurse pin. She'd also be making the kind of money that would enable her to get the place of her own she'd always wanted.

Michael retrieved his bags from behind the seat and hurried to catch up as Angie sprinted up the uneven concrete steps and across the sprawling front porch, flinging open the squeaky front door and yelling, "Honey, I'm home!" He caught up as she purposefully marched into the living room, her boot heels clicking a sharp staccato on the scuffed hardwood floor. Storming through the door with her brother in tow, Angie screamed into the emptiness, "House meeting, living room, now!"

The quiet, aging wooden structure suddenly burst into a flurry of activity. It sounded to Michael as though a herd of elephants was descending the stairs as the deserted-seeming house sprang to life. Bodies converged from everywhere in a blur of colors and sounds, streaming into the living room where Michael was standing just inside the door.

“Ok, pay attention; there will be a test later,” Angie warned as she dragged Michael further into the crowded room. The house was old and the rooms were large, but the gathered assembly still seemed like too many people to fit in the one building comfortably for any length of time, let alone one room. The furniture was a hodge-podge of mismatched couches, loveseats, and assorted chairs, all clashing loudly with the violet, cracking plaster walls. Currently, the seating was filled to capacity.

“Everyone, this is my li'l bro, Michael,” Angie gushed to the room in general, displaying a brilliant smile full of gleaming white teeth.

A chorus of “Hi, Michael’s” erupted around the room. A mumbled, “He’s hot,” followed a moment later, then “oof!” as the offender was elbowed in the ribs by her seatmate.

Ignoring the responses Angie continued, “Michael, this is Vickie, Wayne, Drew, Bennie, Charlene, Danny, Jay, Terry, Victor, Emily, Annie, Curtis, and Shasta. Welcome to the Zoo, little brother!”

Michael was stunned, not only by the sheer number of people but the fact that his sister recited the entire list without taking a breath. “Um, do they all live here?” he stage-whispered.

She turned back to where she had begun the introductions, pointing them off as she had a moment before. “Lives here, doesn’t, does sometimes, might as well, her mom thinks she does, does, does, doesn’t, I’m not sure, doesn’t, here so much she should start paying rent, does, does — but we tell the landlady we’re just dog sitting.

It was then that Michael noticed that Shasta was, in fact, not sitting on a couch or chair but under one. This suited the Golden Retriever just fine, intent as she was on wreaking havoc on an acid green tennis ball with her teeth. Michael perused the people in the room, attempting to put faces to names. Angie wasn’t kidding; she would test him later. Some he knew personally, some from his sister’s letters, and some from his mom’s. One or two were even in residence during his last visit two years ago. They were all young, though some were older than he, and all were probably enrolled in the local university or community college.

On the first couch was Vickie, a poster child for Goth chic; that is, if you overlooked the inch or so of blond roots peeking through her stringy, dyed hair. She was new to Michael. He wasn’t sure but he thought that he and the brown-haired, freckled Wayne had attended the same grammar school. Drew had once dated his sister, he knew from a disapproving letter from Mom, and he and Bennie had worked together on his grandfather’s farm during the summers hauling hay and doing odd jobs. There was a hippy chick sitting in a

ratty, plaid chair, eyes owlishly peering from behind large, round glasses who he remembered as Charlene, a childhood friend of Angie's. Perched on the arm of her chair was a young man dressed in stereotypical Emo garb, peeking out from behind an artfully arranged fall of dark hair. Michael thought his sister had called him Danny.

On the other side of the room was guy a bit older than the others. Victor, if Michael wasn't mistaken. Next to him sat a grinning pony-tailed blonde with a bright shining face, who he wouldn't have been a bit surprised to see suddenly launch herself out of her seat to scream, "Go team!!" He thought a moment, was this Emily or Annie? Curtis he remembered from high school and the other girl on the couch, either Emily or Annie, had beautiful, light brown skin and rows of tightly braided hair — she probably caught hell from the local rednecks. So Curtis must be the jock-looking guy currently talking mushy baby talk to Shasta while leaning over to rub the happy dog's belly. She wagged her tail enthusiastically but didn't surrender her grip on the saliva-soaked ball.

A dark blue loveseat, under a huge bay window that wreathed its occupants in bright sunlight, caught his eye. Michael dismissed the blond, whose name he thought was Terry, as being blessed with good looks and cursed to be fully aware of it. He recalled his sister making references to an 'arrogant, self-righteous, egotistical asshole' in her letters. But the man also had a sweet and caring side, she had said, or the other housemates wouldn't tolerate him. No matter what other people thought Michael preferred to make up his own mind, but the looks Terry was casting his way made him feel like a recent addition to the Sausage Shack's menu, who was about to be ordered just for the novelty. While he liked to be admired as much as the next person, those assessing green eyes were starting to creep him out.

From the chill of ice to the warmth of the sun, Michael's eyes slid away from the model-handsome blond to the dark-haired, dark-eyed man sitting next to him. A startling contrast to Terry's assured good looks, this man wasn't as pretty but was more conventionally handsome. Also unlike Terry, he seemed oblivious to the effect his appearance had on others, or in particular, on Michael.

His nose was long and straight, cheekbones high and prominent, lips dark and full, pushing the size limit for what could be considered masculine. Thick, glossy black hair was close cropped to his head, but even from across the room Michael could tell it would be curly if allowed to grow. A well-trimmed moustache and goatee were worn in a style Angie referred to as 'muzzle hair.' Overall, the look was very flattering and added to the whole manly image. Long legs stretched out in front of the loveseat and, though not as naturally stocky as Michael, he appeared to be sturdily built, with wide shoulders and a narrow waist. Honey-colored skin, several shades darker than Michael's own, along with dark eyes and hair, spoke strongly of Hispanic ancestors. The only imperfect feature Michael could see were his ears, which some might consider overly large. Rather than detract from his appearance, however, they merely served to add interest. It seemed Michael had once heard some vague high school locker room reference to 'men with big ears,' but he couldn't quite remember it now.

While the other occupants of the room were assessing him with curious, indifferent, or even lust-filled eyes, this man's thoughts were neutral and undecipherable, except when an easy grin broke free. It was when he smiled that Michael felt a strange sizzling deep in his belly, the beginnings of an erection threatening. The surprising and slightly embarrassing thing was, the moment his eyes focused on the darkly handsome man, they didn't want to leave. Michael blushed and forcibly averted his eyes, hoping that anyone noticing the reaction would chalk it up to fatigue and being overwhelmed by meeting to so many new people.

Almost against his will his eyes returned to their favored target. The attractive stranger continued to watch him intently and, when those bright teeth flashed against that dark skin, Michael sensed it was just for him. That smile fanned the spark that had been lit earlier into full flame and he discretely shifted his weight, hoping the tenting in his blue jeans wouldn't be noticeable. Was it his imagination or did the wattage of that brilliant smile just increase?

Rationally, he knew it wasn't possible, but that didn't prevent him from thinking that the man had somehow read his mind, knew of his predicament, and fully intended to exploit it for personal gain. The momentary flash of fear gave way to something equally intense — and just as terrifying — as his arousal increased.

A tacky wall hanging provided a temporary distraction but his mind soon wandered back to where it had been, proudly proclaiming to Michael's unwitting body, "*Lookee here what we found!*" What was his name? Michael ran through the list in his mind trying to find one he hadn't yet matched to a person. His dilemma was solved when Angie whined, "Hey, Jay, move over and let us sit!"

"Anything for you, Your Highness," he heard, watching those chocolate-brown eyes roll heavenward. Damn, what a voice — deep and southern, with a touch of a Texas twang.

"You gotta watch out for this one," Angie teased as she pushed her way between Jay and the blond sitting next to him.

His erection quickly deflated as Michael realized who he'd been lusting over. This was the famous 'Jay from Brownsville' he'd heard so much about from Angie and the folks! Oh God! He was attracted to his sister's boyfriend!

Jay's assessing look induced feelings that could only be described as 'deer in the headlights.' Those dark, hypnotic eyes rendered Michael paralyzed; he couldn't have moved if someone had yelled, "Grenade!" Warm tingling feelings slithered down into his belly once more, but he was just too darned tired to deal with this bizarre attraction at the moment; especially since his body was, apparently, stubbornly unwilling to acknowledge Angie's prior claim.

With a lazy smile Jay from Brownsville drawled, "If you're used to putting up with her then I think you can take care of yourself just fine. I'll bet growing up with Angie for a

sister made basic training look like a walk in the park.” Those eyes finally released their hypnotic hold as Jay yelled, “Ow!” and turned to defend himself from the indignant redhead who’d just punched him in the arm.

Their antics quickly escalated into a tickling fight, causing the others to roll their eyes and drift away from the living room while moaning things like, “They’re at it again,” “It was nice meeting you,” “See ya around,” and “You poor thing, putting up with a sister like that.”

The intense fluttery feelings died a slow, horrible death as Michael turned his eyes back to the two tussling on the love seat amidst screams of laughter. Jay was Angie’s boyfriend. Shit. Michael didn’t understand it but he’d definitely felt something unnerving when he’d first laid eyes on the man. Then again, his tired mind could have been playing tricks on him, making him see things in those dark eyes that weren’t there. Just for a moment, a scant second in time, he’d allowed himself to hope — he was so very tired of being alone.

There was no mistaking the hunger he saw in Terry’s eyes, however. Warning bells sounded whenever the handsome blond looked his way and, he wasn’t sure, but it might not have been an accident when a hand brushed his ass and lingered a moment when Terry passed by on the way out of the room. Michael also felt a breeze flutter against his bad ear, but decided to ignore it for now, turning attention back to the loveseat.

As quickly as the fight started, it ended, amid more squeals of laughter. “Well,” Angie announced, pushing Jay away and hopping out of reach of his long arms, “I have to get ready for work. Michael, Jay here agreed to take you over to Mom’s for me. Is that all right with you?”

“I did?” Jay responded, with a horrified expression that lasted only a moment before it gave way to another toothy grin.

“Yeah, you did — loser!”

The dark-haired Texan turned those paralyzing eyes on Michael with devastating effect, gluing him to the spot. “Well, the queen has spoken so I guess I’m taking you home.”

Michael’s body screamed, “Yes!” while his mind screamed, “No!” Aloud he answered, “Sure, sis; have fun at work.” And that was that.

After being subjected to a bone crushing hug and a whispered, “So glad to have you home,” Michael found himself left alone in a room with a man that, for some reason, made him unbelievably nervous and, apparently, belonged to his sister.

Chapter Three

In theory Jay's car should have been roomier than Angie's truck; reality was a different matter entirely. The two-door rust and 'chicken crap yellow' exterior of the ancient Toyota Tercel was quite impressive when compared to the inside. It looked as though Jay lived in the car and not the house, with books, clothes and dishes filling the interior. Michael had to remove a fast food drink cup half-full of questionable semi-liquid from the passenger seat in order to get in. Gingerly placing it on the floor, he hoped that the ever-weakening bottom wouldn't choose that moment to end its fight with the inevitable; he had no desire to get up close and personal with whatever was sloshing around inside.

"Sorry about that," Jay said, grin never dimming as he slid under the steering wheel. "The car's a bit of a mess." The tone suggested he was merely stating the obvious and not actually apologizing for any shortcomings. Knowing what a neat freak Angie was, battles were probably fought daily about the state of the car and Michael was willing to bet good money that she wouldn't be caught dead driving it. Her truck might not enjoy the best maintenance program but it was kept clean.

Michael managed to squeeze his bags into the already-filled-to-capacity area in the back and attempted, unsuccessfully, to adjust the seat to allow more room for his long legs. Unfortunately, there were just too many obstacles in the way. A quick glance over the seat revealed a football helmet and a backpack, along with a few hundred additional items, wedged behind his seat.

"Do you play?" Michael asked, focusing on the helmet as a way to break the tension of being alone with his sister's boyfriend, said boyfriend making him feel things he didn't know how to deal with. Why? Why did he have to find this particular man attractive?

"Play what?" A cheeky grin and waggling eyebrows said just how Jay had chosen to interpret the question.

"Football," Michael clarified, blushing hotly. Was Jay flirting with him? "Do you play football?" he asked again, immediately feeling stupid for asking. Of course he played football, Angie had mentioned it in her letters often enough.

"Whatever gave you that idea?" Jay's eyes crinkled at the corners when he laughed. "Now why would I be carrying around a football helmet if I didn't play?"

"Ummm...maybe because you have everything thing else in here but the kitchen sink?"

"Damn!" Jay exclaimed, fastening his seatbelt and motioning Michael to do the same. "I knew I forgot something! Remind me to go by the hardware store and pick one up while we're out, okay?"

Ignore the intended joke, Michael asked, rather hopefully, "We have a hardware store now?"

“Well, actually, no. But there’s one over in Hanley.”

It figured. Nothing ever happened in this one-horse town and probably never would. If Michael had his way it wouldn’t matter one way or another, he’d be long gone. Wherever he wound up would have to be one hell of a lot more progressive.

Jay cleared his throat and Michael looked over to find him smiling in amusement, those dark eyes sparkling with humor. “I’d say that you were lost in thought because it’s unfamiliar territory but, judging from what Angie says, that’s just not the case.”

The open friendly face, added to his travel fatigue and basic loneliness, tore at the carefully constructed guards that Michael had built around his emotions. “I don’t know,” he said sincerely, “it’s just all that’s happened in the last few years, coming home...” He let the thought trail off when he saw sympathy and pity on the man’s expressive features. Oh shit. Jay knew. Well, of course he knew if Angie did. She never could keep a secret and would have happily told anyone who would listen about what happened to her brother ‘over there,’ never considering that he didn’t want it to become common knowledge.

Michael turned away, wishing for the millionth time that he had chosen a different road to walk down after graduation. But no, he wanted to see the world, earn money for college and, most importantly, escape from the man who was no longer in his mom’s life anyway. He guiltily added ‘escaping from an inevitable teen-aged marriage to someone he didn’t love’ to the list.

A soft, “Hey,” drew his attention and a warm hand landed on his knee. “Whatever it is, it’ll be all right. You’re finally home. You can do whatever you want to now.” The warmth and understanding appeared genuine, and Michael decided then and there that he liked Angie’s latest flame. It was possible that Jay didn’t know what he’d been through, maybe it was just a guess; understandable given the media coverage of late. Michael offered up a half-hearted smile.

Jay’s eyes turned to the living room window and Michael followed his gaze, watching as a curtain fluttered. “We’d better get moving before someone comes out to see why we’re just sitting here,” Jay said as he started the engine.

“They’d do that?”

“You betcha! I’d like to think that we’re a big happy family and they’re all concerned.” He leaned in and smiled conspiratorially as his hand left Michael’s knee to shift the car into reverse. Backing the Tercel out of the driveway he added, “But I happen to know they’re just really, really nosy.”

They’d just pulled into the street and stopped at a four-way stop sign when Michael’s mouth opened and, “So, how long have you been dating Angie?” slipped out.

“Do what!?!?” Jay looked dumbfounded.

Michael repeated, “How long have you been dating my sister?”

“Dude, you’ve got it all wrong!” Jay retorted. “What gave you the idea I was seeing Angie?”

“I don’t know, just the way you two acted earlier. And I’ve gotta tell ya that she and Mom talk about you — a lot.”

Jay’s expression was thoughtful for moment, then threw his head back and laughed. An impatient horn sounded behind them and Jay turned his attention back to driving, still quietly chuckling.

Michael flinched at the unexpected reaction, prepared to defend his sister’s honor.

Finally sobering, Jay told him, “Think about what you just said. Now, think about how you and Angie act when you’re together. And don’t lie to me; she’s told me all about you.”

Looking back on the incident in the living room, Michael recalled his own memories of Angie. His eyebrows arched as he suddenly understood. “She treats you like she treats me!” he exclaimed.

“Got it in one,” Jay said. “She’s a good friend. A *very* good friend, but that’s it. Besides, she’s not my type. I’m not into...” he paused mid-sentence and Michael wondered what he’d started to say. Finally he concluded with, “Redheads.”

That statement and its vague delivery left him curious. “So, you like blondes instead?” Michael ventured.

“Maybe,” muttered Jay, intently focused on the road.

“I see. Maybe that hot blonde that was sitting on the couch.” He managed to smile somewhat convincingly, even while developing an instant and intense dislike for Emmie or Amy or whatever the hell her name was.

“Depends on which one you meant.”

Their eyes locked, silent communication flowing between them. “So...” Michael prodded.

Jay sighed, averting his eyes as he accelerated and turned right, heading north toward the old main street area of town. “Not the couch, the loveseat.”

Michael's eyes widened as he recalled who'd been sitting where in the living room.

"Yeah, Terry," Jay confirmed. "Terry is my type, or was, rather. I found that, although I like blondes, I can do without self-righteous arrogance." The car pulled to a halt at the town's one and only traffic light and he turned to face Michael. "I'm gay; is that a problem for you?" His eyes returned to the road and remained there while they waited for the light to change.

'*Oh hell no!*' was rejected as a possible response before it had a chance to leave Michael's mouth. A simple "No," emerged instead.

The sigh of relief was unmistakable. "Good. And before you ask, yes, your sister knows. In fact, I think pretty much everyone does. I don't advertise it, but I've never tried to hide it, either."

The conversation faded as the light changed. Before the silence grew uncomfortable Jay said, "Knowing your mom and sister I didn't think you'd be a bigoted jerk about it, but you never know. I've met some pretty cool people in this town but I've also met some real assholes, ya know?"

Yes, Michael did know what people could be like, especially to gays, blacks, or Hispanics in this town, and the fact that Jay had two out of three covered meant that life could get ugly for him around the wrong folks.

That was precisely why Michael feared this bizarre attraction. Although unafraid of what people might say or do, he didn't need the aggravation of being on the receiving end of the ugliness that the jerks could send his, or his family's way. Still, he couldn't deny the relief at finding out that, not only was Jay not Angie's boyfriend, but that they swung the same way.

Nothing could ever come of his wishful thinking, however, since he didn't intend to stick around. Recent occurrences had shaken up his life and he wasn't sure what was going to happen once things settled down again. Still, he needed hope that life could go on, and the loneliness lurking deep within recognized something it wanted in the darkly handsome Texan.

His mother had once told him that cravings were the body's way of telling you that it wasn't getting what it needed. Until now he'd only equated that with food, but he was beginning to see that it worked in other ways, as well. He was definitely craving something and, at the moment, it was sitting next to him firmly gripping the steering wheel.

But, damn it, he didn't want to feel attraction for another man! Sometimes he wished he could change that part of himself and find a nice girl, get married, and have a bunch of kids like he grew up believing he should. It would be so much easier. Michael sighed. He

could wish all he wanted to and it wouldn't change a damned thing — he knew who and what he was, and there was no going back.

Jay remained quiet during Michael's reverie, except for a soft melody that he was singing in Spanish. He had a pleasant singing voice and Michael found himself listening with rapt attention, wanting to know the words that went with the mournful tune.

All too quickly the ride ended in front of the simply named, *The Book Store*, and they sat looking at each other for a moment, neither saying anything. Once again it was Jay who ended the awkward silence. "Wanna go out for pizza or something sometime?"

Caught off guard at the abrupt invitation he was just working up the nerve to make himself, Michael began to sputter.

Jay hung his head and looked away. "I wasn't asking you for a date," he murmured softly.

"Oh," Michael replied, surprised at how disappointed he sounded even to himself.

Suddenly, Jay brightened and looked up, winking. "Unless, of course, you want me to." In a more serious tone he added, "Look, I understand if you don't want to be seen with the Mexican queer. I know how folks are here." He held up a hand to stop Michael denials. "It's okay. I know what they say behind my back; how I'm an illegal alien come to steal their jobs even though my family's been in this country longer than theirs." Those verbal attacks had cut him deeply, that much was obvious from the injured tone and sad, downcast eyes.

"I'm not ashamed of my heritage from either of my parents, but I'm just visiting here. I can't wait to leave, to be totally honest. But you? You have to live here and face these ignorant, narrow-minded morons. You've got a lot to lose. Your reputation would suffer for associating with me."

That provoked an immediate and heated response from Michael. "Look, dude, I don't really give a rat's ass what the people around here say about me except for Mom, Angie, and my grandparents."

Jay replied, "Yeah, well I've heard enough off old man Coffey down at the lumberyard not to want that inflicted on anyone else."

Michael knew from experience that Jay wasn't alone in suffering from the words of the bitter, spiteful Herman Coffey, who seemed to want everyone else to be as miserable as he was. But his misery was brought on by his own actions; he had no one to blame but himself. That asshole was the last man on earth that should be judging anybody.

Though gossiping went against all he'd been taught by his compassionate mother, Michael placed a comradely hand on Jay's shoulder and said, "About old man Coffey..."

A faint hint of spicy-scented cologne teased his nose as he leaned in to share a prime bit of small town news. “He’s got three sons and only two of them with his wife.”

Wide-eyed surprise replaced the pained expression one of the town’s most embarrassing citizens had caused. “Yeah, and it gets better. His third son is with his wife’s sister.” With a wry smile Michael added, “There’s no way he can deny it, either, ‘cause the boy looks just like him.”

“You’re shitting me,” Jay exclaimed. “There’s actually two women in this world who agreed to sleep with that horrible man?”

Michael raised two fingers and solemnly swore, “Scout’s honor.” His grin turned evil. “Seems the sister-in-law is spiteful, too; named the kid Herman, Jr.”

“Oh my God! No she didn’t!” Jay laughed.

“Yup, she sure did,” said Michael. “So his wife left him and took the kids. Makes you wonder how he affords all that child support on what they pay him down at the lumberyard, don’t it?”

He hadn’t been raised to gossip and knew it wasn’t right to do so; however, it also wasn’t right for folks to say things that they shouldn’t because of who Jay was. And the beautiful smile that replaced that dejected expression was worth a prayer or two for forgiveness, in Michael’s opinion.

Jay shook his head and laughed. “You probably know the dirt on everyone around here, don’t you? Remind me not to piss you off. “

Michael’s expression turned solemn. “I don’t tell what I know because Mom raised me better than that. But she also raised me not to say hurtful things to people; folks that do are asking for what they get. I was raised to take up for those who were being picked on. I won’t tolerate bullies.”

With a heavy sigh Jay confessed, “I couldn’t use that stuff against him anyway. That would bring me down to his level.”

It was rare to find someone with that kind of integrity and Michael was impressed. Apparently, he wasn’t the only one who’d been raised to have a conscience. “You don’t have to use it against him,” he explained. “But tell me: knowing what you do about Herman, the next time he goes off on you, is it going to matter?”

Jay seemed to consider those words before replying, “Not so much. ‘Cause I now know that no matter what he says to me he’s got problems of his own — worse problems.”

Michael was pleased with that response. “And that makes it easier not to take his words to heart, right?”

“Yeah, I suppose it does.”

“Look, Jay. You’re in college. Soon you’ll graduate and go out into the world. You’ve got your whole life ahead of you. Hell, you’ve probably already been more places than old man Coffey ever will.”

When he turned to look out the window Michael saw that the lights of the store were off and knew his mom was probably waiting, but he wanted to see Jay smile once more before they parted company. “In ten years you’ll be long gone from here, Cookesville will be a distant memory, and all these small-minded people will still be here doing the same thing, day in, day out. For them this is as good as life is gonna get. You have the world, Jay, and they know it. If they have anything against you it’s that fact. They’re jealous.”

“So, what you’re saying is they don’t matter?”

Jay’s hopeful expression tugged at Michael’s heart until he was ready to confront Herman or anyone else that dared offer insult. “No, they don’t matter. In fact, they deserve your pity, not your fear.”

Suddenly that brilliant smile reappeared just like Michael had hoped. “You’re a wise man, Michael Ritter, you know that?”

He could feel the blush rising at the unexpected compliment. “I just pay attention to what’s going on.” Deciding a change of subject was desperately needed, he asked, “So, now that we’ve established that I’m not worried about gossip, what say we get together for pizza some night? Umm...they do have decent pizza in this town, right?”

A more relaxed Jay replied, “Yeah, about four blocks down from here at The Pie Man. It’s some pretty decent pizza, too. He gets a lot of business from the Zoo.”

With absolutely no warning Jay’s hand pushed into the pocket of his jeans, and he wriggled provocatively until it reemerged holding a cell phone. Caught off-guard by the unintentionally erotic display, Michael breathed a sigh of relief and discreetly adjusted the semi-hard he’d sprouted while wishing it was his own hand burrowing into the pocket of those 501’s.

Intent on the phone’s tiny keypad, Jay missed the effect his actions had on his passenger. “What’s your number?” he asked.

Michael took the phone and began to program his number with one hand, handing Jay his own phone with the other, so he could do the same.

“Well, I guess I need to get in there before Mom comes out and drags me in.”

White, even teeth flashed brightly against dark skin. “You know, I can see her actually doing that, too.”

“I wouldn’t put a whole lot past Mom,” Michael admitted, though her unpredictability was actually something he admired.

That earned him another laugh and a sexy little smile that left him needing to adjust his jeans again, but grateful that their ride wasn’t ending on a sour note.

As Michael opened the car door he looked around apprehensively, judging how far it was from the car to the store, determined not to let Jay see his nervousness. It was only a short way and, thankfully, traffic was light at this time of day, most shoppers having gone home for the evening. With a harsh exhalation he exited the car and removed his bags from behind the seat. “Thanks for the ride, man; give me a day or two to get settled in and then call me. We can just hang out or something.” He bumped his fist with Jay’s in parting and then closed the car door firmly, turning to face his new home.

Chapter Four

“Sweetie!” Michael braced himself as a small, red-haired whirlwind launched itself at him — the second that day. This one was more aggressive, however, and nearly knocked him down. Despite the fact that she was almost half his size, his mother was a presence unto herself. Chaos, thy name is Sarah Shiller. Or rather, her name had been Shiller on the last letter he received from her. No telling which of her previous last names she’d resumed during her most recent divorce.

“Hi, Mom,” he managed to squeak once she’d released her hold enough so he could breathe. He fully believed she could teach his sergeant a thing or two about hand-to-hand combat. It would be called “Death by Affection.” The woman just didn’t know her own strength, which, when added to her natural exuberance, equaled lethally, if accidentally, wielded knees, elbows, and feet. She was one of the clumsiest people Michael had ever met; but, hey, that was his mom, she had her faults and made the most of them. And she never apologized for her eccentricities, understanding that she had the God-given right to be who she was. It was a lesson she tried to teach her kids despite objections from various narrow-minded husbands. How the most open-minded person on the planet could wind up with such bigoted losers – five so far, to be exact – was one of the great mysteries of the universe. Angie had a theory that their mom had a fetish for big, dumb, chest-thumping Neanderthal types. Michael thought it was more of a ‘taking in strays’ kind of thing.

Apparently satisfied that she’d properly greeted her youngest child she turned to the people who stood gawking close by and gave them a harsh glare and a curt, “What are you looking at? My kid just came home!” before grabbing him by the arm and hauling him into the darkened bookstore. She quickly bolted the door with one hand while turning the ‘Sorry, we’re closed’ sign over with the other. She then proceeded to drag him through the dimly-lit room, forgetting that he wasn’t familiar with the surroundings — confirmed by his bumping into every object in the store.

She was a woman on a mission as she plowed through the darkened space with her second born in tow, all the while keeping up a running monologue about Cousin Kathy’s worthless new husband, Grandma’s latest adventures with her arthritis, and how everyone was so happy that he was home and couldn’t wait to see him.

After crossing the length of the building with only minor injuries, Michael exclaimed, “Ow!” at the precise moment his mother warned, “Watch your head,” and began dragging him up the rear stairs. He was still rubbing what was sure to be large knot when he was blinded by the lights she turned on in the apartment over the store.

“Let me get a good look at you,” she gushed, grinning like a kid at Christmas and spinning him around to view all sides. Her smile fell. “You’re nothing but skin and bones!” she exclaimed, the tried and true greeting of all southern mothers when seeing their kids after a long absence, even if it wasn’t true. But then, they were in the south where Sunday dinner was considered an art form.

“I’m hardly bones, Mom,” Michael protested. “I’ve actually filled out a lot since I left. And I’m more toned now than I’ve ever been. I just don’t have you force-feeding me every time I manage to drop a pound!” How could his mother not remember the scrawny, gangly thing he’d been just a few short years ago? He ceased arguing as his fatigue caught up to him; he needed to sleep, and soon, or he’d be taking his frustrations out on anyone close enough to be his unwitting target. Not that he wasn’t thrilled to see her – he was just exhausted and her whirlwind energy was fast depleting any reserves of strength he had left.

Ignoring his harsh tone she continued, “Well, now that you’re here we’ll get you fed up right. Everything’s gonna be just fine now that you’re home.” ‘Fine’ was pronounced, ‘fiiiiiiiine,’ in the true southern style.

When sympathetic eyes met his, he groaned. How long was everyone going to treat him like an invalid? Yes, he’d seen some heavy shit over there, but so had lots of other guys, he was just one of many. So what if he was only twenty-two but would now have to emulate his seventy-two-year-old grandfather and turn his good ear to you if you weren’t talking loudly enough. It wasn’t the end of the world. At least he came back! All the visible parts still worked; his infirmities were deeply hidden.

He took a deep, calming breath to ease the building tension. Fussing over him was her way of showing love, so he held tongue, knowing her reaction was nothing compared to how Grandma would be; he’d need at least twelve hours of sleep before meeting up with her.

“...you’re asleep on your feet. Why don’t you go take a shower while I put your things away?” she suggested, dragging his duffle through the door to a small but comfortable looking bedroom. The bag was nearly as big as she was, but his hand got a playful smack when he tried to take it from her. He had no choice but to follow and watch as she dumped everything out on the bed for sorting. Realizing he’d been dismissed just as surely as if she’d spoken the order, he snagged a pair of boxers from the pile and backed out of the room, disappearing into the tiny bathroom.

He felt guilty for not staying and talking, but they’d spent so much time on the phone the last few days that he’d actually run out of topics, except for the ones he wasn’t ready to discuss. So he retreated and allowed his mother to put away his few belongings while he took a much-needed shower. As he looked for soap and towels he was amazed at how much effort had gone into preparation for his homecoming. No only had an apartment been created in what used to be empty space, the cabinets had been stocked with his favorite brands of toothpaste, shampoo, and...an industrial-sized box of condoms?

His face flamed and he quickly replaced the box on the shelf. Leave it to Mom to think of everything. He found what he was looking for under the sink and unwrapped a bar of scented deodorant soap before stepping under the soothing shower spray, the warm water

working out his kinked muscles. A soft, fluffy towel, so unlike what he was used to, felt like heaven when he dried off. Nearly asleep on his feet, he somehow managed get his teeth brushed and his boxers on. He found his old, ratty-but-comfortable bathrobe hanging from a peg on the back of the door and put it on, tying the sash firmly — it fit more snugly than it had four years ago. Finally ready to face the world, or at least his mother, he left the room in a cloud of steam.

A quick glance in the bedroom showed the bed had been turned down. He very much looked forward to putting it to use — soon. No matter how much he'd traveled or where he'd been there was nothing like sleeping in his own bed, even if it had been awhile since the last time he'd had the privilege. He stared longingly at the soft, quilt covered haven, then sighed and went to join his mother in the living area of the small apartment.

He leaned against the doorframe watching as she bent to retrieve two beers from the refrigerator. For the first time he noticed the strands of gray hair that he'd sworn she didn't have, and the lines around her eyes, not all caused by laughter. She looked tired. She also didn't have much room to accuse him of losing weight, obviously having lost a good deal herself, and she was thin to start with. Time and disappointment had taken their toll. Maybe he had inadvertently told his buddies the truth: he needed to come home and take care of his aging, graying mother. The idea hit him hard that leaving to find his own place in the world might prove more difficult than expected.

A woman with a heart of pure gold, that was his mother, and all the qualities he liked about himself came from her: honesty, open-mindedness, dependability, compassion, but she'd always sold herself short. He wished that she had shaken off the loser who'd gotten her pregnant at sixteen and gone on to college like Angie had after the miscarriage of her son. His mom was such an intelligent woman and he couldn't understand why she let guys who could barely read convince her that she was stupid and worthless.

It always baffled him why his free-spirited mother kept returning to Cookesville. In any of the larger towns they lived in she was accepted for her eclectic tastes, even being praised as a modern, free-thinking woman. Here, she was just the kook who ran the bookstore. Even then she had to censor what she normally would have stocked on her shelves. The good people of the town would run her out on a rail if they saw some of her personal collection of books, with topics ranging from comparative religion to alternative romance. Yes, there were several selections that fell under the alternative romance heading that had answered quite a few questions for him during his formative years, while raising even more.

Far from passing judgment, Michael felt sorry for her, understanding that she just wanted someone to love and appreciate her, though she never quite succeeded in finding that in her love life. In a way she didn't belong in Cookesville, but he was glad she had returned here where she at least had Grandma, Grandpa, and Angie — and now him.

Smiling as she looked up and found him watching, she quickly straightened, closing the refrigerator and handing him a beer. “Let’s go sit on the couch a while,” she said softly. “You look so tired.”

Mumbling his thanks, he sprawled inelegantly on the plaid couch that had once occupied his grandparents’ living room. It was old and battered, but that particular piece of furniture held fond memories and he took comfort in having it in what was essentially his very first place.

Though he tried hard to appear attentive, his yawning soon became uncontrollable. “Honey, why don’t you get some sleep? We can talk tomorrow morning — I’ll bring breakfast,” she said.

With a sleepy smile he replied, “Thanks, Mom.”

She rose and kissed him on the forehead, something she could never do had he been standing. “Love you, sweetheart,” she murmured.

“You too, Ma.”

After she let herself out Michael wearily studied his surroundings. It had just been empty space when his mother had bought the store and sent him pictures. Now, as he looked around he was once more reminded of how much she missed and wanted him there. He’d noticed that all his things had been carefully placed where they used to be in his old bedroom. His high school era posters graced the walls of his living area and the guitar he’d never quite learned to play was sitting upright in an old beanbag, like an honored guest instead of a musical instrument. Even his neon beer sign was in its rightful place above the head of his bed where it had always been.

In a restless haze he dimmed the lights and attempted to relax, first on the couch, then on his bed, but the fatigue, the excitement of being home, and his whirling thoughts just wouldn’t let him sleep. Finally, he turned the lights back on and familiarized himself with his new apartment.

He made his way over to his old stereo, grateful when a quick inventory showed his entire music collection was present and accounted for. An ancient TV and a cheap DVD player sat in a corner with his favorite movies stacked beneath. A cursory inspection of the cabinets and refrigerator showed the results of a major shopping spree – they were stocked with all his favorites. Even his well-used Steelers coffee mug was there. After helping himself to another beer he sat on the worn and faded couch, surfing through channels on the TV, happy to see that Mom had gotten the cable connected.

Once relaxed to the point that he might actually get some sleep, he tucked himself into bed, wrapping the blue, patchwork, Grandma-made quilt over himself, and closed his eyes, hoping against hope to sleep through the night and not wake up screaming.

The next few days were a blur of activity as Michael settled into his new home and routine, working in the book store, visiting with and being fussed over by his grandparents. Most importantly, he came to terms with his environment and began to relearn how to live as a civilian. After all the discipline and stress of his previous life, having every minute of every day planned and structured, the loss of stability left him unnerved.

It also left him with entirely too much time to think. Many nights were spent in sleepless frustration, lying in his bed unable to turn off the never-ending stream of self-doubts and what-ifs. He now had the opportunity to do whatever he wanted; he could go to college and pursue any of the courses of study he'd been debating or go to the local technical college and study mechanics or welding. Decent money and jobs could be had in any of the fields he was considering and he'd always excelled at working on things around his grandfather's farm.

As he weighed the options he revisited the old dream of staying here, getting married, and raising a family, finally realizing that dream hadn't been his at all. It was what his grandparents and his girlfriend had wanted. At one time he had accepted it; now, though, he was relieved that he hadn't gotten trapped, knowing it wouldn't have been fair to himself or to Ruth Ann.

They had been very close at one time, or as close as he'd ever been with anyone, but it wasn't his high school sweetheart that starred in his thoughts about the future. No, as unbidden as the thoughts were, they all seemed to focus on a man. And not just any man — Jay. When he had first seen the tall, dark Texan in the living room of his sister's place he'd felt something that he now realized he'd felt before over the years, just not as strongly. Then he hadn't wanted to admit what the subtle signals meant and he'd become quite skilled in denying his attraction to other men, or passing it off as something else.

Like it or not, he could no longer lie to himself about why he hadn't been that interested in girls when all his high school buddies had been hormone driven lunatics. What he was going to do with that information was what he still couldn't decide. He could hide who he was and try to live an ordinary, straight life, deep in the closet, however, a young man that had attended his church years ago kept coming to mind.

Everyone knew something was different about Jim and whispered behind his back. Even when he married the rumors persisted. Michael guessed he was hiding who he was, but didn't do a very good job at it, for everyone still knew. All the poor man had gotten for the subterfuge was misery and a broken marriage. Michael wondered whatever happened to him, sympathetically hoping he'd come to terms with life and was now happy. Though some might call him a sap, Michael truly believed everyone deserved a happy ending. Well, most people, anyway.

The Jay dilemma was something else entirely. Before, any leanings he had were simply theoretical. Now that there was someone that made him feel, well, like doing something about it, he didn't know what to do. What he did know was that he couldn't look or even think about Jay without getting hard. He wanted the man — badly.

That day in the car Jay had definitely been flirting even before disclosing his sexuality. The fact he'd never called afterward left Michael disappointed.

Jay was correct in saying that being seen out together would be taken negatively as far as most of the narrow-minded community was concerned. What of the family? Michael thought of his mother. She'd had so many gay friends over the years and was so accepting and non-judgmental that it shouldn't be a problem. If he came out she'd probably join a support group and slap a rainbow bumper sticker on her car. He was fairly confident that she'd just want him to be happy — but you never could tell how a person would react until you actually told them.

Angie? Since she obviously accepted Jay and Terry she might be open-minded about him. Then again, it could be a different matter when it came to her brother. Besides, Jay was her friend. Getting together with him might cause some weirdness with her, but Michael hoped not. But if she didn't approve of something she'd just come out and say it. It wasn't like her to mince words or hide her opinions.

His grandparents? Another matter entirely. They were good folks — good, church-going folks — and the Bible was very clear about homosexuality. Though he didn't like lying to them it wouldn't be the first time he'd kept things from them. However, they knew Jay and, from what Angie had said in her letters, they thought highly of him.

Michael fantasized for a moment what it would be like to be in a relationship with another man. Not the sexual part; no, he wondered how it would be to kiss, hold hands, sit together at the end of the day, prepare dinner together, be a couple.

Through it all Jay smiled and laughed, playing the role of the perfect mate. This was a dangerous game and Michael knew it, fantasizing and turning someone into someone he might not be. Also, the absence of the promised phone call suggested disinterest. Even if Jay was interested, could years of conditioning be cast aside, allowing them to attempt a relationship? Or, like that man long ago at church, would he present one face to the world while sneaking around in a delusion that no one knew the truth?

Besides, he hadn't seen Jay since being dropped off that first day. He tried to pretend it didn't matter one way or the other when he casually asked Angie about her roomie, but she hadn't told him much, other than that Jay, like herself, was hard at work studying and finishing final projects.

Between the gloomy thoughts running rampant in his head all day and the nightmares that plagued him when he finally was able to let go of the waking world, was it any wonder he was exhausted?

“Sure, Mom, I’ll call Grandma,” Michael said, patting his pockets for his cell phone and discovering it wasn’t there. She was using the store’s phone to place an order, so he mouthed, “I’ll be right back” and took the stairs two at a time up to his apartment.

He searched his nightstand, the couch cushions, and even his dirty laundry hamper before the buzzing that indicated waiting messages led him to the kitchen counter. Three messages blinked on the screen. The first was a text from Angie asking if he wanted to drive up to Atlanta for some shopping the next day. His first reaction was “Oh, Hell yeah!” but when he thought about leaving the sanctuary of the store and his apartment a chill ran up his spine. He hated lying, but sent a bullshit response about how he’d promised Mom he’d work and asked if they could reschedule. He’d love to go just for a chance to spend some time with Angie, but didn’t think he could do it, not yet at least.

The next message was a voicemail from Ryan, a good friend from the service with whom he’d formed a special bond — a bond that involved the death of someone very close to them both.

He quickly dialed the number to retrieve the message, grateful for the privacy of his apartment. This was one conversation better held without a curious mother or customers around. After keying in the proper codes and selecting from the long list of options, the clear, soft voice that he knew so well washed over his senses.

“Hey, Big Guy. Ummm... Sorry it took me so long to call, I’ve been, you know, busy.” The normally straightforward Ryan sounded nervous and uncertain, something that never happened before their convoy was attacked. After a moment of awkward silence the message continued, “Look, I hope you’re not mad at me or anything; I’d hate to lose you, too.” The last words were murmured so quietly they could barely be heard. There was a soft sigh and then, “Anyway, I’m doing okay and hope everything’s going good for you. Umm....give me a call sometime; that is, if you’re not mad.” Another long pause followed. “Look, I know what I did was wrong, but...well, you know what I was thinking. I just wanted to feel...well... I just wanted to feel anything again. I’m sorry for using you like that. Look, I gotta go, just call me sometimes, will ya? Can we still be friends?” Then silence.

Michael mentally kicked himself. Why had he allowed so much time to pass without checking on Ryan? His friend was suffering and, regardless of what had happened, friends didn’t desert friends in need. Then the painful truth occurred to him: Ryan was a reminder of all he was trying to forget. Tears burned his eyes when he replayed the message, feeling ashamed of his own selfishness. With all else Ryan was shouldering alone, he honestly believed his one true friend left in the world had deserted him in anger — the one person who knew the truth about Jimmy. No, Michael wasn’t mad, far from it; he was just a thoughtless asshole that should have been there.

Hitting the redial led to disappointment. The voice happily greeting him turned out to be a recorded message. How long ago had that been programmed? Certainly Ryan hadn't sounded so happy in a long, long time. After listening to a mechanical voice explaining options, Michael waited patiently for the beep and left a message of his own.

"Ryan, I am so, so sorry I haven't called and I don't even have an excuse. I could never be mad at you and you've never in your life used anyone, least of all me. I've never met a more honest, caring person than you. When you get this message please call me right back. I need to know that you're all right."

Dejected, he hung up the phone. Running a shaking hand through his hair — as he so often did when frustrated — he realized how disastrous the neglect could be and how severe the consequences. Regardless of the issues he was dealing with, at least he never seriously considered taking his own life. And though Ryan said he was over it, the young man from Arkansas was still on the edge and could easily tumble into the abyss. Michael sincerely hoped his insensitive actions hadn't resulted in...well, those thoughts were best not dwelled upon.

"Michael, did you call Grandma?" his mom bellowed from below.

Still shaken by Ryan's call, Michael forgot all about the third message.

Jay waited until nine before giving up and getting undressed. He should have called sooner, suggesting pizza or something, but he'd wanted to give Michael a chance to settle in and catch up with his family. When he'd unexpectedly received two tickets to the Hawks game in Atlanta he'd jumped at the chance of having a legitimate reason to invite Michael out without giving off 'I wanna date you' vibes. The guy was straight — he knew that, and would probably have married his childhood sweetheart if not for enlisting in the army. Michael's grandparents had innocently provided all the 'twist-the-knife-in-my-heart' details.

Changing into loose, worn sweats, he wondered for the millionth time how he'd let this happen. How had he allowed himself to become enamored of a total stranger? What was it about Michael that caught his attention? An image formed in his mind that answered the question. Yeah, that's why: blond-haired, blue-eyed, and built to perfection. Michael hadn't been at his best when they met, but Jay had plenty of reason to believe him highly intelligent, having been privy to letters he'd sent to Angie and his grandparents, with whom Jay had shared many a Sunday dinner.

But the thing that clinched it, the defining moment that sent Jay past the point of no return, was in the car when he had looked over and seen, not a grown man or a war veteran, but a lost little boy, dealing alone with unimaginable pain. He'd fought the urge to hug Michael and tell him everything was going to be all right.

Jay shook his head at his own imagination. Apparently, after further consideration, Michael had a change of heart about accepting Jay's being gay. Then again, maybe the returned soldier was busy reuniting with that old girlfriend. That thought left Jay lonely and depressed before he remembered that the girlfriend, by all accounts, had married and was pregnant.

His attraction to Michael stemmed from the stories told by an idolizing sister and doting family and not from actual knowledge of the man himself. It started when Jay found a picture that Angie had dropped shortly after moving there to start college. Her brother had been dressed in his military uniform, having his first picture taken as an American soldier. Knowing it wasn't the only picture Angie of him in uniform, Jay had kept it, not really knowing why at the time.

There he was in a strange town, trying to adjust to college life and attempting to make friends in a place where 'his type' just weren't accepted. He wouldn't have chosen to come here at all but a scholarship was a scholarship, and his parents couldn't afford to send him to college on their own. He also didn't stand a chance of snagging an athletic scholarship in Texas, either. Football was practically a religion there and, as a result, there were too many better candidates to choose from. So he'd wound up in some Podunk town in Alabama, far from family and friends, when a disciplinary suspension left an unexpected opening for a running back.

Sadly, he later learned that the honor had been bestowed more for his Hispanic heritage and bilingual abilities than any skill at the game, and only his parent's pleas that he not be a fool kept him from throwing the scholarship back in their racist faces.

So, with a full academic ride, a little help from the folks back home, and money made from odd jobs, he managed to be fairly independent. Much to his surprise, the local small town university offered an outstanding engineering program. Despite his earlier outrage at the reasoning behind his scholarship, he also found that the majority of the faculty and students were great people, most readily accepting — or at least tolerating — not only his heritage but his orientation.

Finding a reasonable place to stay had been a happy accident, a tip from a friend of a friend, and his new roommates turned out to be an interesting lot. Still, it was the loneliest time in his life. When it became too much to bear he retreated to the privacy of his room to confide in the steely-eyed, somber young soldier in the picture. Sometimes Jay just looked at the photo, wondering where the young recruit was, what he was doing, what he was thinking. At other times the image of the blue-eyed blond listened, unflinchingly, to deep, dark secrets, and to tales of success as well as failures. The more Jay looked at that picture the harder he fell, until he was forced to secure it in the safety of a glass frame before it disintegrated and fell apart.

Developing an obsession with a total stranger wasn't the healthiest thing he'd ever done, but imagining the man in the photo was a friend and confidante gave Jay comfort and helped him through a very difficult period of adjustment. Eventually he adapted to his

new environment, settling into a fierce but brief relationship with Terry. The picture was tucked away for safekeeping but was never too far from Jay's mind. He knew that his fantasy image of Michael wasn't the cause of his and Terry's problems, even as he admitted that, subconsciously, his dream image was held up to Terry and any others he had considered — they were all found lacking.

He also knew that there would come a time when he'd come face to face with the subject of that worn and faded photo, he'd just never anticipated the impact. When he'd heard that Michael was coming home he'd fretted endlessly. How could he face the man knowing that he was in love with a fantasy and that the person who meant so much to him only existed in his fertile imagination? What if the guy turned out to be a complete asshole?

Then, the moment of truth arrived. It was all Jay could do to maintain a straight face and, hopefully, a neutral expression when he really wanted to pounce on the young blond and show him all he'd been missing, begging him to live up to the fantasy — begging him to be gay.

After he'd shaken off the shock of finally meeting the object of his clandestine desires, Jay couldn't help but recall that picture, carefully tucked into a sock drawer, amazed at the differences four years had made. In the photograph Michael looked so young and innocent, a far cry from the haunted soul that he was now. All boyishness had firmed and matured, taking on a hard, masculine edge. Whereas Michael was cute before, now he was just plain, heart-stoppingly beautiful.

The passing years had added bulk and maturity to the familiar features, though something in the eyes had changed, too. Experience had aged them beyond their years.

Jay sighed. Being around Michael might just break his heart. He owed it to the man to leave the fantasies behind and get to know the real Michael Ritter. At least they could be friends. He'd deal privately with his feelings and try not to impose them on someone who wouldn't welcome that kind of attention. Yes, he'd be a martyr.

Part of Jay wondered how horrified Michael would be if he knew that a gay man had been infatuated with him for the past four years. If he knew, would he run or would he feel like beating the shit out of the faggot? Could they even be friends or was it just wishful thinking? For that matter, could Jay be so honorable as to squash his own desires so as not to intimidate Michael? He just didn't know the answer to that.

Dammit, why were all the good ones straight?

“Ryan?”

“Michael? Oh, man, I'd 'bout given up on hearing from you. Look, I'm so sorry...”

“Shhhh....It’s ok. I’m the one who’s sorry for not calling you. It’s been so hectic.”

A ghost of a laugh reached Michael’s ears, a mere echo of the heartfelt guffaws he knew Ryan capable of. “Tell me about it! My family’s about to drive me nuts! My uncle and sister follow me around like I’m on suicide watch or something.”

“Ryan!” Michael scolded, unwilling to hear him say such things, even in jest.

A sigh wafted from the phone. “No, dude; I told you. The moment came and went and it’s gone. I hurt like hell and probably will for a long, long, time...but I can’t. As much as I wanted to, I just can’t. He would never make that choice; he had so many plans...” There was never a question of who ‘he’ was. After a moment of awkward silence that sorrow-laced voice continued softly, “His mom gave me the flag that draped his casket. I think she knows.”

“Is that gonna be trouble for you?” Michael asked, more than a little concerned. He knew how hard it had to be for Ryan to face all the folks back home, hiding his true feelings to protect the memory of a dead man.

“No, she’s cool. I’m told says she cries a lot, but one day she came by to see me and said the strangest thing: that as long as I’m alive that a part of her son would be, too. Then she hugged me and gave me the flag.”

“That’s good that she knows, then. Is she someone you can talk to?” As awkward as it might be to talk to Jimmy’s mom, Michael hoped that perhaps she and Ryan might comfort each other. Damn, but it sucked that someone as young as Jimmy, with so much to live for, would never have the chance.

A breathy sigh preceded, “Maybe not now, but hopefully in time. I need someone to talk to, ya know; someone who knows the truth. This is just so damned hard! Everyone keeps telling me that they know how difficult it is for me to lose my best friend but they have no freaking clue! He was so much more to me than that, and I can’t tell anyone. Then some of them act like I have no right to be so broken up because he was *just a friend*. Damn it, Michael...he was *everything* to me!”

Ryan was quietly sniffing, though it sounded like he was trying to hide it. Michael simply listened, silently offering support while waiting for Ryan to compose himself or for the gentle tears to become full blown howls.

The subject was changed abruptly. “So, you’re not mad at me?”

It was Michael’s turn to sigh. After all the man had been through his worries were still for someone else. “How could you ever think that? I’m just glad I was there when you needed me.”

“Uh, so you’re not upset about...”

“No, Ryan, I’m not upset; surprised maybe, but not upset.”

He was rewarded with a soft chuckle. “You have the gift for understatement, Big Guy.”

Michael smiled at the familiar nickname that Ryan and Jimmy, both rather short, had called him from the first day they’d met at boot camp. The memory of the two laughing, smiling Arkansas boys made his heart ache. They’d all been so young and innocent back then with no idea what life had in store. “So, how are you doing, really? You gonna be all right?” Michael felt totally inadequate, at a loss for what else to say.

“I don’t have much choice, do I?”

“Do you want me to come there?” The words were out of Michael’s mouth before he had a chance to stop them, but after a moment’s shock at the spontaneous offer he realized that this is what he should have done days ago. Regardless of his own fears and phobias, if Ryan needed him he would be there just as fast as he could.

“You’d do that?”

The eagerness in Ryan’s voice assured him that he’d said the right thing. “In a flat minute.” In the silence that followed Michael steeled his resolve. He would leave the safety of home to provide support for his friend without question, even though a small, frightened part of him hoped it wouldn’t be necessary.

Ryan let him off the hook. “That’s nice of you, Big Guy, but I really need to stand on my own two feet right now.”

Michael hurried to offer reassurances, more comfortable with his decision by the minute. “No, you don’t, Ryan, that’s what you’ve got friends for.”

This prompted another silence. Finally, Ryan said, “Listen Michael, I just want to thank you for, you know....everything.”

He was grateful Ryan couldn’t see him blush. “Look, I cared about Jimmy, too. I don’t think I’d have made it without the two of you. We’re bros, right?”

“That’s right, we’re bros.”

“Well, don’t think for a minute that I won’t come out there, ‘cause I will — just say the word.”

The strain was gone from Ryan’s voice when he answered, “Well, that’s good to know but I’m just relieved that you’re not mad. I couldn’t have handled that.”

“No, Ryan, never mad. Look, I know you’re busy and all, but maybe in a few weeks you could come visit me.”

“I’ll think about it,” Ryan said, though he didn’t sound very convincing.

Michael decided to let it pass and remember to ask again once things calmed down.
“Well, the offer stands whenever you’re feeling up to it.”

“Thanks, Big Guy. I gotta go now, but don’t be a stranger, all right?”

The words were so earnest that Michael smiled in spite of himself. “Only if you make the same promise.”

“You got it.” After a moment’s pause Ryan added, “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. Bros.”

“Bros,” Ryan agreed.

With that parting thought Michael broke the connection, grateful that his friend was doing as well as he was, under the circumstances. He shook his head sadly as his thoughts drifted back in time — as if often did when he thought of Ryan and Jimmy — hoping that his failed memory could explain why, on that fateful day, he’d been sitting in a transport with Ryan while Jimmy had been assigned to a Humvee at the head of the convoy: Michael’s normal spot. Ryan, sadly, didn’t know either.

Guilt was another reason he’d failed to call. By all rights it should have been him lying in that flag-draped casket, and it was only a matter of time before Ryan realized it, too.

Chapter Five

On Sunday Michael reluctantly agreed to leave his sanctuary and venture out into the world. He knew his mom wasn't really implying anything by insisting he accompany her to church, but his anxiety, once they left the book store, was palpable. Heart beating double-time and breathing deep and erratic, he hurried to the car and jumped inside, slamming the door. Screwing his eyes tightly shut, he focused on deep, even breaths as he'd been taught by his therapist.

"Michael, honey; are you all right?" His mother's worried voice penetrated the fog of panic. "You didn't take your meds, did you?"

When he opened his eyes, she was scowling at him, that sixth sense mothers have telling her he hadn't taken his prescription. She'd raised him to think of her as a friend, but was still capable of going maternal when necessary. "You know, Mikey, you really need to start taking your pills. That doctor gave them to you for a reason..." she began.

"No, Mom," he said, with what he hoped passed for a genuine smile. "It's okay. I really don't need it, I'm fine."

"Well, if you're sure." She put her aging Focus into gear and pulled away from the curb, heading out of town toward the old church his grandparents had attended most of their lives. En route she briefed him on the former members and what they were doing now, about the new preacher who was so much better than the last one, and how a committee had formed to clean up around the church and make some necessary repairs to the grounds. It was an old church with a cemetery surrounding the main building. Generations of Michael's family were lying beneath the earth in that old churchyard, the worn and faded inscriptions on their headstones barely legible. He wondered if he would have joined them there had things gone a little differently in the attack on his convoy.

Shaking his head to dispel those thoughts, he turned back to his mother, thankful her attention was on parking the car and not on him. She gave a reassuring smile and patted his hand. "Ready?" She climbed out without waiting for an answer, smoothing her skirt and hair before turning, waiting expectantly.

Going home now wasn't an option, though it's what Michael really wanted to do, no longer in the mood even if his mother did say the preacher delivered excellent sermons. The last time he'd been here was in the teens' class; now he'd be in with the adults, and that made him feel old.

Some of his earlier panic returned upon exiting the car, but he was soon caught up being welcomed back by more people than he recalled ever knowing. His mother swept him along, reintroducing former friends' parents who, in turn, insisted on telling all about their children and where they were now. By the time he made it into the building both his head and his heart were pounding. The first strains from an ancient piano, played by a

musician of roughly the same vintage, caused a hush to descend on the congregation, allowing a reprieve from all the attention.

After an hour of Sunday school, he found himself sitting next to his mother on the back pew of the church trying to ignore the stares from their fellow church-goers. He hoped the service would start soon and draw attention away from him.

However, when the sermon started Michael wished it would stop. The new preacher was indeed charismatic and well-spoken. Too bad this morning's topic was on the evils of homosexuality. Feeling increasingly uncomfortable, Michael wondered why this particular message had to be delivered today and glanced around discreetly, hoping no eyes were straying his way. It was as though the entire sermon was intended for his ears and the thought shook him to the core. Could people somehow tell? Had they known all along, even before he did?

He'd always known that things with Ruth Ann weren't exactly how his friends had described their experiences, but at the time he'd just thought, as she had, that he was 'cold' when it came to the physical aspects of a relationship. Michael liked women; hell, he liked Ruthie, but females just didn't do much for him sexually. When he and Ruth Ann had broken up all he felt was relief.

Then there were the dreams. Repeated nocturnal visits from a faceless lover — a male lover. Michael's dream self was never cold when his lover took him to new heights, leaving him sweaty, shaking, and needing to change the sheets. The dreams had started in his teens and intensified as he grew older and had a better working knowledge of the mechanics of sex. They horrified him at first, but he later dismissed his fears as just his overactive imagination twisting things.

His bigoted stepfather had called him a fag on a normal basis, considering it to be the worst insult one could receive. Those scathing comments saw to it that Michael kept his thoughts to himself, not even discussing them with his mom or sister, whom he could normally tell anything. So the secrets and misgivings remained his own. He told himself he wasn't gay and that he wanted the women he slept with even though those experiences never failed to disappoint. Later, the mysterious dream lover always appeared, never leaving Michael wanting.

Then came the defining moment the night before returning home, when he'd turned a corner from which there was no going back. The first time he'd held a man, had one in his bed, he knew what had been missing in all those past experiences and what he wanted. There'd be hell to pay to get it.

Five minutes before services ended he was drawn out of his musings as his mother took his hand, pressing two small pills into his palm. "Take this and don't argue," she hissed, while everyone else sang the closing hymn. He took a quick look around, confused that time had passed without his noticing. Slipping the pills into his mouth, he choked them down dry, whispering, "Thanks." Trust Mom to know when he needed them.

She was right. Leaving the building was much easier than arriving, the meds he normally avoiding taking working quickly to take the edge off his frayed nerves. With her running interference he managed to make it to the car without being stopped by curious well-wishers. He breathed a huge sigh of relief when they pulled out of the parking lot and onto the county road that led to his grandparent's house. Realizing he had the perfect opportunity to say what was on his mind without all the distractions at the bookstore, he steeled his resolve and asked, "Mom, can we talk?"

"Sure, baby; you know you can talk to me about anything," she answered, just as he knew she would, voice caring and concerned. "Hey, you okay?"

He knew she anticipated him opening up about the things he normally wouldn't discuss. There would come a time when he'd have to voice them, but now was not that time. No, in a way that might be easier to talk about as so much of it was just big, gaping holes in his memory; fragments of disjointed events like a jigsaw puzzle with pieces missing.

Michael turned to look out the side window, anywhere but at her. It made it easier somehow. Why he felt compelled to talk about it at all he didn't know, but with the sermon and his recent acknowledgement that he was gay, he needed reassurance of her love and that she wouldn't judge. The preacher called it a choice but he didn't believe it. Why would he choose to jeopardize his relationships with his family and risk being ostracized? Who would do that? He thought back on the genuine love between his two friends in the unit. Even though they tried so hard not to let it show, it was clear that Ryan and Jimmy were crazy about each other. How could someone pretend a thing like that? And who could fault them for taking what happiness they could in life?

He recalled that one of his mother's proudest moments came when he'd gotten into a fight to defend a gay classmate even though he hardly knew the guy. It was the principle of the thing. Three big rednecks against one average-sized teenager just weren't fair odds. She had praised him the whole time she was driving down to the local high school to give the principal a piece of her mind about the resulting suspension for 'defending the weak and helpless.' But that was before he acknowledged that he was gay. Then he was a hero, now the shoe was definitely on the other foot.

Michael sighed and thought, 'Here goes nothing,' before beginning what could very well be the end of his relationship as he knew it with his mother. He hoped not, but he wouldn't lie to her — ever. "Mom," he said quietly, "I have reason to believe that I might not be totally straight."

A moment's silence, then, "How long have you felt this way?" Her tone was neutral, giving away nothing about what she might be thinking.

Well, he supposed it was a reasonable question, after all. "I guess I began to suspect when we lived in Biloxi," he answered, slamming the door on the memory of the dark-haired Cajun boy who'd lived next door and on whom Michael had his first crush.

“Oh, that long, huh? You were thirteen when we left Biloxi.” She grew pensive and he could almost hear the wheels turning in her mind. “Why didn’t you tell me then?” she asked quietly.

“I wasn’t really sure at the time and didn’t know how you’d take it. Besides,” he said, unable to keep the bitterness from his voice, “you can just imagine what Crawford would have said.” He shuddered inwardly at the memory of the bigoted asshole who’d spent way too many years in his life.

“Now you know you could have at least talked it over with me,” she said, sounding hurt. “I could have kept it from Crawford!”

Michael sighed. “I just wasn’t sure, ya know? You could very easily have screamed at me that I was going to Hell for being a disgusting pervert. Believe me, this isn’t something I just dreamed up, no matter what the preacher just said. It’s how I feel. I didn’t just decide one day to be different.”

“I never would have thought that!” she exclaimed in righteous indignation.

“Yeah, well; that seems to be the general consensus around here.”

“Michael Aaron Ritter! Don’t you dare accuse me of being like those narrow-minded, self-righteous idiots in this little po-dunk town! You know me better than that!”

There she was in all her glory: the mama bear, defending her cub. How he loved this woman! Slowly he began to relax, feeling better about the whole situation. He should have known she’d be there for him, just like she always had.

“I know, Mom,” he admitted. “I’m sorry. This is just hard for me. I had no idea what you might think or say, and I couldn’t bear it if you turned away from me.”

“Son, that ain’t a-happening. Ever. I love you and I want you to be happy. This isn’t what I would have chosen for you because I know how hard it’ll be. Teddy and Nick caught hell before they finally picked up and moved to Atlanta.”

Teddy had been a childhood friend of his mother’s and proof, in Michael’s eyes, that gay wasn’t a choice. There was no way you’d mistake Ted Funderburk for a straight man — ever. Nick, however, was a football hero and all round good ol’ boy. The town gossips had reached the conclusion that Teddy had somehow corrupted their favorite son and infected him with the gay disease. The two men had faced a tough battle, but that had happened when Michael was just a kid. After all these years they were still together, so that counted for something, right?

“Well, I don’t plan on marching down Main Street in a rainbow shirt, Ma,” he said. “And I could always go to college somewhere else...” He hated to bring that up because he’d

just gotten home and didn't want his mom to worry all over again about his leaving. But he already felt like a traitor for allowing her to create a nice apartment when he had no intention of staying any longer than necessary. Still, the worn look around her eyes reminded him of her worries -- worries he'd add to by leaving.

"You do what's right for you, son, and to hell with what people say. They can't even run their own damned lives, so you shouldn't let them run yours!" Her soft soprano filled the car then as she sang a line from a 70's song that mirrored the sentiment, then looked over at him and smiled. "I always loved that song. I do have one question for you, though."

Fear momentarily gripped his heart when his mother grinned and asked, "Who is he?"

"What?!?" Michael sputtered.

"If you're telling me now it must be because you've met someone, right?" Her small, heart shaped face glowed with excitement. "Are you gonna bring home a keeper to meet your mama?" she asked with a sidelong glance.

Damn, did she have to be so darned intuitive? Not quite ready to talk about that he bluffed with, "No one yet. But I'm hoping one day."

"Today just might be your lucky day!" she gushed.

The look he turned on her suggested that she'd just grown three heads. Before he could ask what she meant they turned and were pulling into the driveway of his grandparents' house. She must have been driving slowly so that they could talk longer, for an aging Buick was already parked under the shed. His grandparents had beaten them there.

As she turned the key and killed the ignition, he worriedly asked, "What do you mean?" They had just moments to conclude this conversation and he was *not* going into the house with it unfinished.

"Well, it seems Dad has taken a liking to one of your sister's roommates and invited him to Sunday dinner with us."

"And..." Michael prompted, already convinced he knew exactly what she was about to say.

"Well, he's gay!" she blurted as if it was the greatest thing in the world. "I'll bet he can teach you all you need to know." She winked and added, "And he's cute, too!"

"Yeah, I know," Michael replied, but only after his mother had gotten out of the car and was well out of earshot, knowing full well that it had to be Jay she was talking about. He groaned as his mind formed a clear image of just what he'd like Jay to teach him.

Sunday dinner at his grandparents' house was exactly as remembered: loud and boisterous with plenty of good food like fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, fried okra, buttermilk biscuits, and sweet corn that Grandma had canned herself. Without being told he knew there would be pie or cake at the end, too. He didn't comment on the small pitcher of tea placed beside his plate, knowing without asking it was decaffeinated as his doctor had recommended. Thankfully, Grandma had used sugar instead of a substitute. Some things he was simply unwilling to give up.

He'd barely talked with his grandparents at church since they were in the Seniors' Sunday school class and then sat with the choir during service. Apparently, his mom had clued them in about his anxiety attacks so they let him leave church and retreat into the relative safety of the car without detaining him, even managing to divert well-wishers. Michael had been reluctant to tell them himself, knowing they'd just worry even more than they already did.

Grandpa asked the blessing and 'Amen' was followed with, "Please pass the chicken," "Can I get some of that okra down here," and "Anyone want the last biscuit?" The table was so laden that passing the dishes was precarious. Finally, all plates were filled and they got down to the business of eating and socializing, the glue that held southern families together. Only Jay remained silent, merely picking at his meal with downcast eyes.

Michael found their close proximity distracting, his leg occasionally brushing against Jay's, causing an instant reaction from his easily provoked body. If Jay noticed, he had the good graces not to let it show. In fact, he was polite, soft spoken and the perfect dinner companion, if a little reserved.

Michael was beginning to think he had misinterpreted the man's earlier outgoing behavior when Angie abruptly spoke up. "Dern, Jay; what's wrong with you today? You haven't spoken two words and you've barely touched your chicken."

Grandma Ramsey leaned up from the end of the table to observe Jay's plate. "Is something wrong with the chicken, Jay? I could fix you something else, if you'd like."

"No, Grandma; everything's fine. I was just listening to everybody and got distracted." To prove his point he picked up the drumstick he'd been toying with and took an impressive bite. "Great as always, ma'am."

That seemed to satisfy the old woman and she relaxed back into her chair. Angie, however, watched Jay with intense scrutiny, possibly waiting for another *faux pas* she could comment on.

'She really does treat him like she treats me,' Michael thought to himself.

After dinner the ladies cleaned up while the men retired to the living room to explore that male bonding ritual of sports watching. NASCAR was on. That was one of the things Michael had dearly missed — watching the race with his grandpa.

Since Angie's comment about Jay's behavior, Michael noticed the subtle difference in how he held himself and acted. His captivating smile didn't make an appearance all afternoon. When Gramps excused himself during a commercial Michael finally had to ask, "Jay, have I done something to offend you? I mean, you're not acting yourself. I may not know you that well but Angie does. And...you never called me." He hated sounding so whiny, but once the words were out there was no taking them back.

"What? Of course I called you! You never returned the call so I thought maybe you just didn't want anything to do with Angie's pet fag." The hurt in Jay's voice was like a slap in the face. Then the words registered.

"You called me?"

"Yeah, Coach Anders gave me two tickets to the Hawks game and I thought maybe you might wanna go. But you never called me back."

Mouth falling open in shock, Michael grabbed his cell phone. Sure enough, the little icon on the screen displayed a message. He turned to Jay with horrified eyes. "Oh my God, Jay! I'm so sorry! I had other messages and thought that was it. I never even played yours!"

Jay's was rigid for just a moment, then all the tension seemed to ease out of him. "So you weren't blowing me off?" Michael couldn't help but notice how hopeful Jay looked, and found it most encouraging.

"Are you kidding? It was a Hawks game! Do you have any idea how long it's been..." He shut up with he realized how he sounded. "I mean, well..."

Suddenly that smile he'd been missing made an appearance. "That's okay. I know what you mean. It was just a little missed communication, yeah?"

"Yeah," Michael agreed, relieved that Jay was once more acting like he did the day they'd met.

"So, we still on for pizza?"

"Sure. But you should know that I have a hard time going out sometimes, it makes me really anxious. Does that bother you?"

Jay leaned up from where he'd been sitting and looked Michael squarely in the eyes. "You obviously have never met my family if you think a little thing like that is gonna bother me. Jeez, I think we have all the major phobias covered in my immediate family

alone. And don't even get me started on the cousins!" Jay was grinning and Michael took it to mean he was joking. Of course, even if he wasn't it couldn't be any worse than his own cousins.

Jay's smile and relaxed attitude were reassuring. "Don't worry about it, dude, I understand. Believe me, I do. I'd have taken good care of you."

That might be a double-entendre; in fact, Michael hoped so, but he had to take this slow. Just because things had gone well with coming out to his mother didn't mean he was ready to announce it to the world.

The mood was broken when Gramps returned. Jay leaned back into the loveseat as though he'd been there the whole time.

Grandpa looked at them both and asked, "Did I miss something?"

Michael's heart skipped a beat until he realized that his grandfather was asking about the race.

Chapter Six

Tuesday night found the two young men ensconced in front of the television in Michael's apartment, munching burgers and watching a reality show. As Michael didn't watch much prime-time television, his guest's slow Texas drawl provided a running commentary, filling Michael in on the details of the program that, apparently, Jay adored.

"So, they all have to live and work on this farm when most of them have never even seen a cow before," Jay concluded, the camera panning to show two inappropriately dressed young women attempting to clean a stall while wearing high heels and very tight blue jeans. Michael would have bet good money that their breasts were what was known around his part of the country as 'store bought.' One kept falling off her own shoes while the other bemoaned a broken fingernail. They'd never last a minute at his grandfather's place.

The men on the show weren't faring much better and they both laughed as Maurice, an aspiring model, was chased out of the barn by a small pink piglet.

Animated expressions and hand gestures accompanied Jay's dialog, a drastic change from what Michael was used to; even Angie seemed reserved in comparison. The enthusiasm was contagious and Michael soon found Jay far more interesting to watch than the program.

"Oh! Look!" Jay exclaimed, pointing at the screen. "That's Lisa; she's a Wall Street broker. She's gonna win this thing, I just know it." He cocked his head attentively as the meticulously attired blonde scolded the two hopeless cases in the stall, and Michael found himself jealous of Lisa, wishing those dark eyes looked at him with such single-minded focus.

Occasionally a flirtatious grin would flash his way, or he'd be on the receiving end of a little light teasing, but that was just Jay; it wasn't intended the way Michael wanted it to be. Several times he'd started to say something and let his interest be known, but whenever he opened his mouth he lost his nerve and the moment passed. It was all he could do not to reach out and touch sometimes; only fear of rejection kept him from acting on those impulses.

So he contented himself with what time he had, enjoying the easy friendship they were building. Besides, watching Jay watch TV was quality entertainment, in his opinion. At the end of the show when Jay uttered an 'awwwww' at Maurice snoozing in the hay barn, piglet cuddled in his arms, Michael wanted to do the same to Jay.

All too soon, however, his guest yawned a stretched, saying, "Well, I'd best get going, I've got a test in the morning."

Walking Jay through the dimly lit store to the front door, the words were poised on the tip of Michael's tongue to ask him out the next night, but he froze, unable to get them out. In the end he said nothing.

Jay stood at the door, looking expectant, but what he was waiting for Michael couldn't tell. Finally Jay said, "I had fun, we'll have to do it again sometime." Then he was gone.

The moment was right, and he'd blown it. Michael stood there watching the tail lights of Jay's car disappearing into the night, kicking himself for the missed opportunity.

On Friday night Michael was coerced into leaving his sanctuary by his well-intentioned sister, though he couldn't understand how partying with a bunch of college kids was supposed to be good for him. Angie wouldn't take 'no' for an answer, however, so he reluctantly agreed to attend the party at the Zoo. The deciding factor had been his mom's threat to burn down his apartment, bookstore be damned, if he didn't leave it occasionally.

Out of his comfort zone, not in the mood to socialize, he sat in the crowded living room feeling alone and out of place among his sister's carefree roommates and their guests. Angie only made matters worse by her constant but well-intentioned nagging, urging him to dance, have a beer, meet someone and get laid. He smiled sadly and shook his head. If a thought entered his sister's brain it didn't slow down on its way out of her mouth. It got her in trouble sometimes, but you always knew where you stood with her. That was refreshing in a world where you had to measure your words for fear they'd be used against you, yet he still wished she'd learn to curb her tongue, at least occasionally.

All around him people were laughing, dancing, and enjoying themselves, and there he sat brooding on the couch, wondering how soon he could leave without appearing rude. Though he was unwilling to admit it, part of the problem was that Jay wasn't there. The real reason he had given in and agreed to attend at all was in hopes of seeing the handsome Texan, even if he lacked the courage to do more than look and enjoy the company and witty conversation.

Tilting his head back, beer bottle poised at his lips, he allowed the cool brew to slide down his throat; the liquid quenching his thirst and the alcohol quenching his pain. Temporarily, that is. With the consumption of alcohol came the loosening of inhibitions until, without his control or knowledge, he had descended into that place where he dared not go sober. The conversation, music, and dancing dulled and faded into the background until only the base beat of the music remained, morphing into a more regular whoop-whoop-whoop of helicopter blades, or the tat-tat-tat of firing rounds. His breathing deepened and his heart raced as the downward spiral carried him away — carried him back to *that day*.

It had begun as any other: inspection, breakfast, mounting up and heading out; the usual tension-laced small talk while breaking and moving camp. The men packed their things as neatly and efficiently as they could, used to the routine, knowing the drill. Gun in hand, he had joined his comrades in the waiting vehicles, heading off to yet another destination that he couldn't pronounce, so sick of it all. He was proud to serve his country and, for the most part, he liked the guys in his unit. But he was ready for a change of scenery — he was ready to go home.

Normally, he would have been closer to the head of the convoy, but that day, for reasons he couldn't recall, he had been riding further back. He didn't remember much about the hours leading up to the event — maybe he'd been chatting with those seated near him, or perhaps they were all quiet, nervous and tense, sensing that something wasn't quite right. Whatever had been happening, though, ceased to be important when *that moment of that day* occurred.

All he remembered was chaos and confusion. Shots fired and explosions boomed while angry voices barked out orders. Wondering aloud what was happening, some of the men unwisely unbuckled their seatbelts, hurrying to the exit of the halted vehicle to see what was happening. Then the world turned upside down, throwing him and his companions violently against the top and sides of the transport, his seatbelt falling uselessly away. The screams of the men were deafening.

When the vehicle stopped rolling, lying on its side, his first thoughts were for his friends and frantically he searched for Ryan among the jumbled, thrashing bodies. Somehow he managed to make it outside, watching in horror as the small blond corporal ran hell bent for leather toward the front of the convoy and straight toward a hail of enemy gunfire. Without thought for himself, he launched into a flying tackle, throwing his body over the young man who would have willingly run headlong into death in a futile attempt to save someone who was even then beyond mortal help. Ryan fought for all he was worth but Michael, bigger and stronger, kept him pinned to the sand — wet with gasoline and the water they were carrying — doing his best to convince his friend that they had to stay put.

Unfortunately, Ryan was beyond understanding and Michael was forced to tune out the pleas, cries, and cursing, knowing that if he relented his captive would be dead within seconds. He, too, worried about Jimmy, and silently sent up a prayer that his friend was safe.

Gas fumes stinging his eyes, his battered chest and side burning in agony from as yet unnamed injuries, he regained enough wits to know they had to get the hell out of there before a spark blew them both to kingdom come. Operating on instinct and adrenalin, he dragged the struggling soldier free of the wet sand. Once away from the immediate danger, partially shielded by the overturned vehicle, he paused to take a breath. Suddenly a deafening roar followed a 'whoosh,' shaking the ground and causing his makeshift shelter to teeter precariously. Without conscious thought he threw himself on top of Ryan, bracing against the burning debris that pelted them unmercifully, pieces of hot,

flying metal stinging his arms where they hit. Blocking out the pain, he focused on shielding the small body beneath him, protecting the man he loved like a brother. Rationally he knew that it only lasted a few brief moments, but at the time it seemed an eternity of smoke and fire raining from the sky.

His overwhelmed mind didn't register the exact moment when false quiet descended, or when the body beneath his ceased fighting and began shaking, going into shock. Months of training kicked in and he raised his weapon to perform the duty for which he'd so meticulously prepared, all other thoughts fading away but one — defend his position.

Time lost all meaning as he focused with single-minded determination and carried out his duty. He couldn't say how many shots he fired or if any claimed the life of an enemy. He fired until his bullets and energy were spent. There was no fight left in him when hands slipped beneath his bruised and burned arms, raising him from the ground and peeling his fingers from his firearm. Another soldier knelt in the dust and lifted his motionless charge.

When he finally regained his feet with the aid of a sturdy arm wrapped around his shoulders, a medic stood before him. Though the man's lips moved, Michael couldn't hear the words. It was then that he realized that, in the middle of a raging battle, he was surrounded by silence. Shaking his head as much to clear the cobwebs within as to convey that he didn't understand, he wrapped his arms protectively around his injured ribs and swayed on unsteady feet. Warm wetness trickled down his neck and under the grimy collar of his shirt, and when he reached up to wipe it away his hand came away covered in blood. Suddenly light-headed, he grabbed the medic's shoulder, leaving a bloody handprint on the man's uniform.

Grim and tight-lipped, the medic took a firm hold on Michael's arm, tugging him toward a waiting Humvee, picking the way through a veritable mine-field of debris. From the looks of it, more than just one vehicle had been hit. The odor of burning rubber and charred metal stung Michael's eyes and throat, choking him as they passed through a thick cloud of acrid, greasy smoke. Emerging from the other side and coughing to clear seared lungs, he saw a uniform lying on the ground. Confused and disoriented, he paused and studied it, wondering how it got there. Then he saw another, and another, and he knew — and wished to God that he didn't. Those weren't just uniforms, they were soldiers! Staring down into sightless green eyes that he'd seen crinkled in laughter just that morning at breakfast, he screamed with a voice he could no longer hear. These were members of his own platoon, his friends, the guys he'd laughed with and talked to just hours before.

In a panic-induced fight or flight, he fought against the medic's hold, screaming and struggling. He had no idea where he was going, only that he had to get away, had to run. An invisible vise clamped around his chest, making it impossible to breathe. Struggling for breath and fighting for all he was worth, he suddenly realized the medic wasn't the only one fighting back. In fact, the medic had released his hold altogether and was now frantically inserting a syringe into a bottle. Nameless, faceless ones were holding

Michael's arm immobile when he felt the stinging bite of the needle. One second, two seconds; time stood still.

Suddenly, the constricting bands around his chest loosened, allowing him to breathe again. Though still disoriented, he no longer felt like fighting. Once more the medic tried talking only to give up, shaking his head in frustration. Hands caught Michael's arm again and led him, unresisting, to a waiting vehicle. Three others were already there, sweat-stained and filthy. Emerson, ever-present glasses noticeably missing, sat stony-faced, eyes focused straight ahead. Rehnquist's face radiated sheer terror, normal bravado vanquished by what the enemy had wrought. Gone were the arrogant sneer and biting comments about the locals and their technologically inferior attempts at warfare.

It was the small, lost individual positioned between them that caught and held Michael's attention, for only then did he recognize the young man he'd fought so hard to protect. A dark bruise marred Ryan's cheek and blood trickled from a deep gash over one eye as he rocked to and fro, cradling his left arm. The face that was normally full of joy and mischief was a mask of grief, the red-rimmed eyes hollow and empty. Without being told Michael knew exactly what that look meant: Jimmy was one of the fallen. Without intercession Ryan would have joined him. Those haunted eyes turned toward Michael, clearly asking, "Why?"

He never learned if question was why Jimmy was dead or why Ryan had been stopped from joining him, but when those pain-filled eyes locked onto Michael's he couldn't turn away. To his great relief, whatever had been inside the hypodermic took effect and he lost consciousness.

With all the horror of that day, it wasn't the bodies, the intense pain of broken ribs, or even the gut-clenching fear that Michael remembered. It was those beautiful, sky-blue eyes. In his nightmares he saw them as they were at that moment; devoid of all life and happiness, begging for something...what, he didn't know.

The other survivors could only imagine that the young corporal had lost a friend and fellow kid from Arkansas whom he'd known most of his life. But Michael knew better. Ryan Jackson had, in his own words, 'lost my reason for living.'

"Hey, you all right?"

Michael bolted up from the couch, fist ready to fly. Gentle but firm hands wrapped around his clenched fingers, urging them back down to his side.

"Dude, you okay? You don't look so good."

The anguished blue eyes disappeared from his mind as Michael returned from a personal trip to Hell, replaced by warm, concerned brown ones. Shit. Here was the last person he

wanted to witness a flashback. Shock and panic from that long-ago day remained, as it always did when this happened, daring him to shake it off. The adrenaline flowing in his veins sought an outlet and he flushed in embarrassment at just how close he'd come to physical violence.

A quick glance around the room assured him that Jay was the only one who'd noticed the moment of weakness, and he said a silent prayer of thanks for small favors.

Piercing dark eyes narrowed, their unwavering gaze hardening with determination. Just loudly enough to be heard over the music, Jay suggested, "Why don't we go outside and get some air? I think we could both use a break right about now."

Yelling at the room in general, "Be right back!" Jay stepped ahead and created a path through the crowd of gyrating bodies. Angie's raised brow was answered by a wink and, "Gonna go take Shasta out; your brother is gonna keep me company."

Angie just nodded, turning back to her conversation with Victor.

Jay wrapped his hand around Michael's upper arm, the gesture an unwitting reminder of the medic from all those months ago. Neither said a word as they made their way to the back door.

"Come on, Shasta," Jay stopped and called over his shoulder.

The energetic retriever crawled out from under a couch, ball in mouth, tripping everyone in her path as she cut a swath across the room, oblivious to everything but the toy clenched in her teeth and the prospect of going outside. Her ever-wagging tail wreaked havoc on the drinks arranged on the coffee table, leaving chaos and spilled beer in her wake.

When they stepped onto the porch Jay closed the door and hurried to the screen door, the excited dog bounding through the moment it was opened. In a flurry of blond fur she leapt down the steps and into the fenced yard, disappearing from view. Jay casually turned and sprawled on an old wooden swing, precariously suspended from two rusted chains. He patted the seat next to him invitingly. Michael ignored it, leaning his stocky body against the doorframe instead. As much as he didn't want to be inside right now, being outside was still hard to handle.

Jay set the swing to rocking violently as he stood and crossed the porch again to pull the screen door closed. Then he loosened the bamboo shades over the windows, providing the illusion of walls. Michael could still see outside through the screen in the door, but felt more secure with most of the outdoors hidden from view. He nodded his thanks to Jay who smiled nonchalantly and sprawled across the swing.

Michael stood rigid in the doorway, deeply embarrassed at what had nearly happened, but grateful for the rescue. Still, the timing couldn't have been worse, for as much he longed to see Jay and be alone with him, this wasn't quite what he'd had in mind.

Sullenly he gazed out over the yard, softly illuminated by the glow of a street lamp. A haze of shimmering fog created an ethereal landscape, limiting his view to the dilapidated wooden fence encircling the property. Breathing slowly and deeply, in and out, he willed his racing heart and jangled nerves to calm. "Sorry about that," he whispered into the shadows. "I would say it won't happen again but I'm in no position to make promises I can't keep." He had no idea why he was confessing, he only knew that at the moment he desperately needed someone to talk to.

Jay casually pushed the swing with one foot, staring out into the backyard. After a moment he asked, "Care to talk about it?"

The "no" came out of Michael's mouth without a thought. It didn't seem to bother Jay, however. He continued dragging his foot against the uneven wooden boards of the porch, relaxed and unhurried, seemingly unconcerned that his roommate's brother had come close to taking his head off.

Finally Michael said, "Something happened....over there. The doctors say it's post traumatic stress." He stared down at the floor, scuffing the toe of his tennis shoe against the smoothly worn boards. "They say it's common, that it happens sometimes..." he trailed off, half expecting Jay to remember something that needed immediate attention and run away.

The chains creaked as the swing tilted back and forth in time with the steady thumping beat from the living room speakers. Only after the song ended and the music faded did Jay say, "One of my cousins came back with a similar problem."

Michael looked up, blue eyes meeting brown, expecting to see pity or judgment. Instead he saw warmth and understanding. Jay's drawl made the words soothing. "It's nothing to be ashamed of. You served your country, you did a good thing. But you were wounded just as surely as those that come home with physical wounds. Just give it time, man, it'll heal." Michael wanted to believe him.

"I just want to forget," he whispered quietly.

"Yeah, but in forgetting the bad you sometimes forget the good, too. You just have to balance them out and come to an acceptance." Jay rose gracefully and closed the distance between them until they stood toe to toe, nearly touching. A warm, callused hand reached out, cupping Michael's cheek, turning his face up and forcing their eyes to meet. "It's okay," Jay breathed, the words a quiet purr. "I may not ever fully understand what happened over there, but I do understand that you're hurting and I'm sorry for that. If there's anything I can do..."

Michael, just plain tired of being lonely, leaned in and planted his lips against his comforter's. "Ummppppphhh," was all Jay managed to say, but after a moment he responded, long, warm fingers easing around Michael's neck to caress his closely cropped hair. Jay's touch was gentle but firm, secure without restraining. When those lips parted Michael's tongue invaded, finding Jay's and stroking with wild abandon. It wasn't his first experience with a man, but it was the first time he'd kissed one. Ryan had shared only body and grief — both kisses and heart were reserved for another.

But this wasn't just any man he was kissing, this was Jay and heat swept down into Michael like liquid fire, leaving him hard and throbbing. His hands found Jay's ass, enveloping a double handful of firm flesh and pulling the man's warm body closer, moaning in satisfaction when Jay's body responded to him the same way that he was responding to Jay.

Primal instinct overrode any objections his mind might have had and Michael rubbed against the tempting firmness that lay just out of reach behind the denim of Jay's jeans. Answering moans interrupted his thoughts, bringing him crashing back down to reality. Eyes wide with horror, he quickly jumped away.

"God, I am so sorry..." he stammered, body shaking. Suddenly he felt more alone than ever. *Oh my God, what have I just done?*

"Shhh....." Jay whispered, placing two fingers lightly over Michael's trembling lips. "Don't say anything. It doesn't matter. I like you, Michael, and I want to be your friend. If there's something I can do to help you, all you need do is ask. And if this is what will help you...." He left the sentence hanging, the invitation open-ended as he backed away and languidly stretched both arms high over his head. His shirt rose, displaying a tightly muscled abdomen and the barest hint of a treasure trail. The view teased for only a moment before disappearing under the hem of his black T-shirt. "I think I'll go see if there's any pizza left," Jay said. "You come back in when you're ready."

Jay crossed the porch and opened the screen door, whistling sharply. A golden blur bounded in, chuffing excitedly around the ball in her mouth. Jay patted Shasta's head and spoke softly in Spanish, then returned to where Michael stood by the door.

Michael jumped when soft lips brushed his ear. Warm breath caressed his lobe as Jay crooned softly, "If you ever need someone to talk to, I'm here. Anything you need me for, I'll be here." He stepped back, his fathomless dark eyes boring into Michael's. "Whatever you need, no strings attached." With that Jay opened the door quietly and followed the dog inside. He turned and paused for a moment, gazing meaningfully at Michael before closing the physical door behind him, leaving the metaphorical one wide open and welcoming.

Michael sat on the swing, caressing the smooth, worn boards and thinking how Jay had looked casually sprawled across them. He didn't know what possessed him to act on the feelings that had been building ever since he'd come home and could only assume that alcohol and the stress from the flashback had left him vulnerable. When the object of his desires had appeared, close enough to reach out and touch, he just couldn't help himself.

Jay hadn't pushed him away. *"No, stupid, you did that yourself,"* he berated himself.

With a sigh he closed his eyes, wishing he could hide from the world. He'd really done it now; he'd let his guard down and out came his true self. Suddenly he had a greater appreciation for that poor man from church who'd fought so hard to remain in the closet. It couldn't have been easy to fake a hetero lifestyle. Look how quickly he'd fallen when faced with temptation.

There was no going back now, and if Michael were being totally honest with himself he didn't want to. Jay was what he wanted, regardless of the cost. He'd recently learned the hard way how precious life was, and had no intention of hiding and then spending the rest of his life wondering what might have been. He knew what he wanted and intended to go after it. Driven by that thought, he left the relative security of the porch and followed Jay into the house.

The problem, however, was getting Jay alone so they could talk. He'd come back in intending to drag the man off somewhere private, but Jay had walked away and begun a talking with someone else. He waited, and tried again with the same result. Damn it! That was one hell of a kiss on the porch, what had changed? Why was Jay avoiding him now?

Face it, Ritter, you're no prize. He can't deal with your baggage.

There was no point in arguing with that. Disappointment was a bitter pill to swallow but it went down easier when chased with beer, so that's just what Michael did. Hurt and confused, he gave up and resigned himself to an evening that concluded with him going home alone to his apartment.

One beer turned to two, and two to three. Why did he have to settle for a lonely evening? He had as much right as anyone here to have a good time. Pushing his inhibitions out the proverbial window, Michael waded into the mass of writhing bodies and began to dance.

Chapter Seven

The Michael who returned to the party only vaguely resembled the one Jay thought he knew. Closely watching as the man threw back several beers in quick succession, he was quite surprised when Michael then hit the dance floor. Gyrating bodies parted to let him in, and the handsome blond danced with the group, never settling on any one person. Jay was in awe — he had no idea straight country boys could dance with such reckless abandon, like it didn't matter who was watching.

However, others were watching: Angie, who always looked out for her brother, and Jay, who'd named himself unofficial chaperone for anyone incapable of making rational decisions due to alcohol consumption. However, Angie had raised a suspicious eyebrow when he'd returned alone, and her continued scrutiny kept him from approaching Michael directly, though he was dying to resume their conversation.

What had happened on the porch was both the answer to his prayers and his worst nightmare. Sure, he'd harbored secret dreams about the hunky brother of his best friend, but those were just dreams. That kiss was another matter. Any attempts to seduce a straight man could only end in pain, physically or emotionally, and Jay had a hard and fast rule against involvement with someone who was unsure of their sexuality or just experimenting. Michael might prove to be the exception. If he could ease the former soldier's pain in any way he'd gladly do it. After their earlier encounter and Michael's subsequent withdrawal, stepping back and allowing some space for thinking things through seemed prudent. He'd left the invitation open, now he just needed to be patient and see if it was accepted.

Then Jay noticed that he and Angie weren't the only ones watching. Terry was even now making his way into the mass of bodies, easing towards Michael as though it were an accident that found them pressed so closely together and not a calculated move.

Jay watched his sly former lover subtly working the buff blonde away from the other dancers. Caught up in the pounding rhythm and the moment, Michael was oblivious. When Terry's hand, none too discretely, slipped beneath Michael's shirt to caress his stomach, the rules of the game changed. Jay needed to step up and stake a claim or Terry would beat him to it. Terry only wanted another conquest, and a quick fuck was not what Michael needed right now. And, altruistic motives aside, if the straight boy was going to walk on the wild side, Jay would be the one playing tour guide.

He growled when Terry reached out and fondled Michael's ass. Michael, lost in his own little world, didn't pull away. That was dangerous considering who he was dancing with. Terry didn't believe in subtlety, and would take anything short of a slap as encouragement. Their dancing looked more like something Jay saw in the gay clubs in Atlanta than a house party in Cookesville, and he pushed his way through unyielding bodies, trying to get there in time. He groaned aloud as Michael turned and left the room, not a bit surprised when a grinning Terry followed a split second later. This was also something he'd seen, and participated in on occasion, in Atlanta. Was the guy born

yesterday? Someone needed to leave a copy of the Gay Handbook lying around so dumb straight boys didn't blunder into situations like this.

As self-appointed guardian Jay quietly followed them into the kitchen and positioned himself just inside the door. He'd keep his distance and, if the inadvertent come-on was an innocent mistake, he'd take care of it. However, if Michael accepted Terry's advances then there was nothing he could do but walk away, though it just might kill him. He watched quietly from the shadows as Terry snagged a beer, bracing one arm against the refrigerator door, effectively corralling his quarry who had just retrieved a bottle of water.

"Hey, man, want another beer?" the predator asked.

"Nah, I'm good. I think I've about had enough already." Michael looked genuinely puzzled at the arm blocking his escape.

"Aww...one more won't hurt. You don't have to drive home, you can just stay here." Placing the beer on the counter, Terry dropped all pretense and boldly embraced Michael. "We have plenty of room," he purred, lips only a breath away from his captive's, the suggestive tone confirming just which room he was offering. Jay's protective instincts — finely honed by a lifetime spent as an older brother to six sisters — rose in all their fierce glory.

Clearing his throat loudly in warning, he rounded the corner just as Terry pressed the beer into Michael's hand, arm blatantly claiming possession of the man's body. "He said he's had enough," Jay growled, emerging from the shadows.

"Jay!" Michael exclaimed, jumping away from Terry, the relief obvious in his eyes.

So, the blunder was an innocent one, after all. The twisting in Jay's gut lessened considerably.

Terry, unaware of the change of circumstance, slowly turned his head to face his challenger as if not at all surprised to find him there "He's free, white, and twenty-one," he stated flatly, a self-satisfied smile on his face. Jay was certain that the added, "He can make up his own mind," didn't just refer to the beer.

"He did decide, asshole; he said no more." Jay leaned against the stove and crossed his arms across his chest, silently sending the message that he didn't plan on going anywhere. He clenched well-defined biceps, a primitive warning that he'd become physical if need be.

Terry smiled wickedly, unimpressed. "This doesn't concern you, Ortiz; we've been over for months. I'm free to do what, and who, I please. Besides, he invited me here, didn't you, Michael?"

“What!? No I didn’t!” Michael denied emphatically, eyes wide in disbelief.

“Yes, you did!” chorused Terry and Jay in unison.

“No, I didn’t,” Michael mumbled under his breath. Jay and Terry both turned their attention to the fight for dominance, momentarily ignoring their prize.

Jay smiled and it wasn’t at all pleasant. “This isn’t about you, Terry. This is about who you’ve been pawing. I’m not letting you take advantage of him. He doesn’t bat for our team and doesn’t know what he’s doing.” Turning to Michael, Jay feigned nonchalance and asked, “You do realize that within oh, say...fifteen minutes Terry here intended to have you face down on his bed while he carved your name on his bedpost, right?”

Michael’s stunned look assured Jay that sex with Terry wasn’t what he’d intended. If fact, he gave up any pretense of good manners and fled to the other side of the room, hiding behind Jay, who smiled at the unintentional compliment.

Though no explanation was owed, Jay wanted to ensure that Terry understood the situation completely. “Look, Terry, he’s got some issues. They’re not mine to share, but suffice it to say that he’s not up to being a plaything. He’s got too much on his plate already to deal with something like that.”

Terry assumed a defensive stance. “Well, I didn’t even suspect he might be interested at all until a little while ago. Hell, I thought he was straight. Then tonight, well, you saw him; he was definitely coming on to me out there.” It was so like the Terry to blame his victim. Another reason they had broken up: *nothing* was ever Terry’s fault.

Feeling a warm hand on his shoulder, Jay wondered why Michael hadn’t run screaming yet. However, it wasn’t the blond at his back that he wanted to send running, so he played his trump card. “I get the feeling that’s what most people thought, including Angie.”

The name dropping had the desired effect. Terry gave him that wide-eyed, helpless expression that had seemed so endearing back when they’d been dating. That ‘I’ve-just-fucked-up-can-you-help-me-fix-it?’ look. The problem was, Jay had spent the next few months doing just that — fixing Terry’s fuck-ups. The man needed a keeper, not a boyfriend, and Jay liked his relationships less high-maintenance.

It was very telling that a macho guy like Terry was terrified of Angie. She might pretend to be a helpless southern belle on occasion, but everyone knew who called the shots in the house and they all depended on her to keep the peace. Angie Cooper was the law, as far as the Zoo was concerned, and if it weren’t for her the arrogant prick would have been out on his ass a long time ago. Behind his back the rest of the housemates called Terry “Angie’s Stray.”

Jay dismissed him with a wave of his hand and, with undisguised relief, Terry fled back to the party with a muttered, “Sorry, man,” leaving Jay, as usual, to clean up the mess.

Angie burst in moments later but, at a quelling look from Jay, raised her hands in submission and left the way she'd come. She might be the Marshall but Jay was her deputy, though he knew she'd expect a full report later. Right now, though, Michael was more important. Angie would just have to understand.

"Sit down before you fall down," Jay ordered, pulling two chairs from under the kitchen table and flopping into one.

Slowly Michael eased into the remaining chair, eyes downcast. "What the fuck just happened?"

Now that was a very good question. "You gotta watch yourself around Terry; he's not that bad a guy, but he's an opportunist. He saw you were drinking and...well...kinda loose, and took the chance. And yeah, you were sending out some signals."

Michael had just opened his mouth to speak when the kitchen was invaded by thirsty partiers. After making half-hearted conversation with his housemates and sending them on their way, Jay turned his attention back to Michael.

"Why did he think I would... well, you know?" Michael asked softly.

"Like he said; he didn't at first." Jay's couldn't believe the man's naïveté. He stood up, towering over Michael. "Jesus, Michael, you were practically advertising out there! He just took that chance to see what would happen."

Michael flinched. "Advertising?" he asked in a small voice.

Jay sighed and paced the room in agitation. "You were making it pretty clear that you were available."

"I was?"

Could a brother of Angie's really be that naïve? Nobody was *that* naïve. "Look, dude, you're not in your little hetero world here, you left Kansas a long time ago."

At Michael's befuddled look, Jay explained. "Imagine a gay bar full of men looking for one thing." Ignoring Michael's blush he continued, "They're dancing; or rather they're bumping and grinding against each other like you were doing out there. Anyway, one guy leaves and the other follows him to the back room."

Michael's startled expression told just how ignorant he was of such matters. Damn it, he really was that naïve, after all. "Congratulations, straight boy," Jay said in exasperation, "you just issued your first 'meet-me-in-the-back-room-for-a-blowjob' invitation and it was accepted."

At the genuine horror in those big blue eyes, Jay regretted being so brutal and attempted to soften the blow. “Look, Terry is an opportunistic prick but he wouldn’t have come in here if he didn’t think you were open to the idea. He’s an asshole at times, but he plays fair.”

Blond head sagging, Michael brought to mind a small child being scolded. Jay hated being so hard on him, especially so soon after his earlier episode, but Michael needed to know the dangerous ground he was walking. If it had been some others Jay knew instead of Terry, they might not have backed down so easily.

Willing himself to be patient, he took a deep breath and attempted to explain. “Look, Michael, a few hours ago I didn’t think you’d be open to suggestions, either. You certainly didn’t do or say anything to indicate it, at least not until out on the porch a little while ago. It’s like you flipped some kind of switch, because when you came back in you were suddenly on the prowl. And you straight boys are dumb as a bag of hammers when you wanna be, you know that?”

“I’m sorry.” It was so softly spoken that Jay scarcely heard it.

“For what?” He stopped pacing to look at Michael, guilt mounting when he noticed how small and lost the man looked — not an easy feat for someone that large.

“For keeping you away from the party and setting you at odds with Terry, for what nearly happened... I didn’t mean to be issuing or accepting any kind of invitation. At least, not to him.”

Jay chose to ignore the softly mumbled afterthought, though the comment renewed the knife-in-his-gut-being-twisted feeling. Reining in his jealousy, he recognized the truth — he had no claim to Michael, as much as he might wish otherwise. Finally, he sighed and asked, “Why should you apologize to me? Like he said, it was your choice to make.” Even if that choice knotted Jay’s guts and made him want to rip Terry’s handsome blond head from his shoulders.

“I didn’t intend for him to follow me in here. We were dancing and I got thirsty. Next thing I know, there he is. I never realized that he’d see it as an offer. It’s not him I wanted, anyway,” Michael blurted, shocked expression betraying that he hadn’t intended to say that aloud.

The remark, coupled with Michael’s earlier comment, caused Jay’s hold on his jealousy to slip. So there was someone Michael wanted. Well, that was just too bad because he knew everyone at the house tonight and had no intention of sucking it up while whoever it was paraded Michael around like a prize, taunting Jay with what he couldn’t have. “Oh, yeah?” he sneered. “Well, maybe you should tell me just who it is and I’ll tell you what’s wrong with them and why you should stay the hell away from them!”

He never expected to hear, “You, Jay. I want you.”

Jay quickly hid his shock as their conversation was again interrupted. Only, this time, the invading revelers didn't seem to want to leave and it was all Jay could do not to scream at them to get out.

He and Michael needed to talk. They couldn't use his room, that would be too obvious and, knowing Danny, his roommate, it was probably occupied. There was too much of a chance for interruptions on the porch, so that left only one other choice for a private venue. Grabbing Michael by the arm, Jay dragged him out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

"There," Jay said, releasing his death grip on Michael's wrist. "Now we can talk."

Harsh, glaring lights flooded the small bathroom and Michael blinked hard, eyes adjusting to the sudden brightness. He heard, rather than saw, the door close and the lock engage.

"Look, dude, are you playing me?"

Michael's eyes widened in surprise at the obviously upset Texan. "Playing? What the hell are you talking about, Jay?" What had he done? Surely he hadn't misread Jay's interest? That confession had taken every bit of his nerve; Jay was supposed to be happy, damn it, and kissing him into oblivion, not questioning his motives!

Arm braced against the wall by Michael's head, Jay growled, "Wanna know what it's like with another man? Are you just satisfying your curiosity before you run back, safe and sound, to your little straight world? I know I promised whatever you needed, but if you're just looking for someone to experiment with and aren't really particular about the who, then you've come to the wrong place."

"No, it's not like that!" Michael gasped, body trembling. He hadn't fully recovered from his earlier adrenalin overload and, though he knew deep down that Jay wouldn't hurt him, a tendril of fear crept up his spine.

Jay's expression became less frightening, although an undercurrent of anger remained. Voice somewhat calmer, he asked, "Well then tell me, Michael; what is it like?"

Hastily seeking the right words to redeem himself, all that came out was, "I'm gay."

If eyes were the windows to the soul, his were a pair of sliding glass doors, no curtain in sight. His deepest, darkest thoughts had nowhere to hide as those dark eyes bored into his, exposing every secret. Without warning Jay swooped in and delivered a scorching, brutal kiss. Michael's cock grew instantly hard.

Jay pulled away, reaching down and squeezing the engorged flesh. Michael moaned, welcoming the unexpected contact. Jay jumped back as if burned. “You really aren’t playing, are you?”

Michael shook his head.

Those dark eyes continued to study him and, while Jay’s expression was unreadable, at least it was no longer angry. “Sorry,” he whispered “I didn’t mean to do that.”

Michael closed his eyes and let out the breath he was holding. If he looked at Jay now he’d be too unnerved to speak and there were things that desperately needed to be said. “It’s okay,” he said, willing that hand to return and finish what it started. Maybe it was time for a little blunt honesty. “It’s not like I haven’t been leading you on.”

Jay no longer accused Michael but defended him. “No, it’s not okay. I knew how things were for you — how they are. I pushed. When you caught me off guard like that out on the porch I dared to get my hopes up. Why didn’t you tell me you were gay?”

If he looked at Jay directly he was going to attack, so Michael opened his eyes to stare at their reflections in the mirror that hung over the sink instead, heart beating so loudly he was amazed the man couldn’t hear it. “I’m not out and planned on leaving this God-forsaken place before that ever happened,” Michael said.

Jay looked shocked. “You’re not out to anyone? Not even your family?”

Michael shrugged. “Mom knows.”

“But not Angie?”

“I plan on telling her, I just haven’t had the chance. Besides, she’d too busy with school right now and she’d just fuss over me.” Not to mention meddle in his life, fixing him up with every eligible gay male she’d even remotely heard of and badgering him incessantly about his love life.

“That’s true,” Jay agreed. “I still can’t believe she doesn’t know. Y’all seem to be so close.”

Michael loved his sister, but now was not the time for discussing her. Now was the time to get back to the kissing and groping. Still, he pushed aside his body’s demands long enough to explain, “We are, but I’m just coming to terms with this myself. And, like I said, I didn’t intend to come out here.”

“Well then, why did you? As far as I know everyone thinks you’re straight. Why jeopardize that, especially if you plan on leaving?”

In answer, Michael leaned in and locked their mouths together, pouring in every bit of his desire and longing. Slowly he pulled away and leaned back against the wall, saying with his eyes what he couldn't say with words.

"Me. You came out for me," Jay said quietly, voice filled with awe. It wasn't a question.

"Yes," Michael confirmed. "I told you downstairs who I wanted."

They stood gazing at each other for a long moment before Jay replied, "I'll accept that. But I have to ask you this; you can tell me it's none of my business if you want, but had you ever kissed a man before tonight?"

"No." It seemed he was doing okay with honesty, so Michael decided to stick with what worked.

It stopped working. "That's what I thought. Look, you're obviously dealing with some pretty heavy shit tonight and I took advantage of that. I'm no better than Terry. I just hope I haven't ruined our friendship by pushing this."

He'd come too far for Jay to go noble on him, so Michael shut him up the best way he knew how. Heart hammering and his few remaining inhibitions screaming at him to run, he tilted his head and sealed their lips together, effectively crossing the point of no return.

Kissing Jay was different from kissing a girl, the unfamiliar tickle of whiskers a reminder that he was, in fact, kissing a man. Kissing Jay. It was exciting beyond his wildest dreams. No girl had ever made him feel like this.

If he were going to Hell the least he could do was enjoy the ride. When a low moan escaped he wondered who'd made it, then decided it didn't matter. Jay's body was rigid and unyielding for a moment before finally relaxing.

Abruptly Jay stepped back, panting hard. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Two."

"Well, you're not drunk." A soft smile played across Jay's lips. He studied Michael with a critical eye and then stretched out one hand. Expression solemn, he said, "If that's how you truly feel, and you mean it when you say you want me, then allow me to escort you from your closet."

Michael placed his hand palm-down on Jay's. Tugging gently, Jay forced him to take a step forward, then another, smile widening with each step. When they were finally pressed body to body, Michael drew a quick breath, only to exhale forcefully as teeth and lips descending on his sensitive throat. Jay pushed him back against the wall.

“Oh, God!” Michael moaned, lost in indescribable feelings, cock pressed painfully hard against the front seam of his jeans. He’d only had one sexual experience with another man, but that had been enough for him to know what had been missing with girls. That experience, eye-opening as it was, paled in comparison to this.

Awkwardly uncertain of where to put his hands, he finally relaxed and did what came naturally; wrapping both arms around Jay and grasping the man’s firm ass, pulling him close. When it came down to it, Michael’s body knew what it wanted — instinct was all that was necessary. He moaned and resumed that wonderful rubbing that had started on the porch. Jay was as tall as he was and quite muscular; he could grab and squeeze and even bite without worrying about hurting him. And they were alone; no one would ever know what went on in this little room unless one of them told. With that thought the last of his resistance fell. Letting go was exhilarating and Michael stopped caring about what might happen next week, tomorrow, or even in an hour.

All he knew was it felt good, it felt right, and he didn’t want to stop. So caught up in feeling, the words spoken softly against his skin nearly didn’t register. “Oh God, *Querido*. I’ve waited so long for this!” Other unintelligible encouragements were drowned out by moans as Jay introduced him to places that he didn’t know could excite him so.

“Tell me you want me, tell me you’ll let me...” Michael froze, shocked back into reality. He wasn’t ready to be on the receiving end and hadn’t even considered it so early in the game.

Suddenly the moment was shattered by someone pounding on the door.

“Hey, man. You’ve been in there long enough. Others are waaaaiittttting!!!” shrilled a slightly slurred voice.

Placing a fingertip against Michael’s lips, warning him to silence, Jay called out, “Dude, trust me on this one. You do not want to come into this room anytime in the near future! It was two for one burrito night at the Taco Palace!” He smiled and winked at Michael, still held captive in his embrace. “Try the downstairs bathroom,” he suggested.

Profanity and rude comments followed the sound of boots stomping down the stairs. Michael was embarrassed that he’d been so distracted as to miss the sound of feet climbing the uncarpeted wood. Jay remained motionless; obviously listening to ensure their unwelcome intruder was gone.

When Jay spoke again his words were little more than a husky murmur. “*Querido*, I was only going to say ‘Let me show you how good it can be.’”

Michael suddenly couldn’t breathe.

Thankfully, Jay saved him from his own misunderstanding. “No, Michael, I didn’t mean *that*. I’ve no intention of doing anything you’re uncomfortable with.” Jay’s voice was low and soothing. “This is all new to you. Let’s take it slow; there’s no hurry. I only want to do what you’re ready for.

“What are you ready for, Michael?” Jay asked, warm lips brushing chastely against Michael’s forehead. Incredibly aroused and unable to speak, Michael merely nodded his head, hoping Jay understood. White teeth flashed against dark skin. “Stop me if I push too far,” Jay said. Then words became unnecessary.

Michael pushed down all reservations, knowing deep down that if he said “Stop,” Jay would.

Opening his lips, he was overwhelmed by the desperation with which his mouth was consumed, tasting beer and pizza on Jay’s tongue.

He’d had his share of kisses in his lifetime, but none matched the intensity and ferocity of this one. Jay pulled back far enough to breathe against his lips, “Is this okay?” as Jay’s hands left Michael’s shoulders and began to wander down his trembling body — trembling now in excitement instead of fear. He could only nod because his oxygen-deprived brain lacked the resources for a verbal response. Long, nimble fingers freed his shirt buttons, pushing the thin material open and off of his shoulders to pool on the floor at their feet.

Those long fingers fluttered over his chest as Jay’s mouth sought his once again. This kiss was just as nerve-searing, but not nearly as frantic. There was acceptance in it; acceptance that they would be lovers, it was no longer a question of ‘if.’

Jay rubbed the dusky nubs of Michael’s nipples, causing them to stiffen. Michael moaned and arched his back, begging for more. When those fingers became harsh — pinching instead of merely rubbing — he nearly came.

Jay’s hands made short work of the button and zipper of his jeans, then a brown, long-fingered hand slipped into the opening, reaching into Michael’s boxers. Opening his eyes to find his would-be lover watching him, Michael nodded his permission to continue.

His head fell back, smacking against the wall and his eyes closed in bliss as Michael gave himself over to his partner. Familiar with his own touch and with the small, delicate hands of females, this was unlike anything he’d felt before, even that night with Ryan. Jay’s hand was large and rough, with long, strong fingers that wrapped expertly around his cock, applying just the right amount of pressure. It wasn’t at all like the awkward fumbling of Ruth Ann. This was someone who knew what it felt like, who knew firsthand how to give and receive pleasure.

Michael felt a brief moment of panic, knowing that he was crossing a line that he couldn't re-cross if things got difficult. Ryan had been an accident, this was different; this was planned.

"Shhh....*Querido*; relax and just enjoy it. Let go, I've got you."

The murmured encouragements and sultry smile were his undoing. Damn, but Jay's easy confidence was sexy. After so many years of trying to be strong, be a hero, and hold it all together, it was sweet relief to allow someone else control.

Jay pulled him closer, urging his head onto a wide shoulder. Pressure building, Michael's muscles trembled, the fluttery feeling in his belly and groin marking the beginnings of an impending climax. He couldn't hold out much longer, though he fought to make it last.

"Jay," he pleaded, "please don't stop."

Warm breath ghosted over his neck, sending cold chills racing along his body. A faint, "You sure?" sounded like it came from a million miles away.

He answered with a thrust of his hips, a silent plea for more. Jay answered, working him faster and kissing him, muffling frantic moans.

Michael broke the kiss, shouting, "Jay!" then smothered his cries against Jay's chest, trembling uncontrollably.

"That's it, Michael," Jay crooned. "Show me how good I'm making you feel. Come for me, *Querido*!"

Michael lost control, teeth sinking into a wide shoulder, cock convulsing in hard, rhythmic pulses and filling Jay's hand. Being pressed closed to a muscular body was the only thing that kept him from falling to the floor as he gasped for breath, coming down from the best orgasm of his life.

"Was that good for you, Michael?"

Michael lazily opened one eye to find Jay smiling down at him with the same look his dream lover often wore, but it Jay holding him now, patiently waiting for an answer. In that moment, lost in the afterglow, the lines between the two blurred and the man that haunted Michael's dreams was no longer faceless, but he hesitated a moment too long and lost the chance to answer.

"Dude! There's a line for the other bathroom! You gotta come out! Just spray something, all right?" accompanied loud banging on the door.

Jay rolled his eyes and looked apologetically at his partner. “Sorry ‘bout that,” he whispered quietly. “If I’d have known...” Turning toward the door Jay replied loudly, “Well, there’s a half bath off the back porch! Use it!”

Loud cursing followed the retreating footsteps down the stairs, but it was too late, the mood was broken.

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” Jay said softly, noisily twisting the water tap of the sink.

Michael, still in shock over what had just happened, leaned motionless against the wall, letting Jay gently clean him with a damp cloth and put his flaccid cock back into his boxers, zipping and buttoning his jeans. He felt totally helpless as his shirt was pulled onto his unresisting body and quickly buttoned. A brief kiss was brushed against his forehead before Jay unlocked and opened the door, looking out through the crack before pulling it wider.

“The coast is clear,” he said without turning around. “I think you’d better get back to the party.”

Michael stammered, “But what about you?”

“Do you think you’re really ready for that?”

He didn’t know the answer. What could he possibly do for Jay except maybe a fumbling attempt at a hand job?

“I thought not.” Standing aside and holding the door open, he motioned Michael to leave. “I’ll be down in a minute,” he said, closing the door.

Michael and his guilt stood on the landing, believing he’d just cheated himself as well as Jay. Then he remembered that he’d forgotten to reassure his lover. Even now Jay was probably kicking himself, worried that Michael would regret what had happened. Far from regretting it, Michael wanted more — lots more.

He’d just raised his hand to knock when he heard a relieved, “Oh, there you are! I was wondering where you’d gotten off to.” And just like that he was swept away back into the party by Angie, when all he really wanted to do was make things right with Jay.

Chapter Eight

Jay lay draped across the rickety porch swing, nursing a beer while one bare foot hung down to rub Shasta's upturned belly. The back door eased open, music and laughter invading his sanctuary along with a slim figure that stood silhouetted in the doorway. The door closed, banishing the noise and light but leaving the intruder. The scent of familiar perfume announced their identity.

"I figured it was you," Jay said.

"We need to talk."

Yeah, he knew that, though he dreaded the conversation they were about to have, torn between loyalty to his best friend and the loyalty he was fast developing for her brother.

The brief flash from a lighter illuminated the pale white skin and shiny copper hair of the woman he loved as a sister, but who could never be more to him.

The tip of her cigarette glowed brightly and Angie exhaled a swirling cloud of blue-gray fog, barely visible in the glow from the street lamps outside. "I thought I'd find you here," she said quietly.

Rather than join him on the swing as she normally did, she remained standing near the door where brother had stood a few hours ago. Neither said a word, the 'thumpa-thumpa' of the music from the living room and the soft protests of the porch swing the only sounds.

"So, are you gonna tell me or do I have to beat it out of you?" she began.

Refusing to volunteer anything, Jay ventured, "Tell you what?"

"Tell me what the hell was going in the kitchen that had Terry running out like a scalded dog!"

"Oh, that," he replied with casual indifference and a wave of his hand. "A minor misunderstanding; no harm done."

In the semi-darkness he caught a brief glimpse of even, white teeth, more grimace than smile. She knew her housemates well enough to figure out what had happened. "In other words, Terry put the moves on Michael and was disappointed."

"Yeah, something like that," he agreed.

"Did you take care of it?"

"Was there ever any doubt?"

Angie leaned back against the doorframe and studied him for a moment, casually drawing on her cigarette. After a moment she quietly whispered, "*Gracias.*"

"*De nada,*" Jay replied.

"Why are the blinds drawn?" she asked, abruptly changing the subject. "It makes it so stuffy out here." She crossed the floor as she spoke, the ancient floorboards screeching under her feet.

It was ironic that Angie dreaded enclosed spaces as much as her brother feared open ones, so Jay explained, "Michael was uncomfortable; I wanted to make him feel more at ease."

Raising the blinds with back turned, a slight head nod was her only acknowledgement. "He's in a bad way right now; he doesn't need any more shit," she muttered. Angie turned to face Jay then, small slender arms wrapped around her thin body defensively.

"Are you saying you think I'd give him shit?"

She slowly released a breathy sigh. "If I tell you something, do you promise not to repeat it?"

Over the years he'd learned that Angie always spoke her mind with little regard to the consequences; such a request was out of character. "Have I ever given you a reason not to trust me?"

She smiled but it wasn't happy. "I love my brother dearly but what I have to say could be considered betrayal." Slowly sinking into an old wooden rocking chair, she sat facing him, her slow rocking at odds with the fast-paced music from the house.

Never for a minute did he believe his dear friend capable of betrayal, especially not of the brother she adored. "Just tell me," he said, in a voice normally reserved for reassuring upset younger sisters.

"Jay, you know I love you with all my heart but, so help me God, if you breathe a word of this to anybody they'll never find the body."

"If I ever betray you, my greatest friend, then I deserve for my body to never be found."

She took another drag from her cigarette, causing her words to emerge in a cloud of smoke. "Fair enough. Jay, there's a reason I've told you so much about my brother over the years."

"Other than sisterly bragging, you mean?"

With a sly smile she nodded and said, “Yeah, other than sisterly bragging.”

“Do tell.”

“I remember back when he was in high school and, before that, in junior high down in Mississippi. I also remember when he was dating Ruth Ann Dunwoody.”

Jay winced at the name, having heard it many times and knowing exactly who the young woman was — Michael’s high school sweetheart and the girl his grandmother had wanted him to marry.

Angie continued, “I saw how he was with her, or rather how he wasn’t, and not only her but any other girl he was involved with.”

“And?” Jay asked, curious even if the image of Michael with a girl made him cringe.

“He never talked about any of them the way he talks about you, or looked at them the way he looks at you.”

That was unexpected. “What are you trying to say, Angie?”

“I’m saying that I believe that my brother may be gay.”

He opened his mouth to defend Michael, but Angie cut him off. “That’s not the only reason. I’ve kinda felt it for a long time now. Several times I thought he was leading up to a big announcement, and I know for a fact that he snuck some of Mom’s gay themed novels into his room. He’s not nearly as good at hiding things as he thought he was.”

At Jay’s narrowed-eyed scrutiny she added defensively, “What? I’m his big sister, I’m *supposed* to snoop — it’s in my job description.” Apparently, she chose to ignore his condemning glare. “That asshole Mom married was such a homophobe that I think the poor kid was too traumatized to say anything.” She snorted in anger. “As if I’d have said anything to that moron.”

Absentmindedly stroking Shasta’s head, Jay listened attentively. He knew all about Crawford Shiller from Angie’s stories, and was appalled at what she and Michael had suffered at his hands. Having been brought up in a big, loving home where children were considered precious, he just couldn’t imagine having to slink around in an effort to avoid attention. It hadn’t helped Angie’s trust issues in the least; and having suffered through six more years of such exposure, there was no telling how it had affected her brother.

“What do you want me to say?” he asked, draining his beer and setting the empty bottle on the floor.

Angie dropped her cigarette butt into the empty flower pot that served as an ashtray, then moved so quickly that he heard the groaning of the chains before he felt her body

crowding against him on the swing. Shasta sighed and moved to the far side of the porch, noisily flopping down on an old threadbare rug, surrendering her claim.

“Jay, I need to know something: what were you doing with my brother tonight?” Those perfectly arched eyebrows curved high over her eyes as Angie pinned him with a suspicious glare.

Oh, shit. He should have known this would happen. She was a smart lady and paid attention; it was only a matter of time before she put two and two together; only it looked like she’d reached the wrong conclusion. The problem with trust issues was that they turned on the undeserving on occasion.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he answered noncommittally. “I was just talking to him, the same as I did to about twenty or thirty other people tonight.” He knew he was treading thin ice and would have to be very careful with his words. Betraying Michael wasn’t an option, but he also didn’t want to lie to his friend. It was Michael’s decision if, when, and who he confided in. It wasn’t Jay’s news to share no matter how badly he wanted to tell his best friend and receive her blessing.

“I saw the way you were looking at him and you disappeared together, twice!!” she accused. “I know because I went looking and couldn’t find hide nor hair of either of you. I even checked your room; if I’d found you seducing him...”

The memory of a throaty moan and emphatic “don’t stop” filled his mind. Nope, definitely not seduction, the blond hunk was more than willing. If not, as difficult as it would have been, Jay would have simply walked away. But Angie was worried about her brother, otherwise he wouldn’t tolerate such thinly veiled insults to his character.

“Need I remind you who you’re talking to? I’m not Terry, you know.” There was just enough bite to the words to warn her that she was dangerously close to insulting him.

He carefully kept his expression neutral in the face of her angry glare, waiting for her to reach a logical conclusion on her own. Suddenly she turned away, admitting, “You’re right. I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve that. It’s just that the kid’s had some rough times and I’m just trying to look out for him. I don’t want him to get hurt.”

“Angie,” Jay said quietly, “Michael’s not a kid anymore. Don’t you think he’s old enough to make his own decisions?”

When she looked up all the anger had fled just as quickly as it had come, replaced by a deep sadness that aged her before his eyes. For just a scant moment Jay could have sworn it was Sarah sitting so forlornly next to him instead of Angie. He really hated it when she got like this, feeling it his responsibility to bring her back from the dark place she disappeared to sometimes.

“I wouldn’t willingly hurt anyone...you know that,” he said

“Yeah, I know that,” she finally admitted. “I’ve a confession to make. When I first met you I knew you were a special person, but I also knew there was no way you’d be more to me than a friend. Since you could never be for me, I thought I could trust you with my brother.”

“You’d trust me with your brother? You accuse me of seducing him in one breath and say you trust me with him the next?”

“Just forget what I said earlier, okay. I just worry. Well, you know me, so you know that.”

Yes he did, and that’s why he always forgave and tried to help when she let the disappointments of the past interfere with the life she had now. That was what friends did.

He casually draped his arm across the back of the swing and she pulled it around her shoulders. A wordless apology was issued and accepted with that simple gesture. Life was too short to hold grudges. She leaned back against his arm, sighing, and said, “He’s not the same. He was so happy-go-lucky and fun-loving before he left. Now when I look at him, it’s like he’s someone else entirely.”

“Then get to know the man he is now,” Jay’s replied simply. “Maybe the person he used to be will come back, maybe he won’t. But Michael’s your brother and he needs you. Besides, you’ve changed over the years, why wouldn’t he?” Watching his sisters grow and mature, going from clinging little pests to independent women with minds of their own, had taught him a lot about life and living. Though some of the differences in Michael were probably caused by trauma, a lot were merely the product of growing up.

“Yeah, you’re right,” she finally agreed. “He couldn’t stay a kid forever, I guess.”

“No, Angie; people grow and they change. If you love them you learn to accept the changes or gently guide them back to where they need to be.”

They sat in comfortable silence for a few moments, the music from the living room notwithstanding, until she quietly intimated, “When I first thought he might be gay it really worried me. Mom has some pretty great gay friends, but they’re all older. I thought all gay men our age were like what I saw in movies and on television, and how some of the guys at school talk. You know, a different man every night.”

Jay prudently remained quiet. He’d had his own wild times when he first came out — the proverbial kid in the candy store — but, thankfully, he’d settled down and no longer judged his self-worth by conquests.

“I want my brother to be happy but I can’t see him going from one man to the next like that. I was appalled, especially after I met Terry, who only confirmed that theory.”

Jay snorted but otherwise remained quiet and allowed Angie to talk.

Looking up at him through long, mascara-darkened lashes, she said, “Then I met you; a gay man who was kind and decent and moral. The kind of man I’d want for Michael.” She surprised him with her earnest, “If anything does happen between the two of you, promise me that you’ll take care of him. Help him get through all the bullshit.”

Hoping she could see the truth in his eyes, even in such dim lighting, he solemnly swore, “Angie, whether he’s my friend, lover, or just the brother of my best friend, I’ll look out for him.” That said, he pulled her close and planted a chaste kiss on the tip of her nose.

“Then that’s good enough for me. Thank you, Jay.”

Chapter Nine

Later that night Michael lay awake unsure whether to cower or crow. He'd come out and made his intentions known — there was no going back now. Though cringing at how vulnerable he'd made himself, he trusted Jay not to betray his confidence.

Slowly he slipped a hand under the elastic of his boxers and relived the feeling of firm, masculine hands gripping his cock, his active imagination filling in the blanks of how the night would have ended had he not been such a coward. He hoped he hadn't blown his chances with the laid-back, smooth-talking Texan.

He lay in the darkened privacy of his bedroom imagining his fingers brushing dark nipples, exciting them to rigid points, then moving downward to wrap around a cock that was long and hard, in proportion with Jay's body. It would fit so well in his hand — or his mouth.

In his fantasy he took that hard length experimentally between his lips, trying to imagine what it would be like to bury his nose in wiry pubic hair and inhale deeply of musky male scent. In lieu of Jay's cock, he stuck a finger in his mouth, stroking it with his tongue, gratified at the imagined moans it would pull from his pleased lover. Yeah, he could probably do that.

He paused to remove his annoying boxers, then returned his hand to his hard flesh, stroking rhythmically, while he mentally licked and sucked Jay. Up and down his hand moved, faster and tighter, his breathing reduced to quick, harsh pants. His other hand reached beneath his balls, applying pressure to just the right spot. "Jay!" he moaned as muscles clenched, held, and then released, milky semen splattering his chest. Still gripping his cock, he collapsed back on the bed, panting. It wasn't as good as it had been earlier in the bathroom, but it served the purpose, leaving him sated and sleepy.

He wished the object of his desires was there, because he liked physical contact after sex, unafraid to admit to being a cuddler. If things progressed the way he hoped, he'd soon know what that was like with Jay.

But when he came down from his orgasmic high, reality was waiting for him. There were serious problems he had to deal with. It wouldn't be fair to ask another into his life until they were resolved, or at the very least, manageable. Still, Jay had said, "Whatever you need..." Even if Jay couldn't fully understand, the fact that he wanted to meant a lot and, quite frankly, helped to ease the feeling of isolation that occurred even while surrounded by loving family members. As much as Michael wanted Jay, he needed him even more.

It wouldn't be easy to come out in this narrow-minded town. Sure his mother accepted it, but what about his God-fearing grandparents. Would they still love him if he were with another man? They liked Jay, letting him call them Grandma and Grandpa, but did they even know the man was gay? Sunday's sermon came to mind. Attending church was a

big part of Michael's life, but he'd no longer be welcome there if he was honest about who and what he was.

His former stepfather's words haunted him, names used against him like "pansy" and "silly faggot." He'd get that and a whole lot more if he continued to walk this path. Did Angie know? How about everyone else at the party? He'd been so overwhelmed that he only had vague recollections of the evening — up to his time with Jay, anyway. Those moments were forever burned into his memory.

Rising from the bed, he found an old pair of sweat pants to pull on and then wandered into the living area and sank down onto the couch, clicking on the TV. Idly he flipped through channels, mind drifting back to the defining moment when he stopped denying he was different from the guys he'd grown up with.

Two young Arkansas boys had entered his life when he'd been a frightened, lonely recruit in boot camp, away from home for the first time ever. Missing family, friends, and even his newly shorn locks, he was pretty miserable. Ryan and Jimmy seemed to sense that he needed a friend, or better yet, two, and included him in their lives, even though anyone who really knew them would have realized they only needed each other. That's why they kept their distance from anyone but him. For some reason they trusted Michael and, as a trio seemed more appropriate than a pair among their comrades, the rest of their platoon accepted the fact that if you saw one of them, the other two weren't far behind.

If they hadn't confided Michael wouldn't have guessed that they were more than just friends. But then, he'd always been rather naïve about such, being from a small town where any local gays either moved at the first chance or remained firmly hidden in the closet. His mother's gay friends were all older; he hadn't had much experience with gay men his own age.

It was because he knew and accepted their relationship that Ryan leaned so heavily on him after Jimmy died. Both of them were up for reenlistment shortly after the incident, but Michael no longer met eligibility requirements and Ryan had lost all desire to fight, so they concluded their stint with Uncle Sam.

In their grief over Jimmy's death they'd shared a one-time encounter that Michael replayed in his mind many times. He had no regrets, but his only feelings for Ryan were as a very dear friend. Though he cared deeply for him, as he had for Jimmy, that was all it was ever meant to be: a deep friendship tempered by shared loss.

That one experience, however, made him finally understand what his friends had known all along. Even without emotional attachment, what they'd shared was far more intense than anything he'd ever had with a girlfriend. In the past he'd dismissed it as not having found the right girl, but after that night he realized what the problem had been all along — it wasn't a girl he needed. Then along came Jay and all doubts disappeared completely.

From the moment he'd first seen Jay sitting in the living room, wreathed in sunlight, turning back wasn't an option, and it was more than mere sexual attraction. He wanted him, only he wasn't quite sure yet what to do with him if and when he caught him. Catching him was the important part — the details could take care of themselves.

Still, the realist in him couldn't expect Jay to accept all the excess baggage he carried. Again he heard, "Whatever you need..." The words gave him hope. How wonderful it would feel not to be alone anymore.

Sighing wistfully, he got up for a beer, padding across the new carpet that was soft and plush against his bare feet. He'd finally gotten used to that luxury again, and the bright, freshly painted walls that were a far cry from the drab barracks that had been his home.

Home. He was home. All the plans and dreams he'd been saving for the last four years could now become reality. All that he needed to do was make his mind up as to what he wanted and go after it.

Suddenly he felt the overwhelming need to pick up the phone. Noticing it was four in the morning, decided he'd just have to wait.

Jay was wide awake and restless, but to keep from disturbing his roommate with his tossing and turning, he decided to take a delighted Shasta for a walk. The fluffy plume of the retriever's tail beat rhythmically against his leg as her breath huffed out from around the ever-present tennis ball in her mouth. He knew she'd just about die a happy doggie death if he'd play a game of fetch with her, but he wasn't touching the drool soaked, lime green monstrosity.

Instead they walked, enjoying the slight chill of morning and the natural night sounds that would soon be drowned out by cars and man-made noises. Jay shoved his hands inside the pockets of his worn, denim jacket, mulling over the events of the evening, those moments in the bathroom fondly replaying in his mind. Try as he might, he couldn't bring himself to regret them. No, he loved every minute of seeing the normally reserved Michael surrender control.

He recalled the man's confession, not just of his orientation, but the reasons behind his first tentative steps out of the closet, smug with the knowledge that he'd been Michael's first gay kiss. He would have liked Michael to stay and finish him, but had made short work of that on his own, coming violently within moments to the memory of the blue-eyed blond's passionate moans.

When he returned downstairs he'd made what small talk he could with Michael, but Angie's protective, angry glares sent a clear warning. When Michael was ready to go

home, sharp fingernails digging into his shoulder discouraged him from riding along with Charlene, the designated driver.

So he gone on to the porch and waited, knowing Angie would look for him there. After the first year of friendship she'd finally learned to trust him. He felt honored, especially since she was so suspicious of the world at large. But when it came to her brother, he wasn't sure how she'd react. By the end of their conversation, though, they both breathed a bit easier, her trust restored.

She'd given him a lot to think about, like the anxiety and post traumatic stress, especially after how close he'd come to being decked. Jay hadn't lied about his cousin's issues, but even with the support of a big, loving family, Angel's reintegration into the civilian world had been difficult, as it was sure to be for Michael. Combat left a man with some heavy shit to deal with, and he shouldn't have to go it alone.

What Michael needed was a friend who he could count on, who knew what to expect. And if it turned out that he needed a friend more than a lover? Well, his cousin's problems had taught Jay that sometimes you just had to wait until they came around. You didn't give up; you let them know you were there, always, no matter what. And if Michael didn't want him as a lover he'd cross that bridge when he got there, he had plenty of time.

Or did he? He frowned, an unbidden thought crossing his mind. Graduation was fast approaching and he'd looked forward to moving somewhere more accepting. Michael had just come home. That meant in order for anything to develop between them, Jay would have to postpone leaving. He tried to imagine the two of them nestled all cozy and snug in Michael's small apartment over the store. Nah, it'd never work. There was barely room up there for one, let alone two. Still, together in the tiny kitchen preparing dinner, brushing against each other as they both tried to occupy the same space could prove...interesting.

Yeah, he could do it. He could find a job locally or in a nearby city, but he was getting ahead of himself. First he had to win Michael. Angie was on his side, though, so Michael didn't stand a chance.

On that happy note, Jay turned himself and Shasta for home.

Chapter Ten

Haunted eyes stared at Michael's from within the confines of the Humvee. "Why, Michael?" came the familiar plea. "I could be happy now, I'd be with Jimmy. Why'd you stop me?"

"Yeah, Michael," came a voice that had never sounded so sinister in the waking world. "It's your fault, you know. You just had to be with Ryan when you knew he was mine. And I let you take my place. Some friend you are!"

Michael refused to look at the newcomer, knowing full well what he'd see: hollow eyes, a torn, bloody uniform, and dark, seething anger.

"It should have been you. It was your place and you should have been there," said the dead corporal who had once been his friend Jimmy.

"Yeah, Michael, it's not fair," Ryan chimed in. "We would still be together now if it weren't for you!" He was shouting now, something Ryan never did in real life.

"Wanna know what it felt like, Mikey? Do you? The heat, the pain? It should have been you, Michael, it should have been you!"

Suddenly, Michael was in a Humvee with three other soldiers. "Stop!" he screamed, but they just laughed and chatted, ignoring him. "Go back!" he yelled, futilely grabbing the steering wheel. The driver gave him a stern look and swatted his hand away before turning back to his conversation.

Frantically beating hands against the driver, powerless to stop the inevitable, he watched helplessly as the ill-fated men headed toward their destiny in ignorance. Knowing he couldn't save them, he scrabbled with clumsy fingers as his seat belt, only to find the buckled fused and unmoving. Heart hammering wildly in his chest, he struggled to free himself, knowing he had just seconds. Then it was too late. An explosion rocked the vehicle, burning heat engulfed him, and he screamed....

Still screaming, Michael shot upright in his bed, gasping for breath and fighting off sweat-soaked sheets, his heart pounding painfully. Oh God, not again! It was the same dream every time.

In the months since the attack he'd frequently questioned why he hadn't been in the Humvee that led the convoy with those he normally rode with. That day something had changed and Jimmy had been there instead.

When the fighting started with no warning the vehicle took a direct hit. Only Prescott had survived and it would be months before he'd walk again, if then. Jimmy had been sitting next to him where Michael normally sat. His funeral had displayed a closed coffin.

In the chaotic aftermath Michael was reported missing and the worst assumed. He'd survived with relatively mild injuries, only to face the angry accusations of his two friends on a nearly nightly basis. Then, once they'd had their say, he rode with his former comrades, unable to stop the inevitable. He always woke screaming.

He'd scoffed when someone had once told him that if you died in your dreams that you'd die in real life, wondering how anyone could actually know such a thing. Now he worried that, not only was it true, but that it was how he'd meet his end.

A quick glance at the clock showed it was 7:30 a.m. He'd never get back to sleep, so he rose and started his day on just three hours sleep.

It was noon before he shook off enough of his terror to focus on work.

"Hey, Michael, ready for some pizza?"

Four days of brooding had left Michael tired and depressed, so it was with great surprise that he answered an unexpected knock to find the star of his waking thoughts casually leaned against the doorframe of his apartment. A black, fading T-shirt displayed a perfect upper body, and faded blue jeans, worn through in strategic places, cradled strong thighs.

Blood rushed from his head and down to his groin, the depletion of resources leaving him speechless. Finally, he managed to stutter, "How'd you get in?"

The smile disappeared as Jay pushed off the doorframe and turned to leave. "I knew I should have called. If I've come at a bad time..."

"No!" Michael yelled, still shocked that the object of his fantasies had suddenly materialized on his doorstep. "It's not that," he blurted, "it's just that I thought Mom had left already."

Now that Jay was finally there Michael wasn't about to let him leave. He'd been hoping to get together so they could talk, but with Jay's grueling school schedule and his own hiding from the world, it just hadn't happened yet. Jay showing up on his doorstep was like a gift -- like hell the man was getting away!

Jay smiled and resumed a relaxed pose. "Oh, yeah. I caught her just as she was leaving. So?" he asked, staring at Michael expectantly. "Pizza?"

"Sure," he replied. "Let me get my wallet."

A quick glance into the bedroom mirror ensured he was presentable, but he traded his stained T-shirt for a clean one, grabbing his wallet from the night stand before hurrying

back to the living room. After carefully locking the door he followed Jay through the store and out into the early evening.

Five minutes later they were back in the apartment waiting for the delivery driver.

"I'm so sorry, man. I didn't know that would happen." Michael sat on the couch, staring at the floor. He'd gamely agreed to walk to the restaurant instead of driving, only making it two blocks before a backfiring car set off a panic attack.

Torn between shame that someone had seen his meltdown and gratitude that they'd been there, he admitted to himself that he wouldn't have made it back to his apartment without help. Jay had wrapped a calming arm around him and led him back to the bookstore, muttering, "Something he ate," to a curious passer-by. Then, taking the key from Michael's trembling fingers, he'd unlocked the door and brought him inside, shutting the terrifying world outside.

"Shhh... Don't worry about it." Jay said, handing him a paper bag. "Just breathe into that. That's it, slow and steady." A warm hand rubbed soothing circles against Michael's back, the heat radiating from Jay's body as comforting as his words. When Michael was finally able to breathe normally again, Jay's cell phone rang. Jay answered it, speaking quietly before flipping the gadget shut. "I'll be right back," he said, heading for the door.

Michael jerked his head up, panic clutching his heart. *Please don't leave me alone!* he wanted to shout, barely biting back the words before they left his lips.

"Listen to me, Michael," Jay said quietly, as though he'd heard the unspoken plea. "I'm just going downstairs to get the pizza; I promise I'll be right back. I'm not going to leave you. I'll keep the door open and come back up in a minute, okay?"

Michael sighed and nodded, amazed that Jay had stuck around this long. He'd expected polite excuses the moment they'd gotten back to the apartment, but instead Jay had calmly and efficiently dealt with the situation. He'd have made one hell of a medic.

A few moments later Jay returned, depositing his fragrant burden on the coffee table before heading into the kitchen and returning with paper plates and cans of root beer. Michael watched him assume the role of host, serving up pizza and root beer, and setting their plates on opposite sides of the coffee table.

"You sure seem to know your way around my apartment," Michael said.

"I helped your mother paint and get it ready for you."

"Oh." Of course his mother would have needed help getting the place ready, but he never imagined it was Jay who provided it. "Funny, she never mentioned it. It seems strange since she talks so much about you." Michael flushed, realizing he'd just confessed that he and his mom had been gossiping about the man.

Jay grinned. “Your mom’s a cool lady, although she does keep trying to fix me up. I know she means well, but...”

They both laughed, the stress easing. “That sounds like her.” As they ate it occurred to Michael how little he knew of Jay’s family “What’s your mom like?” he asked

“Imagine a taller, chunkier, Catholic version of your mom. She’s a bit older, but she’s pretty cool, too. She and Dad have been married thirty years.” Jay took another bite of pizza, chewed thoughtfully, and then asked, “Hey, wanna see them?”

“Sure,” Michael agreed, reaching over to grasp the thick wallet Jay passed over. Flipping it open explained its width, for inside were about twenty pictures. The first one was a group photo and Michael smiled at the image of a younger Jay that hadn’t yet grown into his ears, surrounded by what was obviously his family, judging from the resemblance. Michael counted six sisters, all noticeably younger than Jay.

“Hey,” he gasped in surprise, “your mom’s a blonde!”

“Yeah, she’s Irish,” Jay explained, smiling fondly. “She met my dad when her parents were on vacation in Galveston. They went home to Cleveland, she stayed.”

“Dang! How many pictures do you have in here?” Michael asked, flipping through one picture after another.

“That’s nothing,” Jay waved his hand dismissively. “You should see the stack of albums back in my room.”

“You’ve got that many pictures?”

To that Jay answered softly, “I like having pictures around of those I love.”

Michael sat the wallet down and picked up a slice of pizza. His fingers still trembled as he ate, but either Jay didn’t notice or prudently chose not to comment. Coming down from an attack usually took awhile if accomplished without the help of meds. They finished their meal while watching the evening news, Michael occasionally asking questions about Jay’s family.

Suddenly Jay asked, “Can I ask you something that’s none of my business?”

Though a bit wary, Michael nodded.

“Where did you go last Thursday? You said you had something to do, but you never said what.” Before Michael could respond Jay added, “Sorry, I was being nosy. You don’t have to answer that, but...you know you can talk to me, right? I’ve been told I’m a good

listener. I'm the only boy in a family of girls; trust me, I can listen with the best of them." Jay flashed a disarming grin.

Well, Jay hadn't run screaming yet, so Michael answered honestly, "I had an appointment with my counselor."

Jay appeared thoughtful, then said, "Ahhh... well I'm glad, then."

Of all the possible responses, that wasn't one he expected. "Huh?" Michael asked.

"I'm glad you're talking to someone. I really hated seeing you like that night at the party."

"Oh." Maybe it was time to have that talk he'd been hoping for.

Jay leaned across the coffee table and explained, "I told you that my cousin was going through something similar. Well, he tried to go it alone, wound up drinking too much. It didn't help. All it got him was a couple of arrests for drunk driving before he finally pulled his shit together and got some help."

"Well, that's not likely to happen," Michael replied bitterly. "Can't get pulled over if I can't fucking leave the house!"

Jay helped himself to another slice of pizza. "Well, look at it this way: you live here and work downstairs, so that allows you time to deal with it. I can't lie and say I know what you're going through, but I'm here and will do whatever I can to help." He leaned forward, his warm brown eyes locking with Michael's clear blue ones.

Michael closed the distance, brushing his lips lightly across Jay's. "I want to apologize for the other night," he whispered softly.

Jay stood and moved around the table, easing down on the couch and wrapping a comforting arm around Michael's shoulders. "There's no need to," he said. With a bright smile he added, "I kind of like how it turned out, myself."

Michael opened his mouth and inserted his foot. "I'm embarrassed about how it ended."

Jay raised a suspicious eyebrow. "Oh?"

"No, I don't mean it that way!" Michael knew what he wanted to say but seemed unable to form the proper words. He ran a hand through his hair and stuttered, "I, uh..."

Out of nowhere the gorgeous smile reappeared. "You are flat adorable when you're flustered, you know that?"

"I just have a hard time saying the right thing sometimes," he mumbled.

“Don’t worry about saying the right things; just say what you feel. I promise that if I don’t understand I’ll give you a chance to explain.” Jay folded his arms over his chest and relaxed against the arm of the couch, obviously waiting.

“I kinda regret leaving you hanging like I did,” Michael said.

“Is that it? You’re not embarrassed by the rest?”

“Oh, hell no!” he exclaimed, surprised at his own candor. “And I’ve gone over it in my head since that night. Many, many, many times.”

Jay’s wicked smile revealed a slightly crooked front tooth. “Yeah, me too.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.” Inching closer, Jay brushed warm lips gently over Michael’s cheek, then slowly worked them back to his bad ear. He murmured something that Michael couldn’t quite make out.

“Oh, sorry,” Jay said, pulling back until their eyes met and repeating, ““Do you think you might like to do it again?”

“Right now?” Michael reached up and smacked himself on the forehead, causing Jay to laugh. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded!”

“Oh, Michael, you poor thing. When you get nervous you really are no good with words, are you?”

“Well, I’m just not very good at communication, especially when it’s important,” he confessed.

“As long as I know what’s going on maybe I can help you. I’ve been told I’m good with words. Two languages’ worth,” Jay added with a grin.

“But the answer to your question is, yes, I would like to do it again, but next time you get to come, too.”

Jay’s hand idly stroked Michael’s shoulder. “Are you sure you’re ready for that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s a big step for you, right? Didn’t you say that until the other night you’d never kissed a man?” Jay asked.

“Well, that’s true, but I have kinda played before.”

“Oh, really?”

“Only once.”

“Someone special?”

“Well, it was a friend and it was more about comfort and reassurance than it was about love or sex.”

“Is it one of those things you don’t want to talk about?”

“No, but I don’t want to talk about it now. Now is for me and you.”

“And you say you aren’t good with words.”

Michael shrugged and replied, “Well, you know what they say, ‘Even a blind squirrel finds an acorn every now and then.’”

Their laughter effectively killed any remaining tension. “So by saying only once, you meant...”

“Only that I’m not very experienced but, yes, I have tried things with a guy before.”

“And?” Jay prompted. The words held no jealousy or condemnation, just curiosity.

“Well, it was good, but it was nothing compared to that night with you,” he answered truthfully.

“Ahh...another good answer.” Seeing those dark eyes coming closer, Michael parted his lips, admitting Jay’s questing tongue. Slowly it curled into his mouth. Rather than a duel, it was a slow exploration. A tingling began low in his belly as warm hands slid beneath his shirt, caressing his bare chest.

He couldn’t remember ever feeling so aroused. With girls he’d been expected to be the aggressor, and it was refreshing to just let go, relax, and let Jay call the shots. Which Jay did — expertly.

Slowly his shirt was eased up his body, the intimate contact with his mouth broken just long enough for Jay to remove it and toss it to the floor. Then the kiss was resumed — with a vengeance. Long fingers caressed his stomach, following the patchy treasure trail down his abdomen. Fire shot straight down to his hardening cock and his hips bucked, seeking more contact.

Jay grasped Michael's shoulders, easing him down onto his back, a well-placed knee gently nudging his legs apart. Jay settled between them, grasping the end of his own shirt and, in one fluid motion, pulled it over his head and dropped it to the floor.

"I want to look at you," Michael said.

Jay sat back on his heels, a coy smile playing over his lips.

Michael's eyes wandered over the fantastic body he'd fantasized about, memorizing every contour and curve. Dark, curly hair grew sparsely across light brown skin, between firm pecs and down as far could be seen; an interesting treasure trail disappearing beneath Jay's faded denim jeans.

When he raised his eyes he saw the question on his lover's face — *do you like what you see?* — and he replied by crushing his mouth to one dusky nipple, loving the way it hardened against his tongue.

Jay eased down, pressing their hard cocks and their mouths together. "Oh, God I want you," he mumbled against Michael's lips.

They reached for each other's jeans, fumbling in their eagerness but still making quick work of the button and zipper closures, before plunging their hands into a pair of briefs in one case, and a pair of loose fitting boxers in the other. Michael had only ever touched two cocks before in his life: his and Ryan's, and both were circumcised. The novelty of extra skin to play with was highly arousing. Jay's cock was just as long and thick as he'd imagined.

When the initial exploration was satisfied, he worked Jay in earnest, using the well-practiced motions he'd privately employed since his early teens.

Moist heat found his neck as Jay seemed to instinctively find that special spot that made his toes curl. That hot mouth worked over his skin, sucking, licking, and lightly biting; he knew it would leave a mark but was finding it hard to give a damn at the moment.

Jay expertly stroked his hardened flesh while Michael pumped his hips, working himself into the tight grasp, matching his movements and rhythm with his partner's. Far too soon he felt his balls drawing up, tingling at the base. Frantically he increased his pace, reaching, reaching, grasping....

"Ahhh..." Head thrown back, eyes closed tightly, he let go, filling Jay's hand with the evidence of his passion. And though he may have lacked experience, Jay's own orgasm, following a moment later, meant he'd done something right.

He opened his eyes and watched the sheer joy of the moment etched on his lover's face. Eyes closed, lips parted, Jay moaned and panted, then screamed in release,

“Miiiiicccchhhaaaaaaeeel!” Warmth filled Michael’s clenched fist and he milked Jay’s cock with sure, steady strokes.

They collapsed against each other, panting and gasping for breath. Once more mouth met mouth. This time the kiss was slow and unhurried, full of sated bliss. Michael found his discarded shirt and wiped them both down before tossing it back to the floor.

“Stay the night?” he asked.

Chapter Eleven

Bright sunlight streaming through the bedroom window announced the arrival of morning and, for the first time in recent memory, Michael woke feeling fully rested. He'd actually slept through the night! A vague memory of dreams persisted, but they dissipated like smoke through a closing fist — and he hadn't woken up screaming.

He yawned and stretched, then jumped back in terror when his arm brushed against something that shouldn't have been there. Heart pounding, covers drawn up to his chin, he stared in shock at the black hair lying on the white pillow case next to him. Heavy breathing, just shy of a snore, rumbled from the sleeping form. Michael let out a relieved sigh, barely suppressing a laugh at his noisy bed partner.

Jay lay sprawled on his stomach, well-muscled back, arms, and broad shoulders on glorious display.

Last night had ended in the bedroom where, head comfortably cradled on a lightly furred chest, Michael had fallen asleep to the sound of a steady heartbeat. His guest's presence must have held his nightmares at bay, for the phantom soldiers hadn't put in an appearance all night. His eyes raked hungrily over the warm honey of his new lover's skin, and he gently lifted the edge of the sheet so he wouldn't be caught ogling.

Jay's broad shoulders tapered down to a narrow waist, and his ass was just as firm and muscled as the rest of him. Although he sported a good deal of dark body hair, the firm round cheeks hiding under the sheets were virtually fur-free. With a sigh Michael lowered the cover, smoothing it down while continuing to admire the view.

He wished his own personal Texan would roll over so he could see that handsome face, but didn't want to wake him. So he sat quietly, watching the steady rise and fall of his lover's back. A smile crept across his face at the realization that, for the first time in his adult life, he felt peaceful and content. He savored the moment for as long as he could before a full bladder forced him to leave the bed and the warm body lying there. Reluctantly he slipped from the room, easing the door closed.

After relieving himself and washing up, he found a pair of reasonably clean sweatpants and a T-shirt, and quickly dressed. He started the coffee pot and rummaged in the refrigerator, looking for something suitable to serve for breakfast. The coffee had finished brewing and he was just removing sautéed peppers and onions from a skillet when a gentle tapping interrupted him. With a quick glance to the closed bedroom door, Michael hurried to let his visitor in, thinking it was his mother inviting him to Sunday school. He'd politely decline and she'd leave, no fuss, no muss, none the wiser.

However, it wasn't an easy-going, privacy-respecting Mom that he found outside his door, but a meddlesome Angie with absolutely no qualms about invading personal space until her curiosity was satisfied and he had no secrets left.

“What are you doing here?” Michael asked suspiciously.

She folded her arms across her chest and scowled.

“Sorry, that didn’t come out right. Let’s try again. Good morning, Angie.”

A saccharinely sweet smile plastered itself to her face. “Hello, brother dear. Are you just going to stand there, or are you going to invite me in?”

Invite her in? His eyes darted to the closed door that concealed a sleeping Jay as he attempted to hide his guilt from her all-seeing eyes. Hoping to keep the visit short without being too obvious, he stood aside and let her in. Sooner or later they’d have to talk, but at the moment ‘later’ got his vote.

“Hmmm... You can tell Jay’s been here,” she observed as she wandered through his new apartment.

The blood froze in Michael’s veins. “What did you say?” he stammered, noticing the soda cans and paper plates lying on the coffee table — a dead giveaway that he’d had a visitor the night before.

Oblivious to his shock, Angie continued to scrutinize the apartment’s walls with a critical eye, looking pleased. “Jay did such a great job with the painting, don’t you think?” Finally noticing Michael’s pained expression, she cocked her head and pinned him with a questioning look. “You did know that he helped Mom fix up this place, right?”

“Oh, that! Yeah, she told me,” he lied. It was then that her words sank in. “You mean you’ve never been up here before?” *Please don’t ask to see the bedroom, please don’t ask to see the bedroom...* he silently pleaded.

“Well...” she began, seeming vaguely uncomfortable. “Grandpa kinda told me not to ‘drive you insane by invading your privacy.’ But I think I’ve behaved myself long enough, and now it’s time to come hang out with my bro,” she said happily.

He eased between her and the coffee table, effectively blocking her view. When she turned to gaze out the window, two paper plates disappeared under the couch cushions. The soda cans found a new home under a throw pillow.

Too interested in the apartment to notice Michael’s impromptu housekeeping, Angie continued, “And in answer to your question, no, I haven’t been up here since they finished the place. I was too busy studying. But I helped in the beginning. I chose the carpet and paint; you can thank me later for my exquisite taste.”

The mention of carpet drew his eyes downward to where a rumpled black T-shirt lay. Why hadn’t he taken it, too, when he’d picked up his own?

His sister continued her inspection, pausing to thumb through his CDs, moving ever closer to the bedroom door while he discreetly pushed the shirt under the couch with his toe.

He watched in horror as she moved closer and closer to the last place he wanted her to be. Jay snored! Surely she'd hear and ask questions! In desperation he blurted, "I made coffee, want some?"

The diversion worked. "Oh...coffee! I could sure use a cup." Michael blew out his breath in a heavy sigh of relief, leading her over to the small bar that divided the kitchen from the living area. He sat on a stool facing the bedroom, strategically placing her back to it.

With feigned nonchalance he glanced at the clock. "My, my, would you look at the time? Don't you have to get to church? You wouldn't want to be late for Sunday school."

"Michael Ritter," she snapped. "If I didn't know better I'd think you didn't want me here!"

"No, it's not that," he stammered, "I just don't want you to be late."

She grinned mischievously. "I'm blowing off Sunday school and I've got plenty of time before preaching. Say," she added brightly, "why don't you come with me?"

The blood drained from his face. Thankfully, she let him off the hook before he had to concoct an excuse — something he really wasn't good at. "Oh, that's right. Looks like you were in the middle of making breakfast. Well, don't let me stop you," she said pleasantly. She took a sip of coffee and scrunched her face in distaste. "Please don't tell me this is decaf."

"Okay," Michael agreed, "I won't tell you."

She waved her cup at him and whined, "But it's decaf! How could you? Mom raised you better than that!"

With a sigh Michael reminded her, "Caffeine is bad for my 'condition.'" 'Condition' was said with the same amount of affection Angie used for 'decaf.' Silently he wished she'd be so repulsed that she'd just go before her curiosity got the better of her and she started snooping.

She took another sip, wrinkled her nose and sighed. "Sorry, kiddo, I forgot. If it's good enough for you, it's good enough for me."

Okay, so that didn't work. He needed to find the reason for her visit and get her out of there. "So, what brings you here so early?"

"What? Since when do I need an excuse to come see my favorite brother?"

"I'm your only brother, Ang," he reminded her.

"Ahh...so you are."

This was far from the first time they'd had this conversation, and he knew from experience that it meant she was up to something, something he probably wasn't going to like. "Okay, Angie, out with it," he urged, resigning himself to his fate.

"You don't trust me!" she exclaimed in mock indignation, giving him her best innocent look. Unfortunately, her performance fell short of innocence, only managing to achieve 'not-yet-found-guilty-by-a-jury-of-her-peers.'

Not about to be taken in by her antics, he raised an eyebrow skeptically and glared. "Angie...."

"Oh, all right! I wanted to talk to you about Jay," she finally admitted.

Michael's heart somersaulted. *She couldn't know, she couldn't possibly know!* "What about him?" Michael croaked, fighting the urge to just push her out the door and be done with it.

"Well, I just wanted to ask you how you feel about him."

Oh my God, she knows, she knows!! Taking a deep, cleansing breath he tried to think rationally. This was Angie. If she knew she wouldn't be coy, she'd just come right out and say it. Since getting rid of her wasn't an option, he switched tactics and instead willed Jay to remain asleep and safely inside the bedroom until she was gone.

"I know you don't do anything without a reason," he said defensively, "so I want to know why you're asking." He leaned back on the stool, stubbornly crossing his arms across his chest.

Angie sighed. Michael recognized that sigh. It usually occurred before something he didn't want to hear. Sighs like that were often followed by things like, "I lost your favorite CD", "I put a huge dent in your car," or, "Sorry, but your cat just died."

Today it heralded, "Well, let's just say that I believe that he likes you — a lot. I care about both of you and don't want to see anyone get hurt." Okay, that wasn't as bad as he'd been expecting.

He answered noncommittally, "Well, I'll admit we've hit it off pretty well since we met." 'Yeah, that's an understatement,' he added to himself, certain images from the previous night replaying in his mind.

"Yeah, well I don't mean 'friend' like, I mean 'like' like."

Michael swallowed hard in a futile attempt to dislodge the brick that had just formed in his throat. “What you talking about, Angie?” He had a bad feeling about this, a really bad feeling.

Angie smiled, undeterred. “Well, for one thing, he’s been talking about you one hell of a lot lately.”

He had? Michael’s eyes darted to the bedroom door, his mind seeing the naked man sprawled across the bed. He shook his head to clear those thoughts before they triggered a tell-tale physical response. Taking a sip of coffee, he tried to appear casual. *Five more minutes. Five more minutes and you’ve got to get her out of here,* he told himself. “That doesn’t mean anything,” he managed to say. “Mom talks about him all the time, but it doesn’t mean a damn thing.”

His sister smiled indulgently, setting her cup down and dropping another verbal bomb. “Yeah, well he doesn’t keep a picture of Mom hidden in his dresser drawer.”

“He what!?” Angie loved to surprise him, but she’d outdone herself this time. Jay’s comment, “*I keep pictures of the ones I love...*” flashed through his mind.

Grinning wildly now, obviously pleased that she’d scored a direct hit – though she didn’t know the half of it — Angie pressed on, “Yeah, he saw that picture of you; the one that was taken when you were inducted in the army. The official uniform one.”

His response was a nervous, “Yeah, so?”

His sister watched him like he’d once seen his grandfather’s barn cat watch a field mouse — right before eating it. “Jay was just being Jay when he first saw it. He didn’t know I had a brother at the time and thought that picture was of my boyfriend. So he made some catty remarks about how hot you were.”

Michael blushed, turning away. Jay thought he was hot? Unfortunately, judging by her knowing smirk, Angie noticed. And it was clear she intended tell the story as slowly as possible. He wanted to shake her and yell, “Just spit it out, already!”

Unaware of how close she was to a good shaking, she fed him just enough information to whet his appetite. “He was obsessed by that picture, especially when he found out you were my brother. So, I kinda tested him.”

If Michael had hackles they would have risen. He’d endured some of Angie’s tests himself on occasion. They usually didn’t end well — for him. “Tested him how?” It was all he could do to keep his voice calm.

“Well, I left the picture out, just to see what would happen.”

Gamely he asked, "What did he do?"

She just grinned and sipped her coffee. It was so quiet that he could hear the clock ticking on the wall and the muted thrum of Sunday morning traffic outside. *Wait, was that a noise from the bedroom?* Holding his breath, Michael listened intently, finally exhaling, relieved, when an engine rumbled to life down the street. It had just been a car door slamming. Forcing himself to relax, he took a healthy mouthful of coffee and unwittingly played into her hands.

With a wicked grin she said, "Well, let's just say I had to get myself a new picture."

Michael sprayed the countertop with hot coffee, body convulsing in choking coughs. The demonic, evil being that had possessed his sister thumped his back a little harder than necessary.

"He stole your picture?" he asked when he'd recovered enough to breathe again.

Angie laughed evilly, obviously enjoying her little game. "Yep. I never saw it again until about two months before you came home. I wanted to borrow a pair of thick socks, and I knew he wouldn't mind so...."

"So you snooped in his room," Michel finished for her, mopping up the coffee mess with a dish towel. Again his eyes shot to the bedroom door, his heart racing as sunlight reflecting off a passing car flashed across the door, creating the illusion that it was opening.

"Hey, that's not fair! I wasn't snooping," Angie argued, "I was just borrowing socks!"

Michael snorted his disbelief. "So, what happened then?" He briefly debated tying her to a chair and interrogating her like he'd seen in bad spy movies, bright lights and all, alternated with images of launching her physically from his apartment in a giant catapult.

"Well, I found what had happened to the picture. It was just lying there in his sock drawer."

"So he buried it in his sock drawer; that means he likes me, why?" *Please just make your point and go, please just go....*

"Michael, Michael, Michael," Angie said dramatically, placing her small, freckled hand on his arm and talking slowly, as though explaining to a child. "The picture looked liked it had been handled....a lot. The edges were all ragged. And he framed it."

"Oh." *He framed it?*

"Yeah, 'oh.' He used to ask a lot of questions about you, but I figured it was just curiosity, or maybe missing his own family. He has about a bazillion siblings."

“Six.”

“What?”

“He has six sisters, he told me.” *He also told me their names and ages, and if they’re anything like you, God help him.*

“Hmmm....telling you about his family now, huh?” She grinned suggestively. “Well, anyway, like I said, he just kept asking questions about you.” Wagging her eyebrows she continued, “Then when he found out you were coming home he got really nervous about meeting you. I’ve known the man for four years now. Trust me, he doesn’t do nervous, but he fretted for weeks. He even got a haircut the day before you came home.” She whispered conspiratorially, “That’s why I asked him to drive you over here, so y’all could get to know each other.”

“Why you...” he began, knowing he really should be grateful for her meddling...look where it got him! Suddenly, he recalled something that had been bugging him. “Angie, how come you never mentioned Jay was gay before?”

“Huh?”

“Well, in your letters and emails you always mentioned your friend Jay, but I thought he was your boyfriend.”

“I didn’t?” she asked, eyes skittering to the side. He recognized guilt when he saw it, but remained silent. “Well, you know the number one rule, right? Never out anybody. I didn’t think you’d care, anyway.” Her scarlet blushing belied her words.

Finally, he lost patience with her little game. “Out with it, Angie.” He all but yelled her name, hoping that if Jay was awake he’d hear and know it wasn’t safe to come out.

“Well, I was kind of hoping that you’d meet and like each other, so I didn’t want to say too much about him. There was no telling what four years in the military might have done to my loving, tolerant brother.”

“And Mom? Seems she would have mentioned it.” The light bulb suddenly came on. He narrowed his eyes at her. “Is this some kind of conspiracy?”

Given her slow, plodding storytelling up until now, her reply was too quick to be the complete truth. “Well, I don’t know about Mom, but he asked me lots of questions about you, and I knew he had the picture.” Angie stared pointedly at her coffee cup, avoiding Michael’s accusing glare. “I figured eventually he’d move on to someone he actually knew, or that y’all would finally meet and be friends.”

Oh shit, maybe it would be better if Jay weren’t listening in.

This was just too surreal. His mom was a co-conspirator. It figured. Neither woman would deliberately hurt anyone, but he worried what effects their meddling, as well intentioned as it might be, could have on Jay. The need to defend his lover momentarily outweighed the fear of Angie discovering his secret. "Do you really think that was fair to him?"

Angie sighed and shook her head, no longer smiling. "I know, I know. It was wrong for me to encourage his little crush, knowing you're straight. But you should have seen him, how excited he was that he'd finally get to meet you. He's a good guy. I really want both of you to be happy. I'm sorry if I meddled, I just got carried away, I guess."

"So what's got you so concerned now that you had to come over here on a Sunday and talk to me?" *Yeah, why don't you leave and come back on Monday...*

"Well, I know you like him.....as a friend," she quickly clarified. "I just thought I should warn you that his feelings for you might be deeper than that. I know you're not a homophobe and wouldn't hurt him physically, but I worry about you hurting him emotionally. I wanted to talk to you before we go for Sunday dinner with the grandparents, 'cause I know they invited Jay again, so he'll probably be there."

Uncomfortably under her intense scrutiny, Michael stood and busied himself by pouring another cup of coffee.

"Could I get a reheat?" Angie asked, extending her cup. He sighed. If he gave her more coffee she'd stay to drink it, but he couldn't think of a way to refuse that wouldn't hurt her feelings. After topping off her cup and replacing the pot on the warmer, he washed his hands and resumed preparing breakfast, needing to burn off the nervous tension before he snapped like an over-wound rubber band.

"Damn, boy, reckon you chopped enough onions and peppers?" she asked, appearing at his elbow to stare into the half-filled bowl.

Michael jumped to suddenly find her so close, frantically searching for a convincing lie. "I'm making meatloaf later."

She reminded him, "We're eating at Grandma and Grandpa's."

Okay, maybe it wasn't such a convincing lie. "I meant tomorrow," he stammered, knowing it was lame even as he said it. Wasn't she ready to leave yet?

"So?"

"So what?" He had to hand it to her, when she set her mind to something, she was nearly impossible to distract.

“Will you please be careful with Jay and try not to hurt him?”

“What makes you think I’d hurt him?” He turned his back to her, shielding himself from her prying eyes to blush in private.

“Well, if he thought you were receptive he might take that as encouragement and pursue you. Don’t get me wrong, he’d never go where he wasn’t welcome, and pardon my saying so, but you were sending out some mixed signals at the party the other night.”

Oh my God! So she’d been paying attention after all! He forced down panic, wondering how many others had noticed. “What do you mean by receptive and mixed signals?” Sooner or later he’d have to tell her the truth, but he needed to discuss it with Jay first. No need to tell her about their relationship if it was only to be it a casual thing. He didn’t think she’d be angry no matter what, but still, now was just not the time!

“Come on, brother mine; when it comes to these things, you’re clueless!”

“I’m clueless?” *I’m hiding a naked man — your best friend — in my bedroom and you think I’m clueless?* he thought to himself.

She snorted, a very unfeminine sound to be coming from such a delicate looking female. “Yeah, girls used to hit on you all the time and you were totally oblivious.”

“They did not!”

“Did, too! And the other night girls *and guys* were making you some pretty obvious offers and you just brushed them off like you didn’t care. But I know you, lil bro; you probably just didn’t notice. I was worried about Terry there for a few minutes...”

Finally, to his immense relief, she dropped the subject. “Oh, Michael,” she crooned, “that’s so sweet of you, but you forgot that I can’t eat eggs.”

Her expression would have been comical if he’d had a clue to what she was talking about. Then he looked down and saw two plates sitting in front of him, one completely covered by a three-egg omelet while another bubbled in the pan. He was cooking Jay breakfast without even realizing it! Backpedaling hard, he attempted a recovery. “Damn, I’m sorry, Ang. You’re right, I did forget. Would you like some toast instead?” Holy shit! How could he have been so stupid!

She joined him by the stove, rising up on her tip-toes to plant a kiss on his cheek. “No, but that’s really nice of you. Anyway, what I was saying...” She suddenly leaned in again, her eyes narrowing critically as she stared at his collar. “Is that...?”

Before he could stop her she reached over, grabbed the neck of his shirt and pulled, the look of wicked glee on her face confirming what she’d seen. “Oh, somebody got lucky,” she sing-songed. “Ok, lil bro — out with it! Who is she?”

Right on cue the bedroom door opened and a very handsome, very naked man walked out, rubbing his eyes and murmuring, "Michael?" Jay and Angie saw each other at the same time and froze, while Michael contemplated having the nervous breakdown he'd been building up to all morning. *Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit...*

Angie was the first to break the silence. "Way to go, Mikey," she crowed, eyes never leaving her roommate. She blatantly looked him up and down and remarked, "Nice package, Jay."

That broke the spell, and Jay moved so fast that he was there one minute and gone the next, the bedroom door slamming behind him.

Angie calmly looked over at Michael and remarked, "You hurt him and I'll hurt you. If he hurts you, I'll hurt him."

Michael swallowed hard and stared at her open-mouthed. You never knew what to expect out of Angie, but he was glad she had his back. Still, his heart hammered wildly as he stammered, "You're okay with this?"

He could have counted her teeth, she grinned so wide. "Are you kidding? Mom'll be over the moon! However, it does look like I got here a little late for our 'Jay likes you' talk. Sorry," she added unapologetically.

Trailing her fingertips up his arm, she brought them to rest against his cheek, patting it affectionately. "Just answer me this: is it serious?"

The cat was out of the bag, he might as well be honest. "It is for me."

"And for him?"

He wished he could answer that Jay felt the same, but he wouldn't lie to her about such a thing. "We haven't had a chance to discuss it yet."

An elegantly groomed eyebrow arched in surprise. "So, last night was the first time?"

"Angie! That is sooo not your business!" Michael yelled.

"Just asking." Hands held up defensively, she added, "You can't blame a girl for trying."

Bending to retrieve her purse from the couch where she'd dropped it earlier, Angie paused for a moment and then exclaimed, "Aha!" She straightened, holding aloft the T-shirt Jay had worn the night before, a triumphant smile on her face. "Well, well, well...what have we here?"

Grateful his own stained shirt was put into the laundry minutes before her arrival, Michael held out his hand, waiting for her to relinquish her prize.

“Spoilsport,” she pouted, handing it over. “Well, my work here is done so I guess I’ll be going.” She flashed him another mirthful grin. “We wouldn’t want Jay’s breakfast to get cold, now would we?” Without a backward glance she turned and let herself out of the apartment.

As the door closed on her retreating back, Michael heard an ecstatic, “Yes! I knew it!”

Chapter Twelve

The bedroom door slowly eased open and Jay peeked out from a two-inch crack. “Is she gone?” He couldn’t believe what had just happened; how stupid could he be? After waking alone he’d grown concerned that his lover was having some morning-after regrets and patiently waited, hoping to at least talk it out.

Only when he couldn’t stand it anymore did he leave the bedroom, hoping to ensure last night was a beginning and not the end. As he walked out into the living room, stark naked, he never considered that anyone else might be there. Angie’s look of glee had done nothing to offset the horror on the face of her sibling. Jay closed his eyes and sighed. This was not the way it was supposed to be; he’d just outed Michael to his sister in a manner that couldn’t be explained away. He’d be lucky if the guy still spoke to him, let alone wanted to continue what they started.

Hastily donning his jeans, he waited for the other shoe to fall, for Michael demand that he leave. But as the door eased further open, warm hands caressed his bare sides then enfolded him in a tender embrace. Warm, soft lips traced a path up his neck before descending onto his for a chaste kiss. “Good morning, Jay. Did you sleep well?” was breathed against his skin.

Finding his voice, Jay asked in shaky tones, “Sssooo, you’re not mad?”

Soft chuckles brushed against his skin, along with the faint rasp of day-old beard. “No, I’m not mad. I wouldn’t have chosen for her to find out that way, but I have to admit that it’s a relief, no longer having to worry about how to tell her.”

“How’d she take it?”

Michael’s baby blues were twinkling with humor. “Let’s just say that I don’t think Mom’s gonna try to fix you up anymore.” Snagging Jay’s hand, Michael led the way into the kitchen area. “Come on, let’s eat.”

Both men had been to that particular house for many a Sunday dinner and normally considered it a treat, but today they were dreading what might happen. Jay was verbally agonizing about being tossed out while facing accusations of corrupting the elderly couple’s only grandson. Michael, though quieter with his misgivings, was afraid of being kicked out of the family after hearing a sermon similar to the one the reverend had delivered on that not-so-long-ago Sunday. But this time the words would have even more impact, delivered by someone whom he loved and respected, who’d be renouncing him from the family.

Although he loathed the things, Michael took one of the ‘emergency pills’ his doctor had prescribed. Nerves in an uproar, he’d never make it to the car without help. As it was, Jay

brought the Tercel to the front of the store, making up the excuse that he was ready to go and Michael wasn't and pulling it around would be a time saver. *Right.*

Once tucked safely in the vehicle, Jay's hand found his, their entwined fingers shifting the gears. Michael knew that if he and Jay were going to see each other that he'd need to tell his grandparents. He didn't like keeping secrets from his loved ones and, while Grandma might tend to conveniently ignore things she didn't want to acknowledge, Grandpa made a point of knowing what was going on with the family and would see through any attempts to hide something of this magnitude. But if nothing was going to develop with Jay, well then, there was no point in opening that particular can of worms.

He was wrapped up in an attempt to carefully construct what he wanted to say when Jay voiced the very questions that needed answers.

"Do you think you'd like to give it a shot with me? I know you're not out, but from what I've seen you don't seem entirely opposed the idea. Do you think you'd like to maybe go out?" Jay hastened to add, "...when you're better, that is. If you're not comfortable here where you know everybody we could always go out of town." With a quick glance to his quiet passenger he explained, "I don't like hiding who or what I am, but I've been out for a very long time. I want to get to know you, let you know me. You don't have to answer right now; I just want you to think about it. We can take things slow."

Michael couldn't fight a relieved smile. Carefully phrasing his response, he replied, "I can't promise you anything, and I know I'm nobody's bargain right now, but I think I'd like that." Actually, he liked it a lot. Jay had complimented his cooking over breakfast and had jokingly asked, "Can I keep you?" Michael didn't want it to stay just a joke.

While Jay appeared cool and confident, a deeply exhaled breath told Michael just how nervous he'd been. "That's good enough for me." He brought their joined hands up to his mouth and planted a kiss on the back of Michael's hand, sealing the deal. "Will your mom and sister tell your grandparents?"

Michael had every confidence that the women wouldn't disclose information that was his to share; however, they could be smugly annoying until he did make the information public; at least to the family, anyway. To their way of thinking if you weren't a blood relative it was none of your business. Furthermore, they would never say anything if they felt it might harm him. It was with a fair amount of certainty that he answered, "No."

"Will you tell them?"

Michael couldn't help noticing the hopeful look in his lover's eyes. "Do you want them to know?"

Jay paused thoughtfully before answering, "Not if it's going to upset them or put a strain on your relationship. But I gotta tell ya, I personally don't care who knows. I'm tickled to

death, though I'll understand if you want to keep it quiet. It is okay if I tell my folks, right?"

That was something Michael had never even considered. "How do you think they'll take it?"

Jay grinned, all confidence returned. "They came to terms with my being gay a long time ago and they'll be happy for me. Although, I might have to keep my eye on you around my Aunt Angelica; she likes big blond men."

"Well, it just so happens that I like dark skin, eyes, hair, and a smooth Texas drawl." Michael lifted his chin and looked at Jay a bit sideways.

"I think I know someone who fits that description."

"Not your Aunt Angelica, I hope."

Wrinkling his nose, Jay replied, "Nah, Aunt Angelica is a *gringa* from my mom's side of the family. Pale skin, red hair, smokes, drinks, and cusses like a sailor." He winked at Michael, who jumped away in mock horror, forming a cross with his fingers and brandishing them as if warding off bloodsucking fiends.

"Then by all means, please keep an eye on me around your aunt!" he exclaimed.

Jay's laughter was deep and throaty, like a quick, discreet grope in a public place – exciting and erotic. "Don't worry, *Querido*, I will. How do you think your grandparents are going to react?" Worry replaced the sunny smile.

Michael sighed and rubbed his free hand through his hair. "I have no idea." It was then that he noticed that Jay had once again called him something he didn't understand. "I've been meaning to ask you; why do you call me '*Querido*'?"

They pulled into the yard of the white frame farmhouse and Jay turned toward him. "Well, I didn't know how you'd react to 'baby', 'darling', or 'studmuffin', so I use an endearment that I've heard since I was a child."

"So it's Spanish?"

Jay nodded. "Yes, it's actually what my mother calls my father; she got it from my grandmother. If you don't like it..."

"No, it's not that; I'd just never heard it before, is all, and wondered what it meant."

"It means 'beloved,'" Jay said, releasing Michael's hand to exit the vehicle, leaving a shocked Michael to contemplate those words. *Beloved?*

Realizing Jay was waiting, Michael got out and joined him, mulling that word over in his mind like a mantra. *Beloved, beloved, beloved.* Together they crossed the yard and climbed the steps, pausing to gaze at each other for a long moment before Michael took a deep breath and opened the door. *Here goes nothing...*

They followed the smell of roast beef down the long hallway that led from the front porch to the back, stopping briefly in the bathroom to wash their hands and exchange a quick kiss behind closed doors.

“Ready?” Michael asked.

“As I’ll ever be,” replied Jay.

The last door on the right opened into a bright, sunlit kitchen, in stark contrast to the darkness of the windowless hallway. As the two men entered the warm, welcoming room, they were greeted by a fond smile.

They leaned in and each kissed a soft, wrinkled cheek, saying, “Hi, Grandma!”

“Hello, boys,” the elderly woman greeted. “How are you this sunny Sunday?”

“Fine, Grandma,” they answered.

She narrowed her eyes and looked them up and down. “You boys wash your hands?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The old lady nodded toward the stove. “I hope you’re hungry, I made pot roast with all the trimmings. Here, make yourselves useful,” she said, handing Jay a pot of steaming green beans and Michael an oblong glass dish filled with potatoes. She shooed them in the direction of the dining room, picking up the remaining casserole dish and following in their wake.

Michael’s mother, grandfather, and sister were already seated at the table, chatting quietly.

“Hey, you’re just in time,” Gramps remarked, beckoning them to sit.

Michael and Jay dropped down, side by side, into the chairs they had occupied the last time they’d both been at that table, and Grandma Eileen took her place at the end. The family joined hands and Gramps blessed the food.

Michael could feel eyes on him even before he heard, “Amen.” He looked up at a grinning Angie.

Apparently, his sister couldn't wait to share the news, as Michael's mom was smirking over her coffee cup, looking like the cat that got the cream. Oh well, he'd expected it. He knew they wouldn't make any announcements before he had a chance to talk to Grandpa, and was grateful for small favors. They could still be annoying, though.

Dinner was a lively affair, everyone taking the opportunity to catch up on what all the others had been doing. Jay sat beside Michael once again, but this time he seemed to enjoy the meal more, eating heartily, smiling, and talking animatedly. He also discreetly brushed his hand against Michael's thigh under the guise of wiping his fingers on the napkin draped across his lap.

Michael carefully schooled his features to keep those moments private but, truth be told, after last night and then the conversation they'd had on the way over, he had to practice restraint to keep from acknowledging how happy he was and why. Watching from the corner of his eye he waited patiently, and when Jay's hand made its next 'accidental' pass over his thigh he briefly caught the man's little finger with his own, giving it a gentle squeeze. He knew Jay understood the need for discretion, but with their newly voiced intentions he was anxious to find some time alone to explore the possibilities.

After dinner the men normally retired to the living room to watch television while the women cleaned the kitchen. Jay stayed behind to help, allowing Michael some time alone with his grandfather to talk. Michael had reservations about telling Gramps of his intentions toward Jay, but needed to so that the man learned accurate information from the right source.

The NASCAR race was just beginning and several times Michael tried to begin a conversation, only to be interrupted by, "Did you see that?", "Hey, watch where you're going!", or "You call yourself a driver?" Michael sighed and decided to wait for a commercial.

When the first advertisement began he tugged the remote from his Grandpa's hand, muting the TV. "Gramps? Can we talk?"

The old man looked confusedly between the now-silent television and Michael, as though unable to figure out why the noise had stopped or when Michael had appeared beside him on the couch. A look of understanding settled over his features and he suddenly seemed to realize where he was and what was happening. "Sure, son," he replied. "I'm all ears." He reached into his ear and adjusted the volume on his hearing aid. "Shoot."

"Well, Grandpa; it's like this," Michael began. Somehow all of his well-rehearsed words flew out the window, reminding him of just how terrible he was at self expression. He suddenly wished his had sent Angie instead. That girl had no problem at all getting her point across. *'Oh, well,'* Michael thought to himself, *'I'm the one here, it's my secret to tell, and I need to be a man about it.'*

To his patiently waiting grandfather he said, "You know about Jay, right?"

Momentary confusion crossed his grandfather's wrinkled face before it relaxed into a look of comprehension. "Sure I do; ain't like it's no secret around here. I mean, it's so obvious. Anyone looking at him could tell."

Michael took it as a positive but puzzling sign that Gramps was so accepting of Jay's orientation. Maybe this was going to be easier than previously expected. "And you're okay with it?"

Gramps made a shooin' motion with his hands. "What's there to be okay with? That's the way he is and there's nothing can be done about it. It ain't like the boy can change now, is it?"

Well, now. That was certainly unexpected. "Wow, Gramps, you're amazing, you know that?"

He wasn't sure if the wrinkled, age-spotted skin was still capable of a blush, but could have sworn the man reddened at the compliment. Things were going so great! Better even than when he'd talked to his mother. Finally, in true Michael Ritter fashion, he opened his mouth and blurted the first thing that came to mind, "So, it doesn't bother you that I'm like Jay?"

His grandfather stared at him as if he'd lost his mind. "But you ain't Mexican!"

Chapter Thirteen

Gramps thought the conversation was about Jay's heritage?

'So much for him making this easy,' Michael thought. 'But it's nice to know that the color of Jay's skin isn't a problem.'

He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled — an exercise a counselor had taught him to help with anxiety. As it was, he wouldn't be this calm if it hadn't been for the medication he'd taken earlier. He only used it sparingly, fearing addiction, but it was such a sweet relief not to feel like climbing the walls from the least bit of stress.

Closing his eyes, he revisited the old fishing hole he'd so loved as a kid. The Michael in his memory picked up a flat rock and skipped it across the calm surface of the water that shone brightly in the summer sun, breathing deeply of the phantom honeysuckles that flourished, without dying, in his sweetest memories. Then he smiled, calm and somewhat relaxed. He opened his eyes to find his grandfather watching expectantly.

"I wasn't talking about his ancestry, Grandpa," Michael said quietly.

"Well, then what are you talking about?"

Damn. So this really wasn't going to be easy after all. He should have expected as much. "I'm talking about his orientation, Gramps. You do know he's gay, right?"

The old man sighed, looking defeated. "I was afraid you'd bring that up sooner or later," he confessed.

"So, you do know, right?"

"Yeah, it's kind of hard to ignore, especially when I send him to town in my truck to buy feed and six people call asking what that 'faggot' is doing in my pickup. You know how people are." Gramps shrugged his shoulders. "Some folks just ain't got no manners and never learned to mind their own business."

His grandfather leaned in, looking him pointedly in the eyes. "But not a doggone one of those people called to check on me and Eileen when my back went out, and not a one of them offered to lend a hand. The only help we got was your mama, your sister, that 'Mexican faggot,' as they call him, and all the friends he and Angie brought with 'em. They got the hay in, tended the crops, and picked apples until I was up and around again. So those old busybodies' words don't hold a bit of weight with me. A man's actions prove who he is, not his words."

His sermon delivered, the old man collapsed back onto the couch, wearing a look that dared anyone to naysay him now that he'd spoken his mind.

Michael had always admired his grandpa. For a fairly simple man, he had a gentle wisdom that couldn't be denied. Still, though his thoughts about Jay had been well stated, the obvious question remained unanswered. "Well, what do you think about him being gay?"

The old man sighed. "I try not to, to be honest. I know what the Bible says and I firmly believe every word in there. But then I see this nice young man that'd do anything for anybody, one of the best men I've ever known, and it confuses me. He ain't bad; I've never seen him hurt nobody. Goodness knows what a blessing he's been to me, your grandmamma, and your mama. He also keeps an eye out for Angie." His grandfather shook his head slowly back and forth. "Beats me how I'm supposed to condemn somebody like that. So I pray about it some, but mostly I just try not to think about it. Works better that way," he said sadly.

Surprised that his cagey old grandpa seemed to have forgotten what he'd alluded to earlier, Michael softly reminded him, "Gramps, I'm like Jay."

The old man shook his head sadly again, appearing unsurprised. "Ain't telling me nothing I ain't figured out a long time back. I knew we'd probably have this conversation sooner or later. Been doing a lot of praying 'bout that, too. Hoping I was wrong."

"You knew?" Michael had only fully believed it himself recently, how in the world could this old man, whom he used to feel was helplessly out of touch with the modern world, have known before he did? "How did you know?"

"I saw the way you were when you was dating Bruce Dunwoody's daughter. I remember how I looked at your grandmamma when I was young and you weren't looking at that girl like that. It was more like you looked at a friend, not like you were s'pose to look at the love of your life. At first I thought that maybe she just wasn't the one, but I pay attention and I seen things. I don't have had the best book learning, but I know people, and I watch 'em and learn. Though I was hoping I was wrong; looks like I wasn't."

Michael whispered softly, terrified of the answer even though the man was being rational so far, "Do you still love me, Gramps?"

His grandfather looked horrified. "Love you? Now why wouldn't I love you?" he exclaimed.

"Well, now you know what I am, and you grew up believing it's wrong — that I'm wrong..."

His grandfather cut him off. "Son, the only thing that changed betwixt an hour ago and this minute is that now I know. No more speculating — I know for sure. One thing I've learned from watching people is that if you try to be something you're not, it ain't gonna do nothing but make you miserable and get you into trouble."

“So, you’re all right with it?”

With a stern look the old man told him, “I don’t understand it and maybe I never will, but you’re my grandson and you’re a good man. I can’t tell you how it killed me inside when we thought we’d lost you. I can’t swear to you that I’ll stop hoping that it’s something you’ll grow out of; I can only promise to try my best to understand and to be there for you, like I always have.”

Michael paused a moment, considering the words. Finally he asked, “Will you have a problem with me and Jay being more than just friends?”

Gramps sighed. “I guess if that’s the way the wind is gonna blow you could do a whole lot worse. Like I said, he’s a good man, even if the folks around here call him names. I just ask that you don’t flaunt it in front of me and your grandmamma. I’m afraid I’d have to draw the line there, boy.”

“That’s fair enough and more than I’d even hoped for,” Michael responded, relieved that things had gone well after all.

“Well, I think it’s fair. Your sister ain’t allowed to be all public with her beaus when she’s here, either.”

“That’s true. I love you, Grandpa. I appreciate how understanding you’re being.” Michael leaned in and gave the old man a heartfelt hug.

“I love you, too, son.” As Michael drew back, the old man pinned him with his eyes, speaking slowly and clearly. “You know it ain’t gonna be easy. Folks in this town can be pretty mean when they want to. Don’t like anyone that ain’t like them. Don’t like them that are much, either. They could make trouble for you, you know that, right?”

“Yessir, I know that. But I’m thinking it might be worth it.” He smiled then, letting his happiness show for the first time since the conversation began.

“Does he make you happy?”

“Yes, Grandpa.”

“Then that’s all I can ask.” The old man turned away and loudly called, “Y’all can come in now and stop listening at the door.”

The door swung open and three people stood there with sheepish grins on their faces, obviously guilty of the eavesdropping they’d been accused of. The fourth person had a bewildered expression on her weathered face. She slowly crossed the floor toward her husband, eyes darting back and forth between him and her grandson. “Aaron?”

Gramps smiled and took a gnarled, delicate hand in his larger, work-worn one. "I'll fill ya in later, Eileen. I think right now we're about ready for some pie, don't you?"

Chapter Fourteen

Pulling in front of The Bookstore, Jay quickly glanced out of the car windows, ensuring no one could see, and finally kissed Michael like he'd wanted to all afternoon.

"Can you stay?" Michael asked, expression hopeful.

There were so many things he needed to do, but solidifying things with Michael was at the top of that list so Jay mentally rearranged his schedule. Today had been a big day for them and it was too soon for it to end. "I have some studying to do," he ventured, careful not to imply an outright, "no."

"Well, I might not be able to help you, but the way I see it, you can study better in my quiet apartment than at the Zoo."

Michael did have a point. "Okay, how about we take these leftovers in then drive over and get my things. Or would you rather stay here and wait for me?"

"If I go with you I'll run into Angie and we won't get to leave until she's drilled every bit of information out of us that she can."

"There is that," Jay agreed. "Why don't you go up and I'll be back shortly. No offense, but I think I'm better at telling her it's none of her business than you are."

"That's true," Michael agreed. He paused a moment, a quick succession of emotions crossing his face as they always did when he was thinking too hard. For a moment Jay was worried until 'mischievous' won out — a personal favorite. With a coy smile Michael asked, "Remember what you said about taking things slowly?"

"Yes."

"Let's not."

Those two simple words slammed into Jay's libido like a runaway train. He asked in shaky tones, "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

Michael's smile never wavered. "If you're thinking I want to take things to the next level, then yes."

Leftovers forgotten, Michael was physically hauled out of the car and dragged across the store, up the stairs, through the apartment and into the bedroom where he was flung onto the bed, Jay's warm body covering him like a blanket. The locks had never opened so smoothly or quickly before. Jay's mouth crashed down and Michael poured everything he wanted to say but couldn't find the words for into the kiss. There, in the semidarkness of

his room, in the comfort of his bed — their bed, Michael Ritter realized he had progressed from being seriously in like to being seriously in love with a man. Yes, it was sudden, but it just felt so damned right.

He pushed Jay off just long enough to remove his shoes and socks, then stood and shimmied out of his jeans. He peeled his T-shirt over his head and then returned to strip Jay in under a minute. He flopped back down onto the bed, gesturing for Jay to join him. Capturing the Texan's rugged body in a near crushing embrace, he pulled his lover down, bare chest to bare chest, their lower bodies separated only by the thin material of their boxers.

Finally, that last barrier between them fell as they struggled out off the thin cotton garments and lay completely naked in a tangle of arms and legs. Moans and panted gasps competed with the rustling of covers and the squeak of the old four-poster bed.

"Stop!" Jay exclaimed, catching Michael by surprise. "We're in no hurry, slow down."

Michael didn't want to slow down, afraid of losing his nerve if he paused long enough to think.

He needn't have worried, for Jay's mouth latched onto his neck and thinking was no longer an option. When Michael tried to reciprocate, Jay pushed him back down on the bed, telling him, "This is for you, *Querido*."

Jay's warm mouth worked his neck, revisiting the mark put there the night before, then traveled down to his nipples. God, how he loved it when Jay did that!"

Kissing a trail down a somewhat ticklish abdomen, Jay finally settled between Michael's legs and lapped gently at the head his cock. Just like he'd sworn to do, Jay took things slowly, driving Michael crazy with a little 'not-quite-intense-enough' sucking.

Out of his mind and longing for more, Michael pleaded, "I want you to fuck me, Jay."

Jay stilled and Michael wondered if he's said something wrong until his lover crawled up the bed to deliver a sizzling kiss, grinding their hard cocks together.

"Shit!" Jay suddenly exclaimed.

"What's wrong, Jay?" Michael asked, suddenly alarmed.

"We don't have any condoms," Jay growled.

With a grin Michael crawled out from under Jay and said, "I'll be right back." He dashed to the bathroom to retrieve condoms and lube from the medicine cabinet, grateful for having an opened-minded and practical mother. Hurrying back to the bedroom, he

flopped back down on the bed, wrapping his arms around Jay and rolling them until he was back underneath his lover. “Now, where were we?”

“Are you sure about this, *Querido*?” Jay asked. His voice was husky with passion, but his dark eyes were filled with worry.

In answer, Michael raised his groin, making his hard cock impossible to ignore. “Doesn’t it feel like I’m sure?”

The heady answering moan was music to his ears. After all this waiting his fantasies were finally going to make come true with Jay.

Jay reached down and retrieved the bottle that Michael had brought from the bathroom, flipping up the cap and pouring a generous amount into his hand. Michael flinched when a wet finger brushed against his opening, cautiously seeking entrance, then spread his legs further apart, encouraging the tentative exploration. He hissed through clenched teeth as the steady pressure of that finger breached his inner muscles and slid steadily into his body. Willing himself to relax, Michael fought the instinct to fight the intruder.

“Bear down,” Jay instructed. “Push back against it; it’ll help.”

Gently that finger twisted and turned and, while not truly painful, it wasn’t entirely comfortable, either.

“Just do it,” Michael whined, surprised and embarrassed by his own neediness.

Jay chuckled. “So impatient. Losing your virginity isn’t something to take lightly. We’ll get there, but I’m not going to rush and hurt you.”

Caught in the throes of passion, Michael threw caution to the winds, begging, “Please! You won’t hurt me!”

Instead of giving in, Jay slid up Michael’s body and took possession of his mouth, tongue pushing in deep and demanding. “Don’t rush us,” he whispered against Michael’s lips as he withdrew, “we have plenty of time.”

Momentarily distracted, Michael was surprised to discover that the discomfort was gone. Experimentally he pushed back on Jay’s fingers, moaning when they brushed something inside that felt amazing.

When the fingers disappeared and Jay’s tongue took their place, Michael thought he just might lose his mind. When he’d first heard of rimming he’d been repulsed. Put your tongue there? Never! Now he was starting to see the error of his ways. If this was just the foreplay he just might not survive the actual sex!

He watched Jay to his knees. One of the small foil packets from the medicine cabinet was retrieved from the bed and he watched, transfixed, as his lover opened it with his teeth. Jay ran a lightly oiled hand down his cock, and then rolled the condom onto its thick length, moaning softly.

Eyes closed, head thrown back, Jay was beautiful, and Michael nearly came from the sight alone as one tanned hand lazily stroked what he hoped to soon have inside his body. "Lay on your side," Jay murmured softly. Those dark eyes raked over him, all reservations, all 'are you sure?' gone. Jay spooned against Michael's back, forcing his knees to bend. "You're gonna love this," Jay crooned, "I'm going to make it so good for you."

Michael felt a nudge at his opening and took a deep breath.

"Relax," Jay reminded him.

Fighting to control a sudden bout of nerves, Michael hissed when Jay's cock pushed against him. His erection, so full and eager a moment ago, deflated.

Jay stilled. "Shh, *Querido*. Don't fight it." Jay continued to hold perfectly still until Michael exhaled a loud, shuddering breath and began to relax. "Better now?"

"Yeah, don't stop."

Warm lips caressed Michael's neck while Jay reached around and stroked him to full hardness again. Gradually the pressure resumed until Michael felt the head of his lover's cock slip through his opening. Jay stopped again, only resuming when Michael nodded.

True to his word, Jay didn't hurt him, though the sensation was slightly uncomfortable at first. Slowly Jay eased out, stopping short of total withdrawal. Just as slowly he eased back in, creating sensations which Michael never knew he was capable of feeling.

"Ready?" Jay asked.

"Ready for what?" Jay was already in, what more could there be?

Jay chuckled and replied, "I'll take that as a yes." He then proceeded to turn Michael's mind to mush, moving in and out, in firm, sure strokes, angling just right to hit that newly discovered and oh-so-appreciated spot inside.

"Are you, okay?" Jay asked.

"Ask me that one more time and I'll scream," Michael threatened.

"Well in that case..."

It wasn't the ass-pounding he'd read about in some of his mother's gay erotic books, it was slow, gentle, and steadily driving him over the edge.

His hand joined Jay's on his cock. "That's it, Michael, stroke it!" his lover encouraged. "Are you close, *Querido*? I'm almost there."

That was all it took to push Michael over the edge. His body bowed and he shouted as he came, inner muscles clenching around Jay's cock almost painfully.

Even caught up in his own pleasure he felt his lover's movements falter, then resume as Jay sought release. One, two, three more thrusts and Michael felt Jay bury himself to the hilt, sinking in as far as physically possible before pulsing against his sensitized inner muscles.

Michael wished he could see Jay's face. Of all he had read in books and watched on the internet, nothing came close to what had just happened, and he couldn't have kept the words from spilling from his lips if his life had depended on it. "Damn, I love you."

His lover, however, had chosen that moment roll him over and deliver a heated kiss, so instead of the words, all that came out was, "Oooaaf."

Later, Jay lay sprawled across the bed, too deeply asleep to hear the words the second time they were spoken. "I love you, Jay."

Michael woke with a start to unfamiliar sensations, but quickly relaxed, or relaxed as well as he could under the circumstances. The sight that greeted him when he opened his eyes took his breath away. At some point while during the night Jay must have turned on the bedside lamp, for in its subdued lighting he watched his lover crawl seductively up from the foot of the bed, bringing to mind a sleek, dark panther stalking its prey. He would have sworn the sinuous movements were even accompanied by a low, aggressive growl. Long, slender fingers caressed the skin of his inner thighs lightly as laughing brown eyes watched intently. A devilish smile was the only warning before strong hands firmly pushed his thighs apart, allowing Jay's sleekly muscled body to settle between. Jay's mesmerizing eyes locked on Michael's, paralyzing him with their dark gaze. He couldn't have moved if he tried.

Though Jay's head dipped lower their eye contact was never broken. So intent was he on staring into those eyes that Michael jumped at the unexpected feeling of a warm, wet tongue. A broad stroke ran repeatedly over his sparsely furred balls before that mouth opened and sucked them in, first one, then the other. Then that talented tongue moved lower, nearing his opening, applying more pressure than he would have believed a tongue capable of. With agonizing slowness it inched back upward, sliding over his balls, then

excruciatingly slowly over the shaft and up to the head of his hard, aching cock. It bumped against Jay's cheek as if wishing to speed things up.

Still they maintained eye contact as that dark head bent down and blew gently against the dampened skin, something that Michael had never experienced before, but loved instantly. Jay chuckled softly at the moan that escaped his lips and repeated the entire process again. This time, when that tongue reached the crown of Michael's cock the generous lips parted and hot, moist heat surrounded it, tongue working the underside, causing an involuntarily gasp. Michael moaned, head falling back and eyes closing, unable to withstand the gaze that was burning through to his very soul.

Blowjobs had been infrequent in the past, but he was no stranger to them. However, if what he'd had before was a blowjob this was something else entirely. What Jay was doing was no mere sex act, or 'playing around.' It was a gift from a sincere giver, as hands, lips, tongue and, very gently, teeth, were applied with the skill only someone who knew firsthand how it felt could employ. Michael's balls were lovingly caressed, kissed, licked, and sucked, as were his inner thighs, cock, and lower belly. Jay never used a single technique or remained focused on one spot long enough to become predictable, constantly treating creating new and different sensations — all beyond anything Michael had ever encountered before or even dreamed of. He never knew that someone could curl your toes and melt you into a puddle so easily.

A callused hand moved up his torso, the warm cinnamon of Jay's skin a striking contrast to his own paler complexion. A second hand joined the first, sliding across firm abdominal muscles, caressing and exploring. Gently those fingers brushed his nipples, causing them to stiffen. Michael arched his back, willing Jay to be more aggressive, to pinch and tug instead of restricting himself to gentle, tentative touches. The message was understood and all Michael could do was writhe on the crumpled sheets in total sensory overload.

His impending orgasm started as a slight tingling in his lower back and balls and grew steadily until he could feel it approaching like a breaking wave. His eyes flew open to find Jay still watching, the look in the man's eyes conveying everything Michael needed to know about the one so lovingly giving him just what he needed. Fighting a losing the battle, he opened his mouth to warn Jay that he was coming when it slammed into him with violent force. "Jay!" he screamed, back arching off the bed.

He was still trying to catch his breath when his grinning lover straddled his chest, gazing down to cheerfully say, "Good morning, *Querido*."

Mind made up to reciprocate this time, Michael said quietly, "Bring that a bit closer." When Jay turned he tentatively lapped at pearly drop of fluid clinging on the end of his lover's cock, before easing his mouth over the head and gently sucking. *Hmmm, not bad at all.*

Looking up at Jay's shocked, questioning eyes, he pulled off to say, "Tell me what you like."

Panting softly, Jay answered, "You know what you like; just do those things to me."

Yes, Michael knew what he liked and Jay was the one teaching him. Wrapping both arms around Jay's slender hips, he pulled him close, taking Jay's hard cock as far into his mouth as he could. He frantically pushed back when he started to gag.

"Easy, Michael, it takes time to learn to throat it," Jay told him. Michael was more cautious this time, only taking half of the length in to his mouth. Working his tongue against the underside — something Jay had done that he'd loved — he was greatly encouraged by his lover's moans.

Taking Jay's cock in as far as he safely could, he worked his tongue against it and then pulled back, applying steady suction. Jay began gently humping, rising up on his knees and grabbing the headboard for leverage.

"Oh God, yes!" Jay cried, his rhythm increasing as he neared orgasm. "Michael, if you don't want me to come in your mouth you'd better stop now!"

Michael hummed and increased the pressure, answering with actions instead of words.

"Ahhh..." Jay exclaimed, muscles going rigid as a splash of semen hit Michael's tongue. Michael was determined not to pull off; if Jay could swallow, then he'd return the favor. Surprisingly, the taste and smell was so exciting that he nearly came again.

Jay slumped against the headboard, taking in air in huge panting gasps. After a few more gentle laps with his tongue Michael reluctantly released his lover's spent flesh.

"Now it's a good morning," Michael said, smugly satisfied that his first attempt at giving oral sex had pleased Jay. "What time do you have to be in class?"

"Nine o'clock," was the murmured reply, garbled because Jay's face was pressed against the headboard.

"We've got time for another round," Michael observed brightly, glancing at the clock.

"Not that I'm complaining or anything," Jay answered, "but I think I've created a monster."

Chapter Fifteen

Michael slowly ambled down the street, focusing on window displays and pointedly ignoring the passers-by. Cars and people became a droning backdrop to the afternoon. His task today was fairly simple — for anyone else, maybe. For him it was a monumental undertaking, requiring every bit of willpower he could muster. Tired of the weakness that prevented him from doing something so simple, today he'd vowed to leave familiar surroundings and walk to his counseling appointment and back — alone. Though still opposed to taking anti-anxiety meds, without their help he wouldn't be able to make it out the door. So, he'd taken them and now was out to prove a point. He could do this.

Thoughts of the bookstore provided a distraction from the here and now, and he closed his eyes, picturing the place he equated with comfort and peace. The slightly musky smell of the leather book bindings, blended with the richer smell of the Kenyan Arabica that his mother brewed throughout the day, filled his mind.

A harsh impact hit his shoulder. "Excuse me," he mumbled, hoping the person would just wander off so he wouldn't have to speak to them further. Instead, the blow was repeated, and this time there was no mistaking it for an accident.

Stubbornly he kept his head down, knowing that looking up would break the spell and he'd hear background noise of cars and people for what they were, leading to panic. The whole point of this exercise was to learn how *not* to do that.

The third time the abuse was dealt it could no longer be ignored and Michael turned to look, immediately wishing he hadn't. He'd recognize that hateful sneer anywhere. "I thought that was you, boy. I heard you was back in town. What's the matter? Wasn't you man enough for the Army?"

The bogey-man from Michael's younger years turned and spat on the sidewalk, causing a pair of middle-aged women to step off the curb. They glared at the offender, but he didn't seem to notice. He never had and never would notice anything but himself, in Michael's opinion.

Crawford Shiller hadn't improved in the looks or manners department since Michael had last seen him. His hair, what was left of it, was longer than he used to wear it, and it looked like the man hadn't shaved in a few days. While that gave some men a mysterious and rugged look, it just made Crawford look unwashed. The plain white wife-beater shirt that stretched tightly across his huge expanse of belly could use a close encounter with a washing machine, and his faded jeans were stained with motor oil and other things too disgusting to even consider. For the millionth time Michael wondered just what his enlightened mother had ever seen in this throwback from a prehistoric age. He wouldn't be a bit surprised to see a club slung over one stooped shoulder and hairy knuckles dragging the ground.

Apparently tired of waiting for a reply, Crawford needled him again. "What? I spent all my hard earned money raising your sorry ass and now you're too good to speak to me." The vile man came closer and Michael caught a whiff of the sour alcohol and tobacco stench remembered from his teen years.

Finally, he found his voice, though his eyes remained focused on the sidewalk. "Go away, Crawford. You're not my stepfather anymore, and I don't want to talk to you." Forcing the words from between gritted teeth, Michael fought to keep his voice steady, unwilling to let on how easily he was intimidated.

"Whoa-ho! What ya gonna do if I don't?" The man laughed, a raspy, ugly sound.

Eyes carefully averted, Michael tried again. "Please, just go," he whispered quietly, hating the desperation in his voice, knowing that appearing weak and vulnerable would only encourage the bully. The politely spoken words were like blood to a shark.

"What's the matter? You afraid of me? Afraid I'll whip your pussy ass like I did when you was a boy?"

The predator stepped closer, crowding Michael against a shop window. Michael finally glanced up, frantically searching for an escape. His eyes met those of an older man who quickly turned away, silently declaring, "Not my problem."

The evil grin on the monster's face grew as Crawford took that opportunity to berate and humiliate his captive audience, sneering, "What cha think you're lookin' at?" to anyone who was brave, curious, or foolish enough to come near.

A familiar, crushing weight slammed into Michael's chest, tightening like a vice. He gasped but no air filled his lungs. Eyes widened in panic, he realized it was too late to fight, he was going under, drowning in his own mind. Though he no longer heard the abusive taunts, he could still see an angry red face and feel spittle showering his face and arms. Crawford continued to taunt, crowding him until their noses were almost touching. *Whoop, whoop, whoop*, sounded the phantom helicopters in Michael's mind.

His vision blackened and he fought the urge to take a blind swing and escape, knowing that if he did he'd probably run straight into people or into the path of a moving car in the state that he was in.

Suddenly, the man was gone and Michael collapsed to the sidewalk, wheezing and struggling for breath, frantically pushing back the grisly images that played behind his eyelids: uniformed soldiers lying on the ground, sightless eyes staring at nothing.

Breath in, breathe out, he heard his counselor's voice say. Grasping onto all he could think to, he focused on memories of Jay, smiling, gesturing wildly while watching TV, head bent over a book while studying, or softly snoring during a nap. Jay, who made everything better simply by existing. Gradually the horror faded, and Michael's heart rate

and breathing slowed as he imagined himself cradled in his lover's arms, humming along with a softly sung Spanish melody.

You're home, you're in Cookesville, he told himself. Slowly he returned to the here and now. When he finally looked up Crawford was still there, now in a heated discussion with Terry, who was a good three inches taller and far more intimidating than the drunken, flabby older man. Although Crawford clearly outweighed the young blond, Terry's weight was muscle, finely honed from gym visits rather than soft fat from too much greasy food and not enough honest work. In a fight between arrogant assholes, Crawford was clearly outmatched.

Michael turned his attention back to the sidewalk and the simple act of breathing, unable to worry about anything else. The constriction in his chest slowly eased and his vision returned to normal. He flinched and tried to pull away when a warm hand grasped his shoulder, but when he looked up it was Terry, not Crawford. Eyes warm with uncharacteristic concern, Terry gently tugged, urging Michael to stand.

An arm was flung around Michael's shoulders and Terry led the way into a small video store. Several inquisitive looks came their way but were quickly averted. Michael suspected that Terry had either said or done something to cause that. He was escorted through the store and into the back, stopping in what looked to be an employee break room.

Terry pushed him down onto a comfortable looking couch, and Michael looked up to find the attractive blond staring, smile somewhat grim but compassionate nonetheless. It wasn't an expression he would have thought Terry capable of wearing. A cup of water was squeezed into his hands as his savior sank onto the couch next to him.

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," he lied out of habit.

Terry didn't look convinced, but didn't argue. Instead he said, "Look, I've been there. Don't pay any attention to that asshole; he's nothing and he can't hurt you." After a moment, Terry rose and stretched. "I have to get back out there and get to work. My boss says you can stay back here as long as you need to." He smirked and added, "Vince hates Crawford, by the way." When he rounded the corner, out of sight, Michael heard, "I'll call someone to come and get you."

Well, damn. That was the last thing he needed, but before he could stop him Terry was gone, and Michael really couldn't bring himself to venture out of the quiet little room at the moment.

Here he was all set to prove that he was getting better and could be out on his own, but instead had proved just the opposite. While grateful for Terry's intervention, he did wish that no one had to be called. He sighed, knowing it was hopeless. There was no way he'd

be able to get back out there on his own. He pulled out his cell phone and quickly called his therapist, making the excuse of a family emergency as a reason to cancel the appointment he'd be unable to keep.

He settled back down on the couch and wondered who Terry had called. Mom? He hoped not. She was working and would have to close the store to come. That thought brought guilt. Mom had enough problems without having to worry about him. His sister? Again, he hoped not. He didn't want Angie worrying and smothering him, either. Besides, not only was she preparing for finals, she had extra shifts at the hospital this week and didn't need to be bothered with a wimp of a brother who couldn't even stand up to a weak, useless old man.

Draining the water that Terry had given him, he crumpled the paper cup into a ball, taking out his frustrations on the innocent cup before tossing it into the trash can. He lay down and curled up in a fetal position, suddenly very tired. Anxiety episodes always sapped his strength and left him feeling drained. Once settled in, he waited to see who would come to get him, planning what to say.

Michael woke, feeling warm and secure, to the familiar sound of a soothing Spanish ballad. Something soft brushed against his cheek and he looked up at a mass of blue fuzz. Opening his eyes revealed two things: he was now covered by a fluffy blue blanket, and his head was no longer resting against the arm of the couch where he'd left it.

"Hey, *Querido*," came the murmured greeting from above. Rolling onto his back, head nestled on a firm thigh, he realized where he was and why he felt so secure. Somehow Jay had managed to settle himself on the couch and cradle Michael's head in his lap without waking him.

A warm restraint held him when he tried to sit up. Concern was evident, but Jay's expression also said what Michael already suspected: Jay loved and was worried about him. No words were necessary. Despite the horrible afternoon, he couldn't help feeling a touch of elation at the thought.

"How long have I been asleep?"

"About an hour, give or take." Michael looked up to find Terry leaning against the door frame.

Gentle fingers stroked through Michael's hair, and he left any conversation up to Jay to handle while he relaxed, letting the petting melt away the tension.

"He gonna be all right?" the handsome blond asked, pointing with his chin to Michael.

“Yeah,” Jay replied, studying Michael’s face before turning back to Terry. “Yeah, he’s gonna be just fine.” Michael could tell by the way Jay looked at his former lover that whatever had passed between them was long gone. Until that moment he hadn’t even thought to be jealous, but seeing them now, he knew there was no reason to be. No animosity or any strong feelings existed between them at all. They weren’t even friends, just acquaintances. Michael breathed a silent sigh of relief, relaxing into the warm thigh beneath his head. “Thanks again for calling me, man,” Jay said. “I owe you one.”

“And don’t you forget it.” Apparently satisfied that Michael was now in good hands, Terry winked and said, “I’ve got to get back to work; y’all behave yourselves back here.” Then he was gone.

Michael struggled to sit up then, embarrassed by the past few hours and anxious to just go home and try to forget the whole thing.

Again Jay stopped him. “Just lie there a minute; I’m in no hurry and I’m comfortable. Extremely comfortable,” he added with a wink.

They remained there in silence, Jay’s arm draped over his Michael’s chest, the only sounds their breathing and the flickering bit of conversation that wafted in from the video store through the open door.

For his part, Michael was enjoying lying with his head in Jay’s lap, one hand stroking the strong, tanned arm enfolding him.

Finally, the silence was broken by Jay. “Wanna tell me about it?”

Michael shrugged. “Nothing to tell, really. My asshole of an ex-stepfather decided to show up and be his normal bastard self.”

Jay nodded as though he understood completely. Perhaps he did, having spent so much time with the family. He was bound to have heard of the infamous Crawford Shiller by now.

“You okay?” Jay asked.

Content to be nestled in his lover’s arms, Michael replied, “I am now.”

“Sarah and Angie told me about him,” Jay said, confirming Michael assumptions. “Your mom carries a lot of guilt, you know.”

“Guilt? About what?”

“She feels she should have shielded you more or, better yet, left the man a long time ago. She thinks she failed you by staying with him, that by not stopping it she was as responsible for the abuse as he was.”

This was sure news to Michael. “That’s ridiculous! Mom would never harm a fly.”

Jay nodded, a sad smile upon his full lips. “Yeah, that’s what she thinks. From what she’s told me she didn’t believe she could make it on her own, and I secretly think he did his part to convince her of that.”

“I never knew she felt that way.” It saddened Michael to think of his giving, caring mother, harboring a burden of guilt for something that wasn’t her fault. Yeah, she could have married someone nicer, but one of her best traits was the ability to play whatever hand was dealt to the best of her ability. She also had a knack for seeing only the good in other people. Sometimes even seeing good where none existed.

Jay’s hands idly stroked Michael’s stomach. “She loves you and Angie so much, you know; only wanted good things for you. It nearly killed her when she heard your unit was hit. She immediately thought the worst.” Jay grew quiet, staring at a movie poster hanging on the wall.

“Damned the fucking media circus!!” he suddenly growled. “We knew that ten troops were killed that day and your family thought you were one of them until they got the call. Your granddad had to take it; your mom was practically hysterical, thinking they were calling to confirm your death. Angie was just sitting there white as a sheet, and your grandma was in her rocking chair, reading the Bible and praying.”

“What? You mean you were there with them?”

“Where else would I be? I wouldn’t have told them for the world but I was scared shitless!”

“What? Why?” Michael shot up from the couch, turning to face a now furiously blushing Jay. “I know you care for my family but ‘scared shitless’? You hadn’t even met me then.”

Jay smiled sheepishly and urged Michael to lie back down. Then he proceeded to tell about a lonely young man far from home, the strange red-haired woman who befriended him, the warm loving family that took him in and treated him like one of their own, and a picture of a handsome young man in an army uniform. He concluded with, “So now you know. I was hopelessly in love before I even met you.”

Michael grinned.

“What?”

“Angie told me about that picture but I didn’t believe her. Do you really keep it in your sock drawer?”

“How did she...?” Jay seemed to think on it a moment, then shrugged. “Well, no, I don’t keep it in my sock drawer now. I figure it’s safe to keep it on my dresser.”

“And what would you have done if I had been a total asshole?”

“You forget, I know your family and I’ve heard all their stories. There was no way you were an asshole.” With that pronouncement Jay leaned in and kissed him, slowly and gently at first, then more passionately and possessively, as if he never wanted to stop.

“Hey guys, I hate to break up a tender moment, but you think you could go home now? I need to lock up.” They both looked up to find Terry standing in the doorway, jangling a ring of keys impatiently. Although the tone was probably intended to be condescending and arrogant, as was the accompanying sneer, Terry had exposed his soft underbelly today and Michael was truly grateful.

He decided to keep it to himself. If Terry wanted people to think him an arrogant prick, who was he to dispel the notion? But Michael now knew that Angie was right; the man did possess a decent side.

It didn’t escape notice, though, as he left the store arm in arm with Jay, that Terry’s eyes followed their every move, the look on the man’s face akin to envy.

Chapter Sixteen

Michael missed his weekly counseling session but it gave him time to reevaluate the scene with Crawford and see it through the eyes of an adult rather than the frightened eyes of a child. Ashamed for letting the man bully him, he promised to never let it happen again. It was extremely embarrassing him that Jay and Terry bore witness to his humiliation, though neither mentioned it afterwards.

Instead, Jay was warm and caring, studiously avoiding any mention of the incident. Whenever Michael thought of it, Jay seemed to know, lending silent support, be it with a look, a touch, or with sex. But that led to problems also. Michael looked forward their time together, dreading the end of the evening when Jay left to go back to the Zoo. He didn't sleep very well alone and felt dependent and needy, worried Jay would tire of him and wander off in search of someone not so...broken.

Yet, when it was time to go shopping, to the doctor, or even to visit family, Jay was there, smiling and happy to play chauffeur. And when it was time for Michael's next counseling session, he was dropped off at the door with a discreet kiss. "I have to run an errand, but I'll be waiting in the lobby when you come out," Jay promised.

Michael paused in the doorway of his therapist's office. He knew he needed to be here, needed this, but still it was hard. When Jay's car was completely out of sight, he sighed and entered the nondescript brick building.

The middle-aged receptionist smiled when he signed his name on the appointment book before sitting down to wait. He had just picked up a copy of *Great Outdoors* when the heavy oak door beside the reception desk opened and the man he was waiting to see stepped out, smiling and beckoning him to enter.

When Michael stepped past, his counselor closed the door and asked, "So, Michael, what did you bring me today?"

Gideon Rafferty was a tall, imposing black man who reminded Michael of a pro basketball player, with his long fingers, lanky limbs, and shaved head. He knew it was stereotyping, but couldn't help imagining this powerhouse of a man dribbling a ball down center court to execute a stunning slam dunk. He certainly hoped the man could help him slam dunk his emotional issues as easily.

In answer to his counselor's question, Michael crossed the room to the now-familiar stereo and inserted the customary CD he always brought to his sessions, relying on a musical selection to set the mood.

Gideon 'call me Raff' sat on a comfortable looking leather chair, long legs splayed, elbows on knees, leaning forward and facing the couch Michael normally sprawled on for their sessions. He was a big man and if he didn't have such a relaxed manner Michael

would have found him intimidating. It wasn't often that he came across someone bigger than he was, and Raff was huge.

A pensive look was replaced by one of pleasant surprise as the first strains of music filled the spacious office. "Rob Thomas?"

Michael set the CD case down on the bookshelf that housed the player and took his customary place on the couch that was his for the next hour, to the strains of *Get Back to Good*.

"That's an interesting choice for you, Michael, so I'm assuming there's a special meaning. What are you trying to tell me today?" The deep rumble of the Raff's voice had a soothing quality that seemed out of place with his dominating presence. Michael guessed that if he didn't do something to offset his imposing size, he wouldn't be very good as a counselor because clients would be afraid of him.

Michael sighed and settled back into the couch to begin his plea for help. "I want to get better. I'm tired of being this way." He sincerely meant it with every fiber of his being: he wanted to live a normal life, free of panic attacks, free of nightmares, free of guilt and self-recriminations.

"And what way is that, Michael?"

"Weak, needy, afraid...helpless."

Rafe scribbled on a notebook and then said, "I want you to think about each of those things, and explain why you use these terms in relation to yourself. Let's start with the first one, as you mentioned it first. Why do you feel weak?"

"Because I am!" Michael huffed. "I can't do one damned thing for myself! I can't shop for groceries, drive — hell, I missed my appointment with you last week because I couldn't walk a few blocks to get here!" One hand combed through his hair, pulling tightly.

Raff mused for a moment, then replied, "Ok, you've told me what you can't do, now tell me the things you can." His voice remained calm, soothing, unaffected by Michael's obvious annoyance.

"I just told you; I can't do anything! I'm useless."

"Michael, you're not useless. You're just looking at things from one direction and not at the big picture. We'll try another approach. Let's start with this week. Tell me what you did on Monday."

Michael thought about it for a few moments before replying, "I cooked breakfast for me and Mom, then I went to work in the bookstore."

“Ah, so you can do some things after all,” Raff commented, a wry smile exposing even, white teeth that appeared even lighter in contrast with his dark skin.

“What? I made breakfast and helped out in my mother’s store. It’s not even a real job! She’s just letting me help out because I can’t do anything else.” He knew he sounded like a whiny child, but dammit, he was tired of being such a burden to everyone!

“I doubt that very seriously. Is she always there at the store watching your every move, worried you’ll make a mistake?”

Michael’s silence answered for him.

“That’s what I thought. Is she making up excuses to go out, leaving you in charge so that you’ll feel needed?”

Again Michael remained quiet.

“Has it even occurred to you that not only does she like having you near, but that she might actually need the help? Let me ask you this: if you weren’t there would she have to hire someone?”

“Yes,” Michael grudgingly answered. “She had someone there who quit on her two weeks before I came home. Sometimes she has to run errands, or go to an appointment. She’s this tiny little thing, no bigger than a minute. Stocking the shelves is hard for her. Not to mention it’d take her like a million trips just to haul the books back and forth.”

“And why is that?”

Michael shrugged and raised an eyebrow, wondering where Raff was going with this. “Because I’m stronger and can carry more.” He resisted the urge to add, ‘Well, duh!’ He respected the man too much for that. Still, he hoped they’d get to the point soon; he was rapidly losing patience.

Raff leaned back into his chair, smiling as if he’d achieved some great goal.

“What?” Michael demanded.

“You just admitted that you’re strong, not weak.”

“Physically stronger than Mom, but who isn’t?”

“It’s not muscles that make you strong, Michael; it’s the desire to use those muscles to help others who aren’t as strong. Tell me, who have you been physically strong for this week?”

Michael thought back over the past few days, remembering helping his mom in the bookstore, moving the refrigerator for Grandma so she could clean behind it, and helping his grandfather work on his tractor out in the barn. There was no way Gramps could have managed the hoist on his own.

Raff must have gathered from his expression that several examples had come to mind, for he moved on without waiting for a verbal answer. “Now, who have you been emotionally strong for this week?”

Again, there were plenty of instances to choose from. Although he hadn’t driven himself, he had gone to his grandparent’s when they needed help, even driving the tractor for awhile, though he was still uncomfortable being out-of-doors. He also recalled the conversation with his mother when he’d tried to absolve her of any guilt over his former stepfather, artfully keeping the conversation with Jay out of it. And then there was Ryan, who was finally coming to terms with the past, and had begun entertaining thoughts of a future. Finally, Michael looked up, understanding dawning on him.

“See, you are strong. You’re strong for your family and you’re strong for your friends. You’ll do for them what you won’t do for yourself. Am I right?”

Raff had a very creative way of making a point sometimes, but Michael was forced to admit, “Yeah, you’re right.” He should have known the man wouldn’t leave it at that.

“And why is that?”

After a moment of careful consideration, he had to confess, “I don’t know.”

Raff disagreed, “Ah, I think you do, Michael. We’ll continue our session, but I want you to think about that, and before you leave I want an answer, all right?”

Michael nodded, hoping that a reasonable response would occur to him something within the next forty minutes or so.

“Let’s move on, shall we? Why do you think you’re needy?”

That question didn’t require a lot of thought – it was an issue that constantly plagued his mind. “Well, I need someone to drive me everywhere I go, for one. Gramps loaned me a perfectly good car, but I’m scared to drive it. I can’t go anywhere alone without freaking out. And I’m clingy,” he added as an afterthought.

Rather than address Michael’s self-recriminations, the sly counselor abruptly changed tactics. “I’ve met your grandparents, did you know that?”

Michael wondered what this had to do with anything, but answered truthfully, “No.”

"I attended a bake sale and auction to raise money for the volunteer fire department out their way," he explained, settling further back into his chair. "Your grandmother makes wonderful apple pies. That must take a lot of work, don't you think? Picking the apples and peeling them. Especially with her fingers like they are. Her arthritis is pretty bad, isn't it?"

Visualizing the bent and twisted hands that so lovingly cooked dinner every Sunday, Michael replied, "Yeah, but she doesn't pick the apples herself, and if her hands are bad she gets Mom or Angie to peel them for her." He still didn't see what this had to do with him feeling weak and useless, but was more than happy to discuss his grandmother with a fellow admirer.

"Who picks the apples?" Raff asked, sounding genuinely curious.

"Well, I used to. I don't know who does now. I suppose Angie or some of her friends. Jay might do it," he added.

"Jay. I don't believe you've mentioned him before. Is he family?"

Michael almost snorted at the inadvertent double-entendre, but managed to divert it into a cough, instead. He couldn't help smiling, though, thinking of the dark-haired Texan who had become so important to him and his family. "Oh, he's a friend of the family," was all Michael divulged for the moment. There'd be time to discuss that aspect of his life later. Although he suddenly found himself eager to do so, he didn't want to interrupt what his counselor was trying to accomplish with the Grandma analogy.

"So, you, your sister, or Jay picks the apples, Angie peels them, then your grandmother bakes the pies?"

"Yep," Michael answered, stomach rumbling loudly in response to thoughts of those pies, which were a personal favorite.

Out of the blue Raff asked, "Michael, what kind of car does your grandmother drive?"

He thought the question strange, but answered, "Well, she has a Buick, but she doesn't exactly drive it."

"Oh, why not?" Raff inquired, as though Grandma's driving habits were of the utmost importance.

Clearly visualizing the woman in his mind, there was sorrow in his voice when Michael answered, "She can't see very well anymore, and with her arthritis..."

Cutting him off mid-sentence, Raff asked, "Then how do you suppose she got to the benefit that night?"

“I guess Grandpa drove her.”

“Well, I want to tell you, the bidding was fierce for Miss Eileen’s apple pies.” A wide smile accompanied the words.

Michael snickered, knowing from past experience how popular Grandma’s pies were. “I can only imagine.”

“Michael, how would you describe your grandmother?”

He thought it over for a minute, about the petite but feisty woman who was the driving force behind the family. “Grandma? Well, she’s kind, but strict, she doesn’t take anything off of anybody, but she’s always there when someone needs her.”

“Yet you think she’s needy.”

“No, I don’t!” Michael nearly yelled. How dare this man say such a thing? She was one of the strongest people he knew!

“Well, someone else drives her where she needs to go and others have to do things for her. If that makes you needy, doesn’t it make her needy, too?” Once again calm logic had led Michael exactly where Raff intended it to.

“You sneaky bastard!” Michael was floored by the roundabout way the point had been made, his own words being used against him with remarkable skill.

Raff smiled indulgently, and then continued their discussion. “I am curious though; why do you say you’re clingy? You’ve never mentioned that before.”

“Well...” Michael wondered how best to explain without saying too much. “There’s someone new in my life, and when they’re around I have to be touching them, you know? And when he’s not there...” His mouth dropped open as he realized that, once again, words were not his friends.

“Ah. So now we’re getting somewhere. You have a boyfriend. I want to remind you that you don’t have to answer that if it makes you uncomfortable. But if it does, we will be discussing the reason why.” Though Raff’s tone was firm, Michael didn’t feel threatened, trusting the man who’d proven time and again to have his best interests at heart.

It was that trust that allowed him to admit, “Yes, I have a boyfriend.”

“Am I to understand that his name is Jay?” The acceptance on Raff’s face set Michael at ease, so he smiled and nodded, happy that here was yet another person he could talk to about his budding relationship, someone who wouldn’t judge and who’d probably be happy for him. He’d known that he’d have to discuss his being gay with Raff at some point, and he’d been avoiding the issue of Ryan even though it needed to be divulged.

Raff revisited Michael's earlier words. "When Jay is around you want to touch him, and when he's not around you wish he were. Is that right?"

"Yeah, that's pretty much it," Michael replied, studying his shoelaces.

"That's not clingy. What you're feeling is what anyone in love feels for their partner. Does he feel the same for you?"

Michael shrugged. "I think so."

"Do you consider him clingy or needy?"

"No."

Raff glanced over his notes for a moment. "You mentioned that you can't shop alone. Does Jay go with you?"

"Yes."

"Does he mind going with you?"

"No, in fact, he says he wants to take me and spends that time asking me about things I like, showing me what he likes, and then we go home and cook together."

"Ah, so you go 'home,' do you?" Raff asked, with a broad smile that involved his whole face.

Realizing his *faux pas*, Michael quickly clarified, "No, we don't live together. I was talking about my apartment."

"No, I don't think you were. I think in this case, 'home' is wherever Jay is. You're in love."

Realization swept over Michael as he saw the truth in those words. "Yeah, I think you're right; Jay is home."

"Well, I'm truly happy for you, but I didn't know that you were gay."

"Is that a problem?" Michael's heart skipped a beat, worried that he'd misread Raff.

"No, it's not a problem for me, if it's not a problem for you. You see, we try to match clients with counselors of similar backgrounds. You were matched with me because I suffered conditions similar to yours following Desert Storm. If you had disclosed your sexual preference, we could have matched you with a different counselor."

“No! I don’t want another counselor!” Michael exclaimed, terrified that he’d have to go through the painful details all over again with someone new.

He was rewarded with a smile. “Well I’m glad, because I like working with you and I feel we’re making real progress. So, let’s get back to it, shall we? We’ve now ruled out weak and needy. Tell me why you feel afraid?”

Raff was quite familiar with the nightmares already: Jimmy’s screams, Ryan’s begging Michael to let him go, and of Jimmy and Ryan’s shouting, “It should have been you!” So today Michael told of the encounter with Crawford, of his helplessness and inability to defend himself from somebody physically inferior to him.

When he was finished, Raff commented, “I think you’re giving this man more power than is his.”

At Michael’s raised eyebrow he continued, “You’re using him as a bogey-man, a reason not to succeed and be happy. Let me ask you this: when you became involved with Jay, did you worry about what this man would say?”

“Yes,” Michael confessed.

“Why? You don’t like him, he’s no longer a part of your family, and his opinion shouldn’t matter to you. Why do you care what he thinks?”

“Because he’s a racist bigot who’ll shoot his mouth off to anyone who’ll listen.”

“And who’ll listen to him? Other racist bigots?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe it’s not Crawford you’re afraid of. Maybe he personifies everyone in the world who might not agree with your relationship. If someone in Seattle thinks homosexuality is wrong, does that bother you?”

“Well, no. Why should it?”

“Good question. Why doesn’t it bother you?”

“Because they’re in Seattle, and I’m in Cookeville, and they can’t affect me.”

Again Raff beamed like he’d just solved the mysteries of the universe.

“I don’t get it,” Michael admitted.

“Michael, it makes no difference if they’re in Seattle or Cookeville, these people don’t matter. The ones who do matter are you, Jay, and your family. How does your family — your immediate family — feel about you being in a relationship with another man?”

He didn’t even have to stop and think of the answer to that one. “Mom and Angie are thrilled because they like Jay. Grandma and Grandpa don’t really understand, but they accept it because they love me. And they like him, too.”

“Isn’t that all you need? I’m not saying it’ll be easy; there’s a lot of Crawfords out there in the world. But do you really want to live your life to please someone who was cruel to you and your family? Someone who you know to be a bad person? Why are you giving this man a hold over you? He doesn’t have any power on his own, Michael, you’re giving it to him.”

Michael pondered the words, realizing they made sense. Then he remembered what he’d told Jay the day they met: *‘Those people don’t matter.’*

“Our time is almost over for today. Have you thought of the answer to my question?” Raff asked as he rose and stretched, back arching with an audible ‘pop’.

“What question?” Michael thought he’d answered every question he’d been asked. But then again, there’d been so many.

“The one I asked earlier: why you’ll do for things for your family and friends that you won’t do for yourself.”

It took him a moment before the answer came to him. “Because they mean more to me than I do?”

Raff smiled like a proud parent. “It’s not necessarily a bad thing to put others before yourself; a lot of admirable people do that. The trick is to accomplish it without neglecting yourself. Think you can do that?”

“I can try.” Michael rose from the couch and crossed the room to retrieve his CD. “Look, when Jay gets here, can I bring him in to meet you?”

While his back was turned he heard the door open behind him and Raff’s deep rumble say, “Please, come in.”

Michael turned around, wondering who it could be. The next client was never invited in while one was still in the room. What he saw was like the sun coming up over the horizon. Talk about timing! True to his word, Jay had come to take him home and was now shaking hands with Raff, a somewhat bewildered expression on his face.

“Hi, babe,” Michael greeted, hoping Jay wouldn’t mind that he’d acknowledged their relationship to a stranger — a stranger to Jay, that is. Apparently he’d said the right thing; however, if Jay’s eager grin was anything to go by.

After introductions and a few moments of polite conversation, he and Jay took their leave, hand-in-hand as they left the office. All in all, Michael thought it had been a very insightful session.

Chapter Seventeen

“Hey, look what I’ve got!” Jay held up a DVD case while balancing a pizza box in his other hand. “Mom sent it. I can’t wait for you to see!”

He leaned in and kissed Michael before handing over the case and stepping past into the cozy apartment. Depositing the pizza box on the counter, he made himself at home, finding plates and ginger ales and placing them beside the pizza. “First we eat, then we watch.”

Obligingly Michael took his customary stool at the counter, studying the disk. “What is it?” he asked.

“That, my friend,” Jay said with a smile, “is my family and my home. I couldn’t make the annual cookout, so Mom filmed it for me... for us,” he quickly corrected.

Michael’s voice was wistful when he said, “I’m sorry you couldn’t be there. I know how much your family means to you.”

Even if he hadn’t been busy preparing for finals, Jay wouldn’t have left Michael for the five days it would have taken to attend. Besides, there was always next year when, hopefully, Michael would go with him. “Ah, it’s nothing,” he said. “Besides, there’ll be other get-togethers.”

Popping the top on a ginger ale, Jay handed it to Michael before heaping both plates with sausage pizza. He bowed his head and Michael asked the blessing. *The perfect domestic scene*, he thought with a great deal of satisfaction. “How was your day?” he asked between bites of pizza.

“Mmmm,” was Michael’s non-committal answer. “And yours?”

Jay sighed. “I am so glad this is almost over. I don’t think I could handle one more term like this one.” Once more he was reminded that graduation meant decisions to be made. He hadn’t brought it up yet, but he was hoping to convince his lover to go back to Brownsville with him, even though he’d feel guilty for tearing Michael away from his family so soon after their reunion.

Michael remained silent and Jay wondered if similar thoughts were running through that blond head; that after graduation Jay would return home, leaving him behind. *Never!* Now that he had him, Jay didn’t intend to give up without a fight.

Silently they ate their pizza, each lost in their own thoughts.

After dinner, they cleaned up the kitchen and took their drinks in to the living area. Michael settled on the couch and Jay turned on the TV, inserting the homemade DVD into the player.

“You are gonna love this,” he said, starting the video with the remote and taking his customary place next to Michael.

A smiling young woman’s face came into view, hair, skin, and eyes a perfect match for Jay’s. “That’s Maria,” Jay said, “she’s my oldest sister. And that’s Theresa.” Another dark-haired girl entered the camera’s view, a dead ringer for the first, only a few years younger. “She’s next in line after Maria.” A young man who bore a striking resemblance to the two girls stepped before the camera. “There’s Cousin Angel. Do you remember me telling you about him?”

Michael nodded, watching with rapt attention as Jay’s extended family, one by one, approached the camera and waved. The camera panned to a massive table set up outside, laden with food. As they watched, more people arrived onscreen, each bringing a covered dish. Then a man appeared, struggling under the weight of a loaded tray.

“There it is,” Jay exclaimed, mouth watering at the thought of what that tray held. “*Cabrito!* Man, I wish I could have some of that.”

“*Cabrito?*” Michael asked.

“A young goat. When we have family dinners someone always cooks a goat.”

Seeing his lover’s scrunched face and wrinkled nose, he remarked, “What? You mean to tell me you’ve never had goat? Man, you don’t know what you’re missing.” Jay continued narrating the video until Michael suddenly went rigid, all color draining from his face. “Michael! What’s wrong, *Querido?*” Quickly turning off the television Jay turned his trembling lover until he could see his face. Michael’s eyes were tightly closed, tears trailing down his cheeks. “Michael, talk to me, please! Tell me what’s wrong.”

Michael refused to reply. Jay held him, stroking his back and singing softly in Spanish, something he did whenever nightmares occurred. Eventually Michael calmed enough to be taken into the bedroom and put to bed. He didn’t resist the pill that Jay handed to him with a cup of water. Once sure his lover was asleep, Jay crept back into the living area to figure out what had set Michael off.

Turning on the TV and keeping the volume low, Jay watched the video again, advancing to the part that had caused Michael’s reaction. Then he saw it and was amazed that he’d never thought of this before. Someone was filming four of his cousins playing around in his uncle’s Jeep. They were yelling and laughing, tearing across the sand on his uncle’s ranch. Damn. It seemed that the place Jay knew, loved, and couldn’t wait to get back to bore a startling resemblance to a battle-torn place half a world away.

Suddenly he remembered something Michael had mentioned earlier and crossed the floor to the small desk that held a computer. Searching through the pictures in the ‘My Pictures’ folder, he located the one he was looking for, gently tracing his fingers over the

familiar features of his beloved. His lips drew up into a smile, mimicking the expressions of the three young men in the image. They were all in uniform, but Michael's shirt was partially unbuttoned, exposing a thin white T-shirt stretched tightly across a well-defined chest. He dwarfed the other two men in the picture.

Jay paused, contemplating the sight of Michael, knowing the picture was taken before the horrific events that now haunted him. Then he clicked on other pictures in the folder, looking for the one he'd been told about. He paused every one of the smiling Corporal Ritter, taking a few moments to admire the handsome man that was, for now at least, his.

If he had any say in the matter Michael always would be.

Several of the photographs contained the same two men from the first, and Jay wondered who they were. Due to the sheer number that featured all three men, it was clear that they were good friends. The strange thing about the two, though, was that there were no pictures of either of them without the other. Then it occurred to him that Michael had mentioned them. Sorrow gripped him like a fist when he matched descriptions with the men pictured.

"Small blond with laughing eyes," Michael had said. So this was Ryan. "Copper-top with a zillion freckles." Jay realized that he was looking at the ill-fated Jimmy. It broke his heart to see the two men that fate had torn apart, laughing and happy and unaware of what was coming. These were the friends that Michael had cared so much about, and for whom he now carried a tremendous burden of guilt.

Jay continued searching until he found what he was looking for: pictures of Jeeps, Humvees, and other vehicles kicking up huge clouds of dust as they rode single file over a bleak and harsh landscape; a landscape that eerily reminded him of his own home. Now he knew what had set his lover off. Though saddened that the dream of taking Michael 'home to Mama' was just that for now — a dream; he could never ask his lover to live in a place that would make him uncomfortable. Carefully he closed the images, all but for the first one he'd looked at. He studied it more closely now, silently mourning for those two young lovers who were forever denied the chance for the happiness he hoped to have with Michael. He mourned also for the young man Michael had been, so free and unburdened by guilt, fear, and remorse. It was past midnight when he shut down the computer, hoping Michael wouldn't find out he'd used it and think he'd been snooping. Sitting there in the quiet apartment, hot tears rolled down his face as he cried for the three young soldiers.

Jay awoke with a start to find himself still sitting in the computer chair, the pale moonlight having given way to the rising sun. He quietly crept into the bedroom to check on the still sleeping Michael, marveling at the pure masculine beauty that sprawled so inelegantly across the tangled sheets. In that moment Jay realized that he wasn't debating the future anymore. If he couldn't take this man with him then he simply wouldn't return

home. Michael meant more to him than the place of his birth and raising. Michael was his home. Jay also didn't think his lover was ready to leave his own newly-rediscovered family, doctor, or counselor. Though Michael seemed to be making progress, a move right now might prove a major setback.

Jay's mind was made up, and he knew in his heart that it was the right decision. He'd call his parents later and then he'd call Uncle Mario, thanking the man for the offered employment opportunity and asking for references for his continued search. After classes ended today, he'd pay a visit to his faculty advisor to request assistance with job placement. Until then he'd enjoy the quiet time here in the early morning hours with his lover.

He stripped his clothes off, tossing them carelessly to the floor. Easing down onto the warm bed, careful not to disturb Michael, he curled into that warm body and gently brushed his lips against his lover's.

Michael mumbled sleepily.

"Hey," Jay whispered, leaning in for another kiss. "I didn't mean to wake you. I forget what a light sleeper you are sometimes." Usually though, after an anxiety attack, Michael slept like the dead.

Michael pursed his lips but kept them firmly pressed together, causing Jay to laugh. Michael was extremely embarrassed by morning breath, and until he'd had coffee and brushed his teeth, Jay could expect no tongue.

Normally, during sex, Jay was the aggressor, but warm arms reached out and pulled him closer, Michael burrowing into his neck. His cock rose in response to the sudden display of affection. Michael squirmed until he was on top and then looked down with a grin, the evidence of his own arousal pressing back against Jay's.

This unexpected glimpse of his lover's playful side was an extreme turn on, especially in light of what had happened just a few hours ago. Jay briefly wondered what had inspired such uncharacteristic behavior before deciding it didn't really matter. What mattered was that he had a warm and willing man in bed who didn't seem too badly affected by the previous night, and an hour before they needed to get up and moving. He didn't plan on wasting a single moment.

Pressing their lips together, he momentarily forgot about his lover's aversion to morning kisses, but was disappointed when Michael's mouth slipped away to his neck instead—but not for long. A gentle kiss turned aggressive and Jay was delightfully surprised to feel teeth scrape his neck; something that he found extremely arousing, but that none of his previous lovers had understood. Michael not only understood, but enjoyed the giving as much as Jay enjoyed the receiving.

Jay's cock was fully hard now and meeting Michael's stroke for stroke as their humping grew frantic. Mouth, tongue and teeth sucked, nibbled, and scraped a trail from his neck to his pecs before latching onto a nipple and working it aggressively. Arching into the contact, he hissed between clenched teeth.

One hardening nub was traded for the other, but the delicious friction suddenly left his lower body, replaced by a firm, slick grip. Where had Michael gotten the lube? Then it didn't matter anymore as Jay's cock was expertly worked in that tight fist. If he didn't know that Michael was fairly new to gay sex, he'd be jealous of just where the man had gained experience, for there was nothing shy and unsure about how Michael stroked Jay with the precise pressure that he loved, alternating the tempo of the strokes and keeping him off balance. Just when he felt his balls drawing up and that familiar tingling in his belly that heralded an approaching climax, Michael would slow down, or stop entirely. At Jay's moan of protest, Michael just grinned, fully aware of the effect of the teasing.

Reaching the point of pleading for release, Jay found himself flipped face down upon the bed, his hips lifted unceremoniously and plopped onto a pillow that had appeared from nowhere. The air against his exposed back was cool, but only for a moment. His lover covered his body, resuming the earlier attention to Jay's sensitive neck. When that mouth opened and teeth lightly sank into his shoulder, Jay couldn't help but shiver with anticipation.

In their brief time together Michael hadn't indicated wanting to top, and Jay hadn't pushed the issue, even though he secretly longed for it, knowing he'd be Michael's first. "I want to see you, Michael," he said, rolling to face his lover. "I take you from behind most of the time because I thought it would be easier for you, but you don't have to be easy with me; I can take it."

Michael paused a moment before leaning in and whispering, "Mine," then lifting Jay's legs and placing them over his shoulders.

Jay nearly came from the possessive growl in his lover's voice. "Yes!" he agreed, loving this self-assured side that Michael only displayed in bed. Again it crossed his mind to wonder just where the new-found lovemaking skills had come from, but the truth was revealed as the man awkwardly prepared his ass. Wherever he'd gotten the knowledge, it wasn't first hand. In his haste, Michael had forgotten to put on a condom first, and now was finding the task daunting with both hands slicked with lube. Jay took pity on him and took the package, deftly ripping it with his teeth. He removed the latex within and worked it down Michael's engorged cock with practiced ease.

With Michael poised at his entrance, time suddenly stood still. They held each other's gaze as Michael slowly, slowly lowered himself down, nearly folded Jay in half. Jay was reaching the point where he was going to ask his lover to ease up, when Michael suddenly lost all revulsion to morning kisses and firmly brought his open mouth down to Jay's, demanding entrance at the same moment that his cock breached Jay's ass. Jay

moaned, overwhelmed by both the unexpected kiss and the exquisite feeling of being entered.

Michael pulled back, panting. “Damn! Why didn’t you tell me this felt so good?”

With a wicked grin Jay replied, “I did.”

Concern appeared on Michael’s face, his brow creasing. “You won’t let me hurt you, will you?”

“*Querido*, I know you’d never hurt me. In fact, if you don’t speed things up, I just might scream.”

Michael grinned devilishly and proceeded to do exactly that, driving in forcefully, losing them both in the hard, pounding rhythm.

Jay reached down and began stroking his own cock when Michael’s mouth descended again, folding him over and repeatedly pounding ‘that spot.’ Pushing in hard, Michael stilled, moaning into Jay’s mouth as he came.

Frantically Jay worked his own flesh, finding release a moment later, just as Michael collapsed beside him. They lay panting, caught in the afterglow.

“Damn, Jay! I didn’t know it could be like that! Is that what it’s like when you do me?”

Jay looked over at Michael and smiled lazily, feeling well and truly sated. “It’s amazing being in you, but I loved the feeling of you in me, too.”

Michael kissed him again, pulling him into a tight embrace. Suddenly Jay realized just how bright the room was and looked over at the bedside clock. “Oh, shit; I’m gonna be late!”

He’d love nothing better than to spend the day here, but he had to study and complete his final project. Reluctantly he left the warm, safe haven of his lover’s bed to start the day. After a quick shower he threw on a combination of his and Michael’s clothes, and then sat back down on the edge of the bed. “Michael, do you mind if I ask you a question?”

Michael, looking sated and sleepy, replied, “You can ask me anything.”

“I don’t know how to say this but, you’re usually so unsure in bed and a little...”

“Awkward?”

Jay chuckled softly. “I was going to say, ‘not so aggressive.’ What came over you this morning? Not that I’m complaining or anything.”

“You make things better,” Michael replied simply, as if that explained everything.

Perhaps it did. And if it helped to chase away the phantoms, Jay was all for it.

Chapter Eighteen

“Michael, I think you’re aware that you’re making excellent progress, but there’s a topic you keep skirting that really needs to be brought out into the open: Jimmy.”

Michael swallowed hard. Yes, he knew it needed to be said, but whenever he thought of the outgoing young man who’d died too young he broke into a cold sweat. “I’m not ready to talk about that yet.”

“No?” An arched brow was the first indication that his counselor wasn’t going to accept that answer this time. “And when will you be ready to talk about it? A week? A month? How long are you going to poke at the open wound of your guilt, Michael, before you treat it and allow it to heal?”

The words that he’d repeated so often over the past few months were now an automatic response to any question that raised his anxiety level. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Raff’s calm demeanor was a counterpoint to Michael’s agitation as he prodded, “Have you grieved?”

Caught off guard by the absurd question—not at all what he suspected—Michael sputtered, “What?”

His counselor’s voice held its normal mild inquisitiveness, as though he were merely asking about the weather and not discussing Michael’s worst nightmare. “Have you grieved for your friend?” When he didn’t receive a response, Raff continued, “Regardless of how he died, or who might have been responsible for that death, the fact remains that you lost a very close friend. So, I ask you again: Have you grieved?”

Silence stretched out between them, just the ticking of the clock and the low strains of the Bruce Springsteen CD, Michael’s latest offering, breaking the silence that threatened to fill the room. The question surprised Michael. He’d been so busy wishing he could take it back, or reverse time to when Jimmy was alive, that he’d never actually let go and said goodbye. Hell, he was still in denial that the man was dead! He answered in a small voice, “No.”

Nodding his bald head knowingly, the older man mused, “I thought as much. Have you remembered any more about what happened that day?”

Michael shrugged his shoulders. “I try not to think about it.”

“Well, that’s understandable, but unfortunately, it doesn’t help the problem.”

Leaning forward from his normal ‘I’m not a threat’ pose as he faced his client, the tall black man looked into Michael’s eyes and said, “As painful as it is, you can’t move forward if you insist on spending all your time looking back.”

Michael quickly turned away, feeling too vulnerable to meet his counselor's piercing gaze. "How do I stop?" he asked quietly.

"It's easy."

At that Michael looked up hopefully, waiting for whatever suggestion would magically help end the pain.

"You have to want to, first."

Anger rolled through him. What kind of bullshit answer was that?! Michael growled, "Don't you think I want that more than anything?"

Refusing to back down in the face of Michael's rising hostility, Raff's tone remained frustratingly unperturbed. "I don't think you do," he challenged.

"What!" Michael jumped to his feet, releasing his tentative hold on his emotions to glare at the infuriating man who sat calmly and smugly, as though he had the answers to life's mysteries and planned to keep them for himself.

"You think I like walking around like a basket case, afraid of my own shadow? Worried that one day my lover will come to his senses and realize I'm a complete waste of time?" He paced a circuit of the room, suddenly feeling hemmed in and claustrophobic in the cozy office that normally made him feel safe and secure. "Being careful of every word I say so my family will stop driving me crazy with their worrying?" He stopped in front of Raff, one hand on each of the chair's arms as he confronted the man who so unjustly accused him of not wanting to get better.

So enraged that his entire body shook, Michael leaned down, nose to nose with Raff, who never flinched.

Through clenched teeth he hissed, "To know that I should have died on some God-forsaken road in a place I didn't know existed four years ago? And that Jimmy should be back home in Arkansas with his family where he belongs?"

For long moments Raff sat quietly, his face revealing nothing, until Michael felt the anger slowly begin to drain. It wasn't possible to pick a fight with someone who wouldn't fight back. Finally, he withdrew and sank back into the couch he'd previously vacated, feeling defeated.

"Do you truly believe that?" Raff finally asked.

"What else can I believe? He was in my place in the Hummer. If I'd been there, he'd still be alive."

“You can’t know that, Michael. How many men from your own transport died?”

Thinking back to that day Michael felt embarrassment that, as much as he dwelled on Jimmy’s death, he’d hardly given a thought to the other casualties. “Two,” he answered quietly.

“So, being in the transport was no guarantee of survival.”

“I survived, Ryan survived!” he argued.

“Yes, were any of the men who died sitting near you or Ryan?”

A smiling face appeared in his mind’s eye, replaced by an image of the same young man, still and lifeless upon the ground. “Harris was sitting next to Ryan, opposite me.”

“And if Jimmy were in that truck he’d be sitting next to Ryan, right?”

“Yes.”

Continuing with his calm logic, Raff said, “So depending on which side of Ryan he was sitting, he still might not have survived the attack.”

“I survived!” Michael yelled.

“Yes, you did. And I hope one day to see you grateful for that fact, instead of thinking that you are so powerful that you control another man’s destiny.” Although the counselor never raised his voice, those harsh words were like a slap in the face.

Michael rose quickly to his feet with every intention of walking out the door and never looking back.

“Michael, listen to me.” The pleading in that voice caused him to stop just short of the door and turn to look at his tormentor.

“You are so unlike that man who died, from what you told me. You’re bigger, more muscular. That alone might have been the deciding factor; you have the quick reflexes of a born athlete. And from what you told me, you stopped Ryan from running into certain death and shielded him with your own body.” Raff rose and made his way over to where Michael stood immobile. “You saved his life, Michael. Even when he begged and pleaded to get away, you had your wits about you and knew it was suicide. You kept him alive. I think instead of blaming you for his death, Jimmy would thank you for saving his best friend.”

“His lover,” Michael corrected.

“Okay, then, his lover. I think Jimmy would be grateful for that, don’t you?”

Although afraid to let go of the pain and anger, as much a part of him as they'd become, Michael knew it was the truth. Ryan meant everything to Jimmy, and beyond the shadow of a doubt the freckled redhead from Arkansas would have gladly laid down his own life for the young man he'd built his world around.

"You're right," Michael finally agreed, hanging his head.

"Don't you think that they'd both grieve for you if you had been the one killed?"

Without even having to think about it he knew that was true. It would have devastated them and perhaps even now they'd be dealing with guilt issues of their own.

Raff wasn't finished yet. "I cannot tell you what happened that day, because I wasn't there. But I do know this: you acted to the best of your ability as a soldier, as a man, and as a friend. You saved Ryan through a selfless act of protection and no one could have asked more of you."

Though many times he'd heard those words from his commanding officers, the medics, and guys in his unit, they were just now sinking in, delivered by this war-scarred veteran, in the comfort of a plush, modern office, far removed from the battlefield.

"There's one more thing you should think about. Although no one you talked to knows why the seating arrangement was changed, it was your platoon leader's assignment to make, not yours. Am I correct?"

"You are," was more of an exhalation than actual words. "I couldn't ask him, because he's one of the ones who died. So I'll never know."

Abruptly Raff barked, "Ah-ten-hut!!!"

On pure reflex Michael snapped to attention, deeply embarrassed when he realized he was now saluting a civilian and not a uniformed officer.

"At ease, soldier," Raff said, voice now back to the soothing, comforting tones he normally used.

Michael exhaled harshly and forced himself to relax, though his heart still raced.

"Why did you snap to attention, Michael?"

"Because you ordered me to," Michael replied, barely biting off the 'sir' he nearly added.

"Big deal. I ordered you to do something; you didn't have to comply. Try again. Why did you follow my orders?"

He cocked his head to the side and studied Raff, puzzling out whatever point the man was trying to make.

White teeth contrasted brightly with dark skin when the big man smiled. “You followed my orders because you are a United States soldier and were trained to do so without question.” The smile broadened when he added, “If you had done that to me you’d have gotten the same response.”

The smile disappeared, Raff’s expression becoming serious. He leaned down slightly to be on eye level with Michael. “That is exactly what happened that day. You were given an order and you followed it, as did Jimmy and Ryan. Jimmy was a casualty of war. You did nothing to contribute to his death and if given the chance, you would have gladly taken his place. Friends don’t come any better than that.”

The tears that had threatened now broke free, and a large, fat drop rolled down Michael’s face, quickly followed by another, and another, until they trickled in a steady stream down his chin to fall silently to the carpet.

“Look at me, Michael.” Though the words were softly spoken, it was a command nonetheless.

He lifted his head and watched Raff through tear-filled eyes.

“Michael Ritter, you are a good man and I’m proud to know you. A truer friend could not exist. But it’s time, Michael. It’s time to let go of the guilt. You have nothing to feel guilty for.”

Suddenly exhausted, the remaining anger drained out of Michael, only to be replaced by huge wave of grief that pressed down like a giant hand. Yes, his rational mind understood that he wasn’t to blame, but like a priest absolving a sinner, it took someone voicing what he already knew for the truth to penetrate the guilt and fear, where rational thought held no sway.

Slowly sliding down the wall to the floor, he huddled into a ball, mourning for not only his lost friend, but for all the men in his unit that been laughing and smiling one minute and forever silenced the next.

The sound of a quiet, “A-hem” caused him to glance up. A throw pillow, one of many scattered around the office, hovered in front of his nose. Snatching it from Raff’s hand, Michael wrapped his arms around it, holding the pillow like he wanted to be held, and rocked to and fro. He pulled his knees up and placed the pillow on top, burying his face in the soft comfort. His body shuddered as he surrendered the tight control he’d kept on his emotions for so long. Hot tears and heartrending wails purged away the guilt, the doubt, and the sorrow as he finally opened up and released what he’d so diligently kept locked inside.

He cried for Ryan, who'd found the love of his life at a very young age, but who, at twenty-three, was facing a life alone, never again to see or hold the one he'd hoped to grow old with. He cried also for his mother, who, at twice Ryan's age had spent her whole life in a futile effort to find a love that strong, and for his sister, who'd never held her son in her arms, and who would forever carry the weight of abandonment by the child's father.

Lastly he cried for himself, for the friend he had lost, and plans that had been made that would never see fruition. Sitting on the floor in his counselor's office, thousands of miles from the sands of Iraq, Michael Ritter opened his heart just enough to let someone out. Not that Jimmy would ever be completely gone — he wouldn't want that — but it was the painful memories that were banished in a flood of hot tears, leaving behind the good times.

And finally, he cried for the young boy who'd wanted nothing more than to please his parents, only to face mocking and ridicule by the man he should have been able to look up to.

Hearing a groan, Michael looked over to see his counselor awkwardly attempting to ease his large body to the floor next to him. They sat side by side, Raff calmly handing him tissues until the worst was over. The wracking wails turned to shuddering sobs, then subsided to silent tears.

Eventually the emotional storm was reduced to hiccupping snuffles. "We were all just kids, you know," Michael began. "We just wanted adventure, to get away from home, and to earn money for college.

"I know."

A quick glance to his left revealed that the professional veneer had finally cracked. The choked response was accompanied by a wet face—Raff had joined him in his grief. Dumbstruck, Michael sat with his mouth hanging open, watching the most stoic individual he knew indulging in an uncharacteristic display of emotion.

The big man chuckled softly, a rich, rumbling sound, much like the purring of his grandparent's ancient cat. With a bittersweet smile he explained, "You forget, Michael, that I'm your counselor for a reason. It was the same in my time. Young people leave home, never fully knowing what's out there. Our parents try to prepare us, but there's no telling where life will take you."

"We were just a bunch of dumb kids with no clue what we were getting into. Hell, we thought anything was better than where we grew up." Michael shook his head sadly, recalling a younger, headstrong version of himself. One that thought he knew it all and could handle any situation; whose only goal was escaping the life he was living at the time. "Man, were we ever wrong."

“Tell me about Jimmy,” Raff asked softly. “Not how he died, but how he lived,”

Lying back against the wall, Michael thought for a moment, then said, “Jimmy was the biggest dreamer I’ve ever met; he had a new plan or scheme every day.” Now able to smile at the bittersweet memory, he found himself thinking about his friend, unimpeded by the demons that had haunted him since the day of the attack. They were strangely silent there in the tranquility of Raff’s office, in the aftermath of his emotional purging. “One day he’d say he and Ryan were going to open a restaurant, the next day we were all gonna go to Aruba. You never got bored talking to him ‘cause he could come up with some crazy assed shit to talk about.”

Turning to Raff he said, “You know, it’s the weirdest thing, but I’m still not convinced he was truly gay. When we were alone, just the three of us; Ryan, Jimmy, and me, Ryan would talk about guys and how hot they were.” Heat suffused his cheeks at the memory, when he confessed, “And they clued in to me immediately. They even brought it to my attention that I was covertly checking out guys, and they were fine with that. But Jimmy? I never once heard him talk about guys, or even check them out. He didn’t talk about or look at girls, either. I honestly think Ryan was the only person he ever saw in that light.”

Raff sounded truly interested when he asked, “How long had they been together?”

Thinking back to the stories Jimmy and Ryan had told him during their ‘getting acquainted’ conversations, he couldn’t hide a tremulous smile as he recalled the bond the two men had shared. “They grew up together; met as kids and pretty much never parted.” Pausing for a moment, Michael allowed himself a brief mental visit with his old friends, as they’d been when he first met them, before continuing, “Jimmy had a great family, but they were farmers and kind of poor, so he joined up for the college funds. Ryan had a bad home life and just wanted out of his situation. Not to mention that he would happily go wherever Jimmy did.” Sorrow filled him as he stated the obvious, “Neither one expected what happened.”

“Where is Ryan now? Do you see him? Talk to him?”

“He moved in with his uncle. We talk all the time, but I haven’t seen him since I came home. Neither one was out to their families, so he needs someone to talk to about Jimmy.”

“Then he’s lucky to have you.”

“Nah, I’m the lucky one. I’m seeing that now.” Michael abruptly changed the subject as he glanced at his watch. “Look, I know we’ve got about fifteen more minutes, but would you mind if I just rested here for a few?”

“Whatever you need,” Raff replied.

Those words brought a smile to Michael's face as he recalled the promise Jay had made that day on the porch — a promise repeatedly kept.

Raff groaned as he climbed from the floor. "Why don't you stretch out on the couch, Michael? You'd be more comfortable."

"Nah, I'm good," Michael assured him with a weak grin. He yawned and stretched out on the floor with the pillow, asleep within minutes.

Jay tapped softly on the door and entered, surprised at first not to see Michael, until Raff smiled warmly and pointed to the floor. There Michael lay, peacefully asleep, arms curled tightly around a pillow.

"Keep him quiet; let him rest," Raff said. "Depending on how he feels in the morning he might need to take the day off and just relax. Emotionally he's worn out."

Rising from his desk and crossing the room to the stereo, the counselor removed a CD and returned it to its case, which he handed to Jay. With a quick glance to Michael, he quietly instructed, "Be patient; he's had a very hard day."

Jay nodded and asked, "Did he finally talk?"

Raff just shook his head and said, "Just be patient. And it wouldn't be unusual for him to exhibit some volatile behavior. Don't take anything he says right now to heart. He's dealing with a lot. Just be there, offer your support. If things get bad, he has a prescription for alprazolam that'll help."

Although frustrated that the man wasn't more forthcoming, Jay appreciated doctor, or rather, counselor-patient confidentiality and didn't ask again. Instead he shook Raff's hand, grateful that the man truly seemed to care, over and above his counseling duties. And it was helping; Michael's condition was improving.

"C'mon, Blondie," Jay said as he helped a sleepy Michael from the floor. "Let's get you home."

Michael mumbled a good-bye to Raff, obviously still groggy with sleep and allowed Jay to guide him outside. As he tucked his exhausted lover into the car, Jay could have sworn he heard Michael mumble, "Goodbye, Jimmy."

"Hey, Big Guy, how's it going?" Ryan's welcome voice was much less strained than in previous conversations, sounding more like the happy-go-lucky young recruit that Michael remembered.

“Ryan!” he responded, pleased with the unexpected call. “I was just thinking about calling you.”

“Great minds think alike,” Ryan quipped.

Michael chuckled. “Yeah, I suppose you’re right. How’re you doing?”

Though there was a long pause before the answer, still Ryan sounded less depressed than he had during their last phone call. “I’m doing better, actually,” he replied. “My uncle has quit worrying so much, though my sister is still driving me bonkers. How about you?”

“Fine,” Michael said. As the words left his mouth he realized that, unlike his usual automatic response to that question, this time he meant it. Damn! When did that happen? When had he gone from merely existing to being ‘fine?’

The next question wasn’t so cheerfully answered, “Have you enrolled anywhere yet?”

Michael’s smile fell. He still hadn’t decided what to do on that score and really needed to make a decision—soon. “Not yet,” he admitted, hoping Ryan would let it drop.

Apparently Ryan didn’t notice his reluctance to talk about the future and school, for he pressed on, excitedly announcing, “Well, brace yourself; I’ve narrowed my choices down to two.”

“That’s good. You gonna go local?” Personally, Michael felt that his friend would greatly benefit from a change of scenery.

A snicker drifted over the phone line, a sound he hadn’t heard Ryan make in a very long time. “Funny you should ask that, Michael. One of the schools is in your hometown.”

“Really? You’re coming to Avery?”

The smile was apparent in his voice when Ryan replied, “Well, I’m still deciding, but they have one of the best nursing programs in the country, so I’m told.”

“They do,” Michael agreed. “In fact, my sister is about to graduate from there. So, you’re gonna study nursing after all?” Jimmy had insisted many times over the years that caring for others was Ryan’s true calling.

“Yeah. I took a test locally and have all the necessary scores for admittance,” he said proudly. That was no surprise; Ryan Jackson was extremely intelligent for all his back country upbringing.

"I'm so proud of you." Michael was genuinely happy for this young resilient man who, apparently, was bouncing back from tragedy. The poor kid deserved all the happiness life could possibly hand him.

It was too soon after the incident for the topic not to come up at least once in their conversation, but this time the sorrow in Ryan's voice was replaced by determination. "I still miss Jimmy and that'll never stop, but I have to go on."

"Yes, you do," Michael agreed. A long paused ensued.

Ryan changed the subject, "So what about you? Anything interesting happening in Podunk, Alabama?"

Michael blushed, recalling all that was happening. He wanted to share the news with his friend, even though it felt strange discussing a new boyfriend with someone who'd lost their own lover not so long ago. Cautiously he ventured, "I...I met somebody."

Far from sounding hurt or jealous, Ryan's shouted "Whooo-hoo! Way to go, Michael."

"It...it doesn't bother you?"

"Bother me? Why should it bother me? Don't you think I want you to be happy? Now, spill! I want to know all about.... Errr...is it a girl or a guy?"

Michael exaggerated a sigh. "Okay, you were right. Are you happy now?"

"Extremely," came the smug reply.

Ryan truly sounded happy for him, and Michael finally did what he'd wanted to do for days: tell him about Jay. "Well, he goes to Avery, but he's from Texas..."

"What part?"

"Brownsville."

"Cool. I've been there. Where'd you find him?"

His mind went back to the day such a short time ago when he'd walked into his sister's communal living room and seen Jay Ortiz for the first time. "Well, my sister shares a house with a bunch of other college students and he was one of them."

"Is he good to you?"

"Yes, he is," Michael agreed as he recalled a certain instance of 'good' from the previous night, one that made him want a rematch. "In fact, he's on his way here now to take me out to lunch."

Sounding more like the old Ryan that Michael remembered before Iraq, he leeringly asked, "Is he hot?" just as a knock sounded on the door.

Phone cradled against his good ear, Michael opened the door to find a grinning Jay, dressed in a black band T-shirt, blue jeans, and a pair of flips-flops. Looking him up and down appreciatively, Michael grinned and said into the phone, "Oh, yeah!"

They entered the small, cozy restaurant and found a booth near the back, away from the windows, ordering a large pepperoni to share. Jay ordered a soda and Michael a glass of water. While waiting for the pizza, Jay nervously opened the conversation, "So, Michael, have you decided what you're gonna take this fall? You're still going back to school, right?"

Between bites of bread stick Michael replied, "I'm still not sure. I know I need to do something soon, but just can't seem to feel right about anything."

"I know what you mean. I felt that way too, for awhile. But I have uncles who are engineers, so I kind of fell into that. The more I got into it the better I felt about my decision."

"And now you're gonna graduate." The enthusiastic grin suddenly disappeared. "You're gonna leave once you graduate, aren't you?"

The door had been opened; all Jay needed to do was step through it. "I've been wanting to talk to you about that."

"Then you are going," Michael replied dejectedly, half-eaten breadstick slipping from his fingers to the table.

"I'm not sure yet, but if I do, I'd like you to come with me."

Jay was watching, waiting for the reaction, when the surprise on his lover's face turned to an ear-splitting grin. "Really?"

To say he was relieved would be an understatement. "Really. Although I'd understand if you wanted to stay here."

That beautiful smile fell. "So you'd still leave."

Jay quickly explained, "If you don't want to leave, then neither do I. That is, if you want me to stay. I'm sure I can find something around here, even if I have to work in Atlanta and live in Cookeville on the weekends."

The joy radiating on his lover's face was more than worth the effort to rearrange his work plans. With wide-eyed enthusiasm, Michael asked, "You'd do that?"

Jay winked and drawled, "You betcha."

Whatever reply Michael might have made was cut off by the arrival of their pizza. Again they lapsed into silence, alternating between munching pizza and grinning at each other. Finally, Michael broke the silence. "Just like that, you'd give up your plans and stay here with me."

Without pausing to think, Jay replied, "You are my plans."

"What about your family? Aren't they expecting you to come home?"

Jay answered with mock indignation, "If I didn't know better I'd think you wanted me to leave."

Michael's open-mouthed shock was all the response Jay needed, but he was grateful for the words. "No! I want you here!" After a moment Michael added, "That is, if you want to."

"Oh, I want to."

"Move in with me?"

Even though that's what Jay was hoping for, he had to be sure. "What about your mom? Won't she take offense to that?"

Michael grinned and reached into his pocket, bringing out a key and handing it to Jay. "Mom gave me that for you ages ago. You've also been programmed into the security system; it's the last four digits of your phone number." Michael shrugged sheepishly. "She's been calling you her son-in-law ever since Angie found you in my apartment that morning. Not only will she be thrilled, she'd be disappointed if it didn't happen."

Still believing it was too good to be true, Jay ventured, "What about your grandparents?"

"What have they got to do with us?"

'*Very good point,*' Jay thought.

"So, what do you say?"

Michael looked so hopeful, still, Jay wanted to be sure that there would be no regrets later—he didn't think he'd be able to handle that. "Are you sure? You know if I move in people will talk."

“Let ‘em.” Michael leaned in, his expression sincere. “There’s a lot of things I don’t know and a lot has me confused right now, but this is one thing I’m one hundred percent sure of.” He caught his lover’s hand in his and squeezed. “I want to be with you every chance I get.”

The perfect moment was shattered by an angry, disgusted, “I knew you were nothing but a fucking faggot!”

Michael looked up from his and Jay’s clasped hands, quickly pulling away when he saw his worst nightmare rudely shoving people out of the way to get to their table.

Horror swept over him as he watched the furious man’s approach, wincing at every expletive from the bully’s mouth. Time slowed and his fellow diners disappeared, his vision tunneling into a nightmare world inhabited by only himself and Crawford Shiller.

He backed into the booth as far as he could go, desperately trying to make himself invisible, feeling twelve years old again, small and defenseless. Back then he had expected such treatment every time Mom’s back was turned. She knew some of what happened — that Crawford was verbally abusive — but she didn’t know the extremity of it, or just how lasting the impact. And Michael didn’t tell her, for fear of the man turning his abuse on her or Angie.

All those years of fear and abuse came crashing down and he frantically searched for a way to escape, but it was too late—his former stepfather was pushing his way into the booth, his litany of obscenities never once faltering. The reek of alcohol assailed Michael’s senses as the obviously drunk man pinned him in the booth.

“I went and raised me a goddamn fag is what I did! I should have beat your sissy ass harder, that would have made a man out of you!” Crawford turned and snarled, “Get your fucking fairy hands off me, you damned Mexican queer!”

Michael was shaken out of his trance in time to see Crawford draw back his arm, preparing to punch Jay. Reflexes kicking in before his brain, Michael reached out and wrapped a hand around the vile man’s wrist, just below the closed fist. He squeezed -- hard. His efforts were rewarded by a bellow of pain. Unfortunately, the enraged bull of a man turned his attention back to Michael. “You’ll pay for that, you little.... You ain’t no son of mine!”

Years of biting his tongue welled up within him, crashing down like a storm-driven wave. Kneeling in the limited space, Michael glared down at his hated stepfather. “No, as a matter of fact, I ain’t no son of yours, and I’m damned glad of it!” His grip on Crawford’s wrist tightened, causing another surprised yelp. Michael wasn’t cruel by nature, but he’d had enough; now that the wave was cresting again it couldn’t be stopped, and he really didn’t want it to. It crashed down with devastating force.

“I’d like to see you make me pay, you useless piece of shit,” he growled. At Crawford’s suddenly fear-filled expression, he only smiled sweetly and purred, “Guess what, you old loser; I’m not twelve anymore and I’m not a skinny, terrified child. You can’t hold hurting Mom over my head anymore, either.” The smile turned evil as he said the words he’d only fantasized about saying in the past, “It’s time for a little payback, Crawford-daddy.”

Eleven years of fear and loathing were loaded into the fist that caught the man in his ugly, unshaven jaw, sending him flying from the booth to slide across the tile floor and crash into a booth across the aisle. Thankfully, it was empty. Crawford and Michael stared at each other, Michael shocked and disbelieving what had just happened.

“What the hell is going on out here?” came an irate bellow from the vicinity of the kitchen door. Michael looked up to see a muscle-bound, bald-headed man crossing the restaurant, his long legs making short work of the distance. He stopped and towered over Crawford where he lay sprawled on the floor. Hands on his hips, the imposing man glared down, waiting for an explanation.

“I can explain,” Michael began, only to be cut off by Crawford, who seemed to have recovered what few wits he’d had.

“I was just telling those faggots there that their kind ain’t welcome around here,” Crawford shouted, apparently assured that he’d find backing from the big, burly man who somehow managed to look intimidating while wearing an apron.

“Is that so?” the man replied, his eyes narrowing as he cast a suspicious glance at Jay and Michael. Once again Michael wished he could make himself disappear.

Emboldened by what he must have considered support for his cause, the bully continued, “Yeah, we don’t want their kind. No one wants a bunch of queers around here.”

“Is that so?” the man repeated, still glaring at the two men who had moments before been enjoying a pizza and a new mile-stone in their relationship. “So,” he barked, “is it true? Are you a pair of faggots?”

When asked later, Michael wouldn’t be able to say what had come over him at that moment, but just as it had with Crawford, his long denied anger bubbled to the surface. Raising his eyes to Jay’s, he silently asked a question.

Jay brought his hand up and linked their fingers as they slowly stood together, presenting a united front. In answer to the big man’s question, they stood hand-in-hand.

The annoyed man looked from them down to Crawford. “Looks like you’re right. Looks like I got some low-lives in my restaurant. What do you think I ought to do about it?”

“Kick their low-life asses outta here—that’s what you ought to do!” Crawford wailed, his bruised ego re-inflating now that he saw victory on the horizon.

“Well, I believe you’re right. I can’t be having low-life scum in my restaurant. Sir, I’ll have to ask you to leave,” the apron clad man said in a tone that brooked no nonsense. “Now,” he added with a stern look that made even Michael want to back away slowly, even though that look wasn’t trained on him.

Crawford staggered to his feet, dusting himself off and glaring at the man who he’d obviously thought of as an ally. “You ain’t heard the last of me!” he exclaimed, turning and glaring at Michael and Jay, who were silently watching. That glare was then turned on the small audience the altercation had collected. “What the fuck do you think you’re looking at?” Crawford snarled.

The proprietor took a step forward, backing the angry man toward the door, then took another and another until Crawford found himself literally herded from the establishment. The man then stood watching, as did Jay and Michael, making sure the drunken bully was really gone.

Without turning around, the bald man called toward the back of the room, “Steve?”

He was answered by a rather non-descript man at a back table. “Yeah?”

“I know you’re off-duty, but would you mind reporting a drunk and disorderly?”

“I done did,” the man replied with a grin.

“Thanks.”

“It’s nothing. The asshole had it coming.”

Throughout the exchange Michael stood silent and still, hand growing sweaty in Jay’s grasp. The restaurant owner turned back and in a quiet voice said, “Sorry ‘bout that. You boys okay?”

Realizing that he didn’t seem to be in trouble for defending himself against Crawford, or by the impromptu ‘coming out,’ Michael merely nodded, unsure of what to do next.

As he turned to Jay the big man’s apology was heartfelt and sincere. “Jay, I’m sorry that you and your friend had to go through that; your pizza’s on me.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Michael stuttered.

A lazy smile curved the man’s lips, making him appear far less menacing than he had a few moments ago. “I know I don’t, but I want to. I want you boys to know you’re always welcome here.”

Before Michael could stop himself, he'd blurted, "Are you gay?"

At that the man erupted into huge guffaws of laughter that rocked his whole body. When he calmed he wiped at a tear from his eye with a massive fingertip and replied, "Heavens, no! I ain't gay, but I am a businessman. Jay and the Animal House..."

"Zoo," Jay corrected with a grin.

"Okay, the Zoo provides me with plenty of good customers. I don't care what you do in your personal life, and regardless of what the bigoted piece of shit might think, lots of other people in this town feel like I do. I just want you to do me one favor, okay?"

Michael glanced uncertainly at Jay before answering, "Sure. What?"

"I don't mind you boys sitting out here making eyes at each other or even holding hands, but if it goes further than that you'll take it somewhere private, right?" The waggling of his brows took the sting from his words.

Jay smiled and replied, "I think we can manage that."

"Fair enough. This is a family restaurant, after all. Now how would you boys like some dessert?"

After the owner walked away they returned to their seats, waiting for the ice cream that their host insisted was to die for. Michael warily glanced around at the other diners who, thankfully, had returned to their own tables and their own meals.

One or two exchanged shy glances before quickly looking away. Two young women smiled at them and, while pointedly maintaining eye contact, placed their hands on their own table where they could be seen, quite deliberately lacing their fingers together.

Michael returned their smile, thanking them for their silent support. As the lunch crowd finished their meals and made their way towards the door, some averted their eyes, some softly mumbled, 'Hi,' or 'Hello,' and others made a point of stopping by the table to say that they didn't agree with or appreciate Crawford's opinions.

When Jay and Michael finally stood to leave, they did it hand-in-hand, earning themselves a giggle and a wave from the young lesbian couple.

Epilogue

It was a warm and clear Friday evening that followed the kind of Alabama day that Michael had lived for as child; the kind that signaled the approach of summer with all of its promise. There was nothing quite so symbolic of the oncoming season as the young men and women he'd braved the great outdoors to be here for today. Down below the bleachers where he was sitting with his mother, sister, and grandparents, one hundred and seventy-three young adults would soon be experiencing one of the biggest moments of their lives. Although Michael was antsy and nervous about being outside and in such a large crowd of spectators, he was determined that his irrational fears were not going to rule him, especially not today of all days.

Angie smiled and squeezed his hand, her wry grin warm and affectionate. She seemed energized by the flurry of activity going on around them, and had spoken to so many people that he was beginning to suspect that she might very well know everyone in town. And, dressed as she was in a flattering sundress, she drew plenty of appreciative male eyes her way. Michael just smiled and patted the jacket he'd brought for when the sun went down and she suddenly discovered it was still too early in the year to be so scantily clad after dark.

Quietly snuggled close to his other side, his mom inspected him, looking for signs that he wasn't enjoying himself. He didn't know what she'd do if he began showing signs of panic, and the frustrated little kid that still lived deep within was halfway tempted to test the notion, but he reined in that impulse. She was concerned about him because she loved him and he had no reason to be annoyed about that. Hopefully, she, like Angie, would soon learn to relax and stop worrying so much.

On the other side of his mother, Grandma and Grandpa were lost in conversation with someone sitting on the bleachers in front of them. He watched them for a few moments, how they interacted with each other and how even a casual brush of fingers against the other's hand seemed to be a form of intimate communication. The thought warmed him that, even though he never witnessed his mother in a happy relationship, he had learned how to have a meaningful one from the two of them, and, hopefully, how to make love last.

Turning away and studying his surroundings, Michael willed himself to remain calm, reminding himself repeatedly that nothing could harm him here. All was well and he was going to make the most of this once-in-a-lifetime event in his lover's life, feeling privileged to be a part of it. The news that the graduation ceremony was going to take place outdoors had caused him some apprehension, but as Angie's pinning wouldn't take place until the next day, she had offered to come with him and hold his hand. He'd taken her up on the 'come with' part, grateful for the support, knowing she'd be here to watch Jay and Terry graduate, anyway.

There'd been a few tense moments upon their arrival just as Michael was leaving the parking lot. Who should he come face to face with but Crawford Shiller? But instead of

the mean, gloating expression the man usually wore, his blood-shot eyes had widened, he'd stammered incomprehensively, and then turned and quickly hurried away. The purple and black bruising around his left jaw was most gratifying. Michael knew he should be ashamed of himself for enjoying another's discomfort, but couldn't help feeling triumphant at scoring a direct hit against the man who had caused so much hurt and self-doubt. Thank goodness Mom, Grandma, and Angie were in the ladies' room and didn't have to see Crawford. Grandpa appeared ready to step up to the plate if necessary, but thankfully, it hadn't turned ugly. Seeing the man flee had been good for Michael's soul, and marked the beginning of closure for the young, frightened kid he had once been. It wasn't over yet, but it was a definite step in the right direction.

The women had rejoined them, none the wiser, and they found reasonably good seats in the rapidly crowding stands. The deep blue sky darkened around the edges as nightfall and the opening ceremonies approached. Man, but it was so good to be back in Alabama; he had missed this place, never even realizing how much it meant to him. His original plan was to only stay for a few months, hang with family and friends, then get on with his life somewhere else. But that wasn't how things were turning out. In fact, the last few weeks had Michael thinking that maybe settling down and making a life in Cookesville wouldn't be such a bad thing. Of course, it wasn't just him anymore; any major decisions would require input from his partner. He smiled while considering that word 'partner,' and just how great it was to be part of a genuine couple instead of just going through the motions and doing what was expected as he'd done in the past.

The sun started to set and the lights along the edges of the football field began to glow a soft fluorescent green, brightening as they came up to full wattage to light the way for the coming festivities. Conversation faded and then ceased entirely when the familiar strains of *Pomp and Circumstance* filled the air. Every eye was trained on the doorway from which football stars normally emerged as the dark cap and gown clad hopefuls made their way across the field to the grey metal folding chairs that had been provided as seating for this event. Michael craned his neck and strained to see his lover.

Even in the shapeless 'one size fits all' robe, Jay's height and dark hair set him apart from those around him, making him easy to spot in the long procession. Those deep, piercing eyes discreetly swept over the spectators and Michael hoped that they would find him, though he knew it was unlikely with so many people filling the stands. He watched Jay turn away and stand before a chair, waiting for the others to take their places before being seated.

When the group had all assembled, a hush settled over the darkening stadium; even the sounds of the nearby highway seemed muted. All was still and quiet, as though the very evening was holding its breath in anticipation. A low murmur thrummed through the crowd when an aging, white-haired gentleman slowly made his way to the podium of the makeshift stage. After the obligatory microphone testing that always preceded such events, the man, whom Michael knew from the crumpled program in his hands to be Dean Myers, began the evening.

“Family, friends, faculty, and students. I’d like to welcome you tonight to a most momentous occasion in the lives of these young adults...” A loud throat clearing brought a smile to the old man’s face and he added, “...And those young at heart.” He grinned down affectionately at a gown-clad student who, judging from his snow white hair, was closer to the Dean’s age than that of his fellow graduates.

The Dean continued the preliminary introductions. “We are here to witness many years of hard work coming to fruition as these students enjoy the rewards of their perseverance. I’d like you to join with me in a round of applause for this fine group of scholars that appear before you tonight.”

Starting softly and slowly building to thunderous levels, the noise frightened Michael at first until he looked around and saw the smiles, heard the laughs, and rationalized with himself that this was a happy moment, nothing to fear. His eyes sought and found Jay and he breathed easier, focusing on why he was here, and for whom, and blocking out any negative thoughts. Though her eyes remained on the field, Angie stopped clapping and her small, cool hand grasped and squeezed his reassuringly.

Abruptly the sound ended with a wave of the Dean’s hand. “Without further ado, I would like to introduce a great student among many great students, who has distinguished herself both within the halls of academia and in the community, where her leadership skills and unfailing compassion has made her a pinnacle of this community that adopted her as their own. I give you Avery University’s Engineering Technologies Class of 2010’s Valedictorian, Kimberly Ann Delacroix.”

More applause greeted the tall, slender figure of a young woman, with skin the color of rich chocolate, as she mounted the stage and made her way over to the Dean, smiling and waving. After a too-lengthy speech, in Michael’s opinion, the part he was waiting for began with the calling of Terry Abramson. Terry, in all his toothy, arrogant glory, danced across the stage to accept his degree. He shook hands with the Dean and Valedictorian before exiting the stage, smiling, waving, and moving the tassel on his cap from right to left, acknowledging his graduated status.

One by one the students crossed the stage to receive their honors, some somber and serious, others laughing and joking. A tall, well-built black man grabbed Kimberly and swept her into an impromptu tango, ending it with a dramatic dip that cost her her cap. Bowing chivalrously, he retrieved the errant mortarboard and returned it to her neatly braided hair, blowing a kiss as he backed away. Even from a distance Michael could tell the young woman was blushing.

“Wasn’t that cute?” Angie gushed, clinging to his arm. “They’re engaged, you know. Her daddy’s a big deal down in Mobile and her parents didn’t like it much, but I think Jamal’s engineering degree changed their mind.”

Yeah, he could see how that could happen.

As more and more students made their way to the stage, Angie gave him a brief history of the ones she was acquainted with, further convincing him that his sister knew everyone. When the O's were called, he counted down, waiting, watching. Finally, the moment arrived. Michael held his breath, anticipating the next name. Based on Angie's sudden gasp, he wasn't the only one surprised when the next name called was 'Javier Aidan Ortiz Gallagher.' Javier? Jay was a nickname for Javier? Jay was such a common name in the South that it had never once occurred to him to ask if it was a given name. While amused at this turn of events, he was also embarrassed that he didn't know such a basic thing about the man he was hoping to spend his life with.

Narrowed green eyes met Michael's blue ones as Angie hissed, "I didn't know that was his name; did you know? I mean, everything I've ever seen said Jay Ortiz."

At his bewildered head shake, their combined gaze moved on towards their mom, who appeared equally shocked. Gramps laughed and said, "I knew. He's named after both his grandfathers, but the Irish side of the family butchered his name, asking 'What happened to the J? It starts with J you should be able to hear it.' So, he got called "Jay". And tacking his mother's family name to the end of his is a cultural thing, or so I've been told." The old man looked far too smug to know something they apparently didn't; he chuckled and added, "Amazing the things that come up when you're working on fence lines."

Michael divided his attention between listening to his grandfather's explanation and watching the fluid movements of his lover. Jay was grinning when he approached the duo waiting to bestow his degree, but merely nodded, smiled, and paused to receive their well-wishes. It was a relatively low-key performance, typical of a man who saw no need for grand-standing but, just as he was about to exit the stage, Jay stopped, turned to the audience, and raised both hands in triumph, pure delight shining from his features. The crowd had been warned not to applaud individual students, to wait until the end, but a few catcalls could be heard, as well as shouts of "Jay, Jay, Jay!"

The bright grin slowly faded into that little boy smile Michael loved so much as Jay reached into the top of his gown and removed something hanging from a chain around his neck. He reverently clutched the mystery object before returning it to the safety of his gown, patting it affectionately. He exited the stage and returned to his seat.

Michael looked right and then left, puzzled by the knowing expressions on the faces of his mother and sister. Okay, he had no idea what that was about and wasn't sure he wanted to know, though he had a feeling they'd tell him — later.

Now that what he had come to see was over, he was eager for the ceremony to end. Who knew there could be so many P's through W's in one class? Much to his surprise, being there wasn't overwhelming like he feared it would be. Parts were even enjoyable, especially seeing Jay not only graduate, but graduate with honors. Michael couldn't be more proud. In fact, he was most anxious to tell the man face to face.

Jay had assured him that he didn't have to attend if he thought it would be uncomfortable, but this was a once in a lifetime event, a crowning moment in his lover's life. It didn't matter how bad Michael might have felt, he was where he needed to be. His therapist agreed with the decision, stating that it was important to have goals to work toward and, in Raff's opinion, Michael couldn't have picked a more worthwhile goal.

And now it was nearing the end. The band played the commencement theme and caps were thrown wildly into the air amid whoops of laughter and screams of joy. Michael hesitated but a moment before joining the throng that crowded out onto the football field in search of their loved ones.

It seemed that everyone was wearing an indistinguishable, shapeless blue gown as Angie pulled him into the fray, laughing and obviously enjoying herself. Occasionally she stopped to congratulate and/or hug someone before grabbing her brother's arm once more and hurrying toward their common goal. He nearly ran into Terry, literally, who laughed and gave Angie a big hug before arranging his features into a more thoughtful expression. Terry smiled and shook Michael's hand, leaning in to speak privately.

"I just wanted to tell you that I think Jay's one hell of a lucky guy." His voice, warm and sincere, somehow managed to be heard by Michael over the chaos without being overheard by those standing close by.

When he pulled back the genuine longing in Terry's eyes overwhelmed Michael for a moment, but before he had time to question it, the gorgeous blond winked at him and disappeared into the mass.

"I told you he wasn't all bad," Angie gloated.

Any response that Michael might have made was cut off as the crowd seemed to part in front of him, allowing Jay to step through. The object so fondly displayed on stage was now hanging from the folds of his gown for all to see — Michael's dog tags. Jay clasped them in his hand and said, "You were with me up there."

Not caring who saw, Michael swooped his lover and friend up into a bone-crushing hug, exclaiming, "You did it!" He put the stunned man down as they were joined by the rest of his family. Suddenly they were invaded by veritable swarm of newcomers, all seeming to have just one thing on their minds — getting as close to the newly graduated engineer as possible.

A moment of jealousy swept over Michael when a lovely young woman with light brown skin, and the darkest eyes he'd ever seen, kissed Jay on the cheek and hugged him tightly to her big-bosomed body, only to be followed by another girl and yet another. Realization hit him as he recognized the young women from the video and photos, and the similarities in most of the newcomers. Suddenly all traces of jealousy were replaced by pity for the man who was barely holding his own against the sentimental onslaught of so

many sisters. Looking around, Michael noticed several young men watching the girls appreciatively and added Jay's father to his list of those who needed pity.

Finally, a pale blond woman, appearing so out of place among all her darker-haired and darker-skinned family members, stepped up to proudly hug her son. A short, squat man with a bristly, black moustache shot with gray held out his hand and said, "You must be Michael."

Michael smiled as he shook the man's hand, then found himself swept up, first in meeting the Ortiz clan, all twenty-seven of them, and then the blond and red-haired Gallagher family, who had been a bit slower in reaching the field.

Just when he thought his head would explode with the sheer number of names he was trying to process, Papa Ortiz looked around and said casually, "I'm hungry; let's go eat."

Finally, a quiet moment alone. It was Jay's big night, so Michael had done his best to enjoy himself and not ruin the evening for his lover, even though he had barely restrained his impatience for this moment through the last few hours of obligatory socializing.

Juan-Carlos Ortiz Ortega (Michael made a mental note to ask Jay more about the Ortiz' culture) had insisted on including Michael's family in his own family's plans, and a caravan of cars, trucks, and mini vans had driven into Atlanta for dinner, in celebration of Jay's graduation. Michael had no idea one person could have so many family members! There were the parents, grandparents, sisters, uncles, and aunts from both sides of the family and more cousins than he could count, and they had come from all parts of the country to see one of their own graduate from college. Michael vowed that in four years it would be him up there, making Jay and the rest of the family proud.

Best of all, it seemed that, for the most part, he would be accepted for who he was and for the role he played in Jay's, no, Javier's life. Michael was still laughing about that one. Somehow, he just couldn't picture the man as a 'Javier' or an 'Aidan' either. Meeting the two gentlemen whom his lover was named after, however, had been a humbling experience.

Now though, his patience was at an end. Michael didn't bother to turn on the store lights as he all but dragged his lover through the darkened bookstore on the way to the home they now shared, stopping every few feet to kiss and rub against him provocatively. "I love you, Javier Aidan Ortiz Gallagher," he said, his tongue stumbling over the unfamiliar name.

"Te amo también, Querido, te amo también," Jay replied.

Michael didn't need to understand Spanish to know what Jay meant, the meaning was clear, in any language. Even without the words, he knew, it was there in everything his lover said or did.

Oh, he didn't delude himself that all would be sunshine and roses; he still had a long way to go on the road back to normal. But as he held his lover in his arms, he knew the going would be easier because he wouldn't be going it alone.

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The Pirate's Gamble - a short story

Archaeologist Ian Lewis has an interesting hobby. He's the captain of the pirate ship *The Naughty Maid*. With the help of a mysterious artifact, he travels back in time to save priceless treasures otherwise doomed to be lost forever.

His greatest treasure, however, wants to stay lost, or rather, deeply in the closet. Tired of the hiding the true nature of the relationship he shares with fellow archaeologist David Kane, Ian risks all on his partner's love in a gamble that just may cost him his life.

Tinsel and Frost - a short story

The last time Tony danced, he'd worn the spangles and tights of the Nutcracker's Prince and the audience threw roses at the stage. One career-ending accident later, he's dancing again, and he's not proud of hoping that the audience will reward him with twenties.

Frost, the big, pale bouncer, has reasons of his own for keeping a watchful eye on Tony. He keeps his distance, too, until he has to bounce an aggressive customer who takes things with Tony too far. They have a short, shared walk home but a huge divide between their lives, though Tony and Frost might have more in common than they believe.

The Wish - a novel

Alex Martin is arrogant, wealthy, spoiled, and...lonely. His never-ending stream of lovers see only his looks and his wallet -- never him. Hiding behind a mask of aloof

indifference, what he really wants is someone who can see past the money, someone who'll stand up to him as an equal.

Down-to-earth book store owner Paul Sinclair insists on making his own way in life. He longs for someone who thinks, who works, and who doesn't have his hand out for gifts. A true partner in every sense of the word.

After years of avoidance they finally meet, and neither is impressed. Though they're worlds apart they share a common bond: their uncles, Alfred and Byron. And when the uncles conspire to match make, a little thing like Byron's being a ghost isn't going to stop them...

Flame – a short story

After he's rescued from certain death by a mysterious, silver-haired warrior who is more than he seems, Kai finds life suddenly taking a turn for the better, for in Rayken he finds all he's ever wished for.

When a cruel twist of fate robs him of his love, the tables turn, and it's now up to Kai to save the fearless warrior. Can he and Rayken survive to be together?

Coming Soon - The Angel of Thirteenth Street - a novel

Noah Everett is a semi-successful business owner with a mission: to help young male prostitutes give up the life and make something more of themselves. His secret to success? He used to be one of them. Unfortunately, he doesn't take his own advice of "Don't let this ruin your life," allowing his less-than-legal past to keep prospective lovers at bay.

Living on his own, determined to finish school and make something of himself, street kid Jeremy Kincaid knows all about doing the best you can with what you have, and self reliance. When he's targeted for recruitment by a local pimp, however, Noah comes to his rescue.

To save Jeremy from the horrors of the life he once knew, Noah retraces his footsteps to his old stomping grounds to ask a favor of Willie Carnell, the pimp who wants Jeremy. Noah risks more than just his body in that den of iniquity—he risks his soul, as well, because long before his nemesis was known as Willie Carnell, the ruthless pimp, he was Billy Cordell, the man Noah had promised to love forever.

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For more hot m/m romance, check out P. D. Singer

Fire on the Mountain - a novel

When Jake signs up for a season as a forest ranger in the high country of Colorado, it seems like a great way to take a break before continuing his education. The mountains are beautiful, he gets to live in a cabin near a small lake where he can fish, and his mentor Kurt is coaching him in archery. It's heaven, with the occasional forest fire.

Kurt's a good partner -- confident, competent, experienced, just what a rookie like Jake needs. He's also good looking, anything but modest, and always around. Jake's living in the closet, not just in the great outdoors, but is Kurt trying to get him to come sniff the fresh air? Jake can't tell, but when a small fire whips out of control, things could really heat up!

Snow on the Mountain - a novel

Snow on the Mountain, the sequel to Fire on the Mountain, is now available from Torquere Press! Jake and Kurt, the rangers are now Jake and Kurt, the ski bums, and off to new and different adventures.

The rich, the famous, and the most serious skiers come to Wapiti Creek, where Jake helps them onto the lifts and Kurt improves their skiing skills. It's perfect winter work for men who love the outdoors but like the comforts of hot water and a big bed when there are several feet of snow on the ground.

For rangers who have been mostly alone with one another for months, it's a big change to rejoin civilization. Making friends is tough, especially when a ski patrol finds Jake far too appealing for Kurt's peace of mind, and why does everyone snicker about the Alpenschlossl Ski School? For two men still finding their way as a couple, it isn't clear if the biggest danger comes from vicious coworkers, would-be friends, the mountain, or each other.

Mistletoe on the Mountain - a short story

This is Jake's first Christmas away from his family, and his first Christmas with Kurt. Jake's shoestring budget doesn't matter, because what Kurt wants most can't be gift wrapped. He'd like to stand openly with Jake as partners before the world, but Jake hasn't come that far out of the closet. Wapiti Creek is hung everywhere with mistletoe, taunting them both with opportunities not taken.

Jake is making a traditional Landon family dish for a Christmas pot-luck dinner with friends, but he's short a key ingredient. Kurt manages to supply the missing ingredient for Jake's recipe, but can Jake supply the missing ingredient for Kurt's happiness?

O'Carolan's Seduction - a short story

Hugh Kelly's come to America to leave Ireland, its traditions, and its conflicting attitudes behind, but the best money he can make is by tending bar in an "Irish pub." The would-be Gaels love his authentic accent, but Hugh has eyes only for Steven, an uilleann piper with the damnable taste to wear kilts.

Hugh doesn't care much for the traditional Irish music and is determined not to tap his toes along with the reels, jigs, and the O'Carolan tunes, but the music and Steven are irresistible. Steven gives Hugh a piping lesson, and the tune they play just might be called "O'Carolan's Seduction."

On Call: Afternoon - a short story

New single doctor in town, Keith Hoyer, gets plenty of interest, but is it for himself, the M.D. after his name, or what they think is in his wallet? The patients, of course, are strictly off limits. So each night he goes home to his big, gray tabby cat, Harpo, and unfulfilled dreams.

Then he opens the door to his exam room to find hunky veterinarian Dante James, with whom he'd rather play doctor than treat professionally. Too shy to approach the man, Keith needs Harpo for an inadvertent matchmaker.

On Call: Dancing - a short story

"It's all a prelude to the horizontal tango," Dante tells Keith, and drags him to the dance club, two left feet or no. Work has a way of chasing this doctor and vet couple down -- the victims in a car crash need their help more than they need a night out -- but a night in, tending an injured dog, can be filled with landmines -- and music.

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