



Tough Love

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Chapter One

Jacob opened his front door and propped open the screen door, startled to see Michael standing on the other side of it. Michael of the black hair and midnight gaze -- the man of Jacob's fantasies and his nightmares.

Michael of the tight t-shirts and tighter jeans, his black boots scuffed and well-worn.

God, Lise! Why'd you have to pick him?

He pasted a friendly, let's-be-civil smile on his face. He'd been to see the world -- or at least parts of it -- courtesy of Uncle Sam and had learned a few things along the way.

After six years away from Lise, he'd had enough and had opted out instead of re-enlisting. He was here to stay, even if "here" was almost three hours away from the home he and Lise had shared, and he figured he and Michael had better learn to deal with one another.

Jacob saw Michael swallow, but it seemed Michael couldn't even make himself speak to him without Lise around to be a buffer.

"Michael. I didn't know y'all were driving up. It's a good thing you got here when you did," he said, craning his head to look around Michael for Lise. "I was just about to make a run into town and then you'd have been stuck waiting for me on the porch."

He started to step around the silent man in search of Lise when Michael reached out and grabbed his arm.

He looked at Michael's hand, so broad and dark, resting against the sleeve of his jacket and hated his jacket. To be denied even the feel of Michael's rough palm against his skin was torture.

He tried to pull his arm away, laughing softly at the grip Michael had on him -- not painful, but not playful, either. Jacob couldn't make himself meet the other man's gaze. Afraid as always that Michael would see into his soul and ferret out his darkest secrets. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Michael swallow and thought, He's nervous.

"What's going on?" Jacob asked, a feeling of dread sinking into him. "Shit. You got her pregnant, didn't you?" He knew his question came out more as an accusation but he couldn't help it.

Lise pregnant.

God, what a miracle that would be. And the final nail in his coffin. He couldn't stand to be around them for any length of time as it was. Seeing the two people he loved most love each other to the exclusion of all else, even himself, was simply too much. But to see their love embodied in that of a child? Unbearable.

He made his gaze meet the other man's for an instant and what he saw there terrified him. Michael swallowed again and shook his head. Jacob struggled in earnest now to pull his arm away, but Michael held on, grabbing his other arm in the process.

"No," Jacob said, his voice utterly calm. Then,

"Lise! Lise! Goddammit, this isn't funny! Get your ass over here now! Lise!"

Michael had a firm grip on his upper arms and used his greater height and weight to pull Jacob into his embrace. Their struggle seemed a sort of macabre dance to Jacob, two dark angels fighting for dominance until the larger of the two wore the other one out.

Jacob heard the other man sob. Sob, when a smile would crack his face and a laugh was unheard of.

Michael's presence on his front porch made a terrible kind of sense then. Jacob felt a void open up inside him and start to swallow him whole.

"NO! LISE!" From far away Jacob heard screaming but couldn't make out where it was coming from. It was a sound such as he'd never heard before.

One that only the worst kind of animal pain could bring forth. And like an animal in pain, he lashed out, viciously attacking the source of his agony.

Michael had shackled Jacob's hands with his own, but his mouth was free. He felt his teeth sink into his enemy's shoulder and heard the other man grunt. Jacob shook his head like a dog with a bone wanting to rend and tear. He didn't know if minutes or hours passed before he once again became aware of his surroundings.

His hands were clenched in the black t-shirt Michael wore, his jaw now loose around the flesh it had clamped on with such force earlier. Faint whimpering sounds were coming from him but he couldn't seem to stop them. He loosened his hands and worked his jaw, freeing Michael in the process, only to realize Michael still had a hold on him.

Michael, the darkest of angels, had one hand buried in Jacob's hair and his other arm wrapped around him with that hand clamped tightly to Jacob's hip. Michael, who had never shown much emotion of any kind except around Lise, held him as though he'd never let him go.

How cruel, Jacob thought, to have his wildest dream fulfilled at such a terrible cost. Slowly, selfishly, Jacob wrapped his arms around Michael as they huddled together on the porch. Jacob kept waiting for the numbness to come over him but it escaped his grasp. Each time he thought he felt its presence, Michael would take a breath and clench him that much tighter. It dawned on him then that the numbness wouldn't come to him so long as Michael was near.

Jacob became aware of the chill as he brushed a palm over Michael's arm and felt goose bumps on the other man's skin. The man in his arms demanded his attention, whether Michael realized it or not.

"Come on, buddy," Jacob said, amazed at the hoarse rasp that came out. "Let's get you inside."

Michael weakly shook his head and continued to hold tightly to Jacob. Jacob hated to break his hold but knew he had to get them inside before they both took sick. Where would that leave Lise -- Christ, don't go there, he thought.

"Come on, Michael," he tried again but Michael refused to budge. After only a brief struggle Jacob gave up, his emotional collapse leaving him drained and unwilling to fight. He wrapped his arms back around Michael and relaxed into his embrace.

"Fine. Then we'll both just sit out here till we take sick. Whatever. It's not like it matters anymore."

Hearing that tone in Jacob's voice did something to Michael. He knew Lise wouldn't want them sick; she loved them too much to see them hurting in any way. So he pulled himself together, or at least as much as he could under the circumstances, and leaned back until he could rest his forehead against Jacob's.

Michael felt a muscle clench along his jaw and forced himself to swallow back his emotions. But when he opened his eyes -- eyes that burned with the need to cry but couldn't -- he was looking straight into Jacob's tear-swollen ones. He knew then if he didn't do something, Jacob wouldn't be long for this world.

Lise had always told him how strong Jacob was, and he'd never doubted it for a second. Looking at Jacob now, though, Michael realized she was why he had been strong. He didn't know exactly how he knew this -- intuition, maybe. But he knew nonetheless.

He accepted this knowledge, just as he accepted that Jacob was his responsibility now. Hell, that wasn't quite right. Jacob had been his responsibility the moment he'd decided to make Lise his.

Because Jacob was hers.

It was that simple. Her family became his family. Gay, straight, black, white, he didn't care. What was hers was his, and vice versa. He knew if he'd been the one to go, Jacob would have helped Lise get through his loss and take care of his family as best they could. Now he would do no less. For Lise. At least that was what he told himself.

It took every bit of willpower he possessed to pull away from Jacob. As he lifted his head he saw the strands of their hair pull apart and somehow felt that was right and good -- even their hair had clung together during this awful time.

Michael stepped back until his hands rested on Jacob's broad shoulders and squeezed them once before letting go.

Jacob watched as Michael composed himself and saw what it cost him -- Michael's nostrils flared and he had to blink fast a couple of times and swallow hard again before he could speak.

Even then, Jacob thought it was touch and go.

"You're right," Michael said, clenching his hands into fists at his sides. His action caused the veins in his arms to bulge and his t-shirt to pull tighter across his chest, drawing Jacob's attention.

Jacob wondered that he should feel surprise at Michael's agreement that nothing mattered anymore but he did -- it wasn't like Michael to give up. As Michael stepped back Jacob felt an eerie calmness begin to settle on him. Not quite the numbness he'd hoped for, but hell, at this point it was better than nothing.

Michael continued, "We should go inside. It's a bit cool out here."

Jacob nodded and looked down at his empty hands, then back at the wrinkles on Michael's t-shirt. He cleared his throat and grimaced at the raw feeling before raising his gaze to lock with the other man's.

"I'm sorry about ..." he began, gesturing helplessly at Michael and then looking down at the porch. Jacob jerked back when Michael raised his right hand toward Jacob's head. Michael grunted as he finished his motion, grasping Jacob's chin firmly in his hand and holding his gaze with his own.

"Don't worry about it, kid. I understand, really I do." Probably better than you do yourself, Michael finished to himself.

Lise had told him about how they had met and about some of the adventures they'd had together along the way. She'd also made it clear from the beginning that they were a package deal -- she wouldn't give up Jacob for Michael. Michael had to admit that had dented his pride at first.

Until he realized the major role Jacob had played in her life.

How he had tried to protect her when they were little, even though she had been the bigger of the two way back then. How his own parents had neglected him and hers had helped save him. How they had gone together to the various school socials and lent one another moral support through their trying teen years. How they applied to the same colleges and chose the one they'd both been accepted to.

How he'd steered her clear of the jerks and she'd steered him clear of the deviants.

A million stories raced through his head and a million images chased on their heels. He shook his head to clear it and then gently steered Jacob into the house, closing the door behind them and locking it.

Jacob stood in the entryway, looking lost and somehow defiant. He jumped when Michael reached around him to ease his jacket off, hanging it on a coat rack by the door.

"It's just me, kid. Ease up."

"Not fucking likely." Jacob snorted.

"Christ, the mouth on you."

Jacob kept running his gaze around the room, never looking at one thing for long. His gaze finally stilled but his finger started tapping an erratic beat against the leg of his pants. His breathing grew rough once again and he seemed oblivious to Michael's presence. Michael eased behind him until he could see what Jacob was looking at. What he saw made his breath catch.

Buried behind and somewhat to the side of some other pictures sitting on the mantel was a picture of the three of them on his and Lise's wedding day. Michael had Lise wrapped in his arms and they were gazing lovingly into one another's eyes, practically eating one another up. Jacob was standing on the other side of Lise with his hands in his pockets, his own gaze fiercely intent on the newlyweds.

Until that moment Michael had refused to recognize the look in Jacob's eyes for what it was -- an aching longing and a deep loss. He stepped around Jacob and crossed the room, hearing Jacob's breathing even out as he did so. Carefully he pulled the picture from its hiding place and gripped it tightly in his hand. With one finger he traced the features of her face, desperately trying to replace the last image he had of her with this one.

The sound of rough breathing caught his attention and he quickly looked over at Jacob. He was startled to realize he himself was the one practically gasping for breath, like a man drowning in an ocean of sorrow. He squeezed his eyes shut against his own melancholy but opened them when he felt a tug on the picture.

He let go of the picture and watched as Jacob gently placed it back on the mantel, rearranging the other pictures until his image was once again covered from view by a picture frame. Jacob turned back to him, putting his hands in his pockets.

"You hungry?" he asked, his voice still torn up from screaming. Michael wondered if he'd ever sound the same again and thought not.

"No. Tired, though," he said, pressing the heels of his hands to his eyes.

"Did you bring an overnight bag?"

"No."

"Sure." Pause. Throat clearing. Grimace. "Did you tell her folks yet?" Jacob nodded.

"Yeah." Michael recalled the devastation he'd wrought on them before driving here. He'd wanted to tell Jacob first but knew that if he'd driven out here before talking with them that someone would have called and told Jacob the news before he'd arrived. He hadn't been willing to chance that.

"Oh, I thought maybe you wanted me to go with you ..." Jacob's voice trailed off. He continued to look around Michael. "You should have saved yourself a trip and called. I'm sure you have arrangements to make."

Michael was surprised he could still feel pain, but he could and that hurt. "That was an awful thing to say."

Jacob closed his eyes and shook his head, feeling so drained he didn't even care anymore. "Yeah. It was. I'm sorry. I'm going to bed. Make yourself --"

Jacob shook his head again and turned to walk from the room. "See you in the morning?"

"Yeah. We need to get going in the morning but there's no rush ..."

"We?" Jacob asked, still facing the doorway.

"Yeah, we." He once again fought back the rising tide of emotion. "I can't do this without you, kid."

"Night." Jacob nodded.

"Night."

Chapter Two

After Jacob went to bed, Michael wandered around the house, taking Jacob at his word, looking into drawers and investigating the nooks and crannies of the other man's home. He looked at the photos, read the titles of the books and movies Jacob owned, raided the pantry. But nothing caught his attention, and soon he'd exhausted all the distractions.

The picture drew him. It called to him as sirens had called to sailors of yore, luring them to a most delicious doom. He looked again at the pictures on the mantel, careful to place them back the way he'd found them. Seeing them made him remember the way Lise had confronted him about his feelings for Jacob ...

* * * * *

Michael had closed a case that day and been given the rest of the afternoon off to regroup before hitting a new one tomorrow. He was sitting on the couch -- the same couch Lise and Jacob had picked out as their one luxury item when they'd bought the house together all those years ago -- and flipping through photo albums they kept in the chest-cum-coffee table.

Even though Jacob had been out of the house and in the military for the past few years Lise had refused to change a thing, saying it wouldn't be right without Jacob. Not that he really cared one way or another whether their home was country cottage or minimalist contemporary, whatever the hell that meant. He just wanted it to be his and Lise's instead of hers and Jacob's. Her compassion for others, for Jacob especially, never ceased to amaze him. It was what made her a great nurse. And their marriage couldn't work without it.

Lise did her best to keep the photos organized and at least once a month pulled a book out and e-mailed pictures to Jacob. She was so determined to maintain her connection with him it was worrisome at times. Michael couldn't help but wonder at the hold Jacob had on her. Lise swore it had never been sexual between the two of them but had admitted that in high school they'd tried kissing once.

He loved his wife and knew she loved him, but the regret in her voice over a romance that never happened concerned him. But instead of trying to talk to her about it -- he knew how uncomfortable intimate discussions made her -- he decided to put his detective skills to work.

He'd found a notepad and a pen in the office and pulled out her box of important papers -- birth certificates, marriage certificate, copies of transcripts and various other legal documents -- and jotted down some of the dates he came across. The notepad now rested on one leg while the other propped up a photo album.

One picture in particular caught his attention. It was of Jacob. He was sitting on a wooden fence, his body facing the camera. His hands were braced at his sides with his legs bent and his feet resting on a fence rail. He was wearing a t-shirt and jeans and looking over his right shoulder.

Even though he couldn't see it clearly, Michael knew the look that would be on Jacob's face. Because he knew how he held himself. An unknowing observer would see the slouched body and relaxed limbs and think Jacob was as laid back as they came. But someone who knew him, who loved him, would see that his knuckles were white where they gripped the rail. The vein in his neck was standing out as it did when he was upset. His foot was blurred because he couldn't sit still with all the nervous energy coursing through his body.

And if they could see his eyes, they'd see the stark terror reflected in them and know he was scared to death about something. When he saw the date on the back of the picture -- ever-so-organized Lise was anal when it came to noting the date and location on each picture -- he felt a tremble work its way through his body. It was the day they'd met him at the sandwich shop.

He flung his pen down and straightened his legs out, easing the notepad and album to the floor. He pulled the blanket from the back of the couch and covered his eyes with one arm. He forced himself to take advantage of the break he'd been given and rest, pushing the picture and all it entailed to the back of his mind.

But in his sleep he dreamed. Of soft lips, a hot wet tongue and teeth that made love nips along his jaw line, stopping at his ear. Short nails bit into his chest and then he felt a hand grab his dick through his jeans. He was so close one squeeze was all it took to send him over the edge.

"Oh, God, Jacob!" he said, coming in his pants and gasping for breath. He blinked his eyes and felt the blood drain from his face. He shook his head in denial but it was too late. His body had betrayed him.

She knelt there on the floor beside him, a startled look on her face. Startled but not angry or disgusted. He figured that would come in time as she got over the shock of hearing her husband cry out for her best friend.

"You thought I was Jacob?" she asked, shaking her head in befuddlement. "I never knew." Slowly she gained her feet and moved back a couple of steps only to sink down into the chair behind her. "How long?"

He shook his head again and pulled the blanket more securely around his body.

"How long?" she demanded. She clenched her hands in her lap, a sure sign she was agitated and having trouble focusing her thoughts. "Have you -- have you touched him? Is that why he joined the Army? Tell me, damn you! Did you hurt him? I swear if you hurt him ..."

Michael knew without being told that Jacob had joined the Army to give him and Lise time to adjust to married life. He knew that Jacob's job at the local mom-and-pop gas station hadn't suited him but that he'd have stuck with it if it weren't for Michael. Within a week of learning of their engagement Jacob had joined the Army.

An amazed laugh escaped him. Here he was, covered in his own cum, discovered dreaming about another man, and she only worried about Jacob.

"I've never hurt him, Lise. We've never ..." He gestured at the couch with one hand. "I would never cheat on you. I love you. But I can't help what I dream. I'm sorry."

She closed her eyes and stilled the nervous movement of her hands. When she opened her eyes he was startled by the intent expression in them.

"I believe you. Jacob would never ..." she said, mimicking his gesture toward the couch.

"Jacob wouldn't?" He sat up and leaned toward her. "Jacob wouldn't? I'm your husband, lady. Try having a little faith in me for a change!"

She glanced pointedly at the wet spot, now visible between the gaping corners of the blanket. She bit her lip and shook her head, holding whatever she had meant to say in.

"I do have faith in you, more than you know."

"Glad to hear it."

"I just meant, Jacob would never have sex with, well, you."

His emotions were a jumble, but he knew that for the lie that it was. "I've seen the look in his eyes, Lise. Deny it all you want, but it's lust and it's there for me. I've never seen him look at any other man that way."

Damn, he thought, listen to me.

Practically bragging about how Jacob looks at me. Defensive as hell because my wife has faith in me.

"No, but I bet you've seen that look in his eyes when he looks at me," she said.

"What?" His head jerked back as though she'd slapped him.

"It's not lust -- well, not only lust. It's love. He loves us but he'll never make love with us. Not apart, certainly never together. He can't." Michael had seen evidence to the contrary, but his mind finally had control over his mouth once again, so he was able to bite his tongue and keep that detail to himself.

"I see I've made you speechless," she said, a soft taunt in her words.

"Speechless, hell. I'm waiting for you to finish."

"I'm a long way from finishing," she said, sliding her gaze to his crotch and then back to his eyes.

"Don't try to distract me, woman. It won't work this time."

"Won't it?" A calculating look rose in her eyes.

"No. Now tell me why you think he can't make love." She turned her head and started fiddling with her hands, picking at her cuticles. She sighed once. Deeply, as though the weight of the world rested on her shoulders.

"I shouldn't tell you," she said, her voice full of hesitation.

"Who am I, Lise?" he asked, demanding that she see him, see them, for what they were. Connected. Eternally.

"My heart," she said, smiling softly.

"And who is Jacob?" he asked, forcing her to admit their unbreakable connection to one another.

"My soul," she said, reaching over to pick up the photo album. Her eyes skimmed the pictures, greedily scanning his image with her eyes. Hungrily absorbing every nuance captured on film. As though she needed the picture to remind herself what he looked like.

Early on in their relationship, Michael had learned to accept Jacob's place in her life. And early on he had determined he would love Jacob if that meant Lise would love him. It hadn't been the chore he'd imagined it would be, but it was trying nonetheless.

"Tell me, Lise. There should be no secrets between a person's heart and soul."

He saw her struggle with her decision and decided to make it easier on her. He leaned back, giving her the emotional distance they both needed to think. He let his cop instincts take over, ferreting out the nuances of her expression, balancing it against his discoveries of that afternoon.

"You said he was always with you, Lise." There was no question to his statement but Lise answered anyway.

"Always," she said, smiling. Then her smile wavered. "Until now."

"He'll be back, Lise. He just needs a bit of space." Bitterness tinged her laugh.

"Well, he's got plenty of that now. Half a world of it."

"Did he give you space after school?"

"Never. We were so close ..." She smiled again, rubbing her finger along Jacob's face in the picture.

"Even though he hated homework?"

"Didn't matter," she said, shaking her head. "He was still there, helping me do mine or distracting me from doing his."

"What about chores? I bet he hated having to do chores."

She laughed. "He sure did. Tom Sawyer had nothing on that boy. He could get out of just about anything."

"What about going to the doctor and the dentist? Didn't you tell me once that your parents made arrangements with some of their friends to get Jacob the care he needed?"

"That's true. But he went, without fail. Because I went."

"And music. I know he hates music," he said softly. Still she flinched, her mouth twisting with the memories. "Lise?"

"Especially music," she said, her voice hoarse. "Now. Not always, though."

"No?"

"No. When we were little Jacob was constantly begging Momma to play something for him. He loved the piano. So Momma got us lessons ..."

"Lise?" he asked softly, not wanting to break her out of her reverie.

"It started right away. The abuse, I mean. I guess that's why we didn't realize at first," she said, shaking her head. "We were so little. We just didn't know."

The look she shot him was fierce, demanding he acknowledge her words. He nodded a bit, which seemed to satisfy her because she continued.

"I guess that was pretty smart on his part, huh? Making it somehow seem part of the lesson. Jacob hated it and didn't want to go back, but Momma insisted I see it through the first month. That was always important to my parents, that I see things through. She told Jacob he didn't have to, but he wouldn't let me go alone. He wanted to protect me."

She looked at him then. Her gaze fierce, as protective of Jacob as ever. "Jacob tried to stop him. But he was so little. That was the day the teacher had been caught and he knew it so he had nothing to lose. That was the day he ... I screamed. He pushed Jacob into the wall. Then Jacob screamed. Over and over again as the man ... hurt us." Tears ran down her face and her hand shook as she raised it to cover her mouth.

"It was awful. Oh, God. And when it was, over he started again. With Jacob."

Michael slowly stood and gathered her into his arms. She clung to him, softly weeping. He didn't try to hush her or tell her to forget. He just held her and gave her all the comfort he could, knowing she would pass it on to Jacob. He was her soul, after all.

Chapter Three

Michael sat on the couch in front of the fireplace and buried his hands in his hair. The memories washed over him and the shaking started soon after. So hard his teeth began chattering and his vision grew unfocused.

“Ohgodohgodohgodohgod ...”

Just when he thought he would break into a million pieces he felt a hand on his shoulder. It squeezed once and then was gone. A strong arm settled around his back and urged him to his feet.

“Up you go. That’s it. Come on now. Careful.” The last as he staggered into the edge of the doorframe.

“I’ve got you. Now, sit.” His legs bumped into something hard and he was eased back. A soft pillow, its fresh scent a balm to his senses, cradled his cheek. Only this morning he had rested his head on the cushion of Lise’s breasts.

The shaking grew worse. He felt Jacob tug his boots off before guiding his legs onto the bed. Jacob drew the covers over him and still he shook. The cold was inside him now. Deep into the marrow of his bones. And it refused to budge.

The mattress on his other side sank down, and then he felt it. A warmth along his side. And then a band around his middle, pulling him back into the warmth. He wrapped his hand around Jacob’s wrist, feeling him stiffen as he did so, and pulled him tighter around him until Jacob practically surrounded him. His sock-clad feet were supported by Jacob’s, his jean-clad legs spooned by his as well.

The warmth from Jacob’s chest heated his back and his arm around his waist helped him hold it all together. At least for a little longer.

The shaking tried to start up again when Michael closed his eyes, so he lay there gasping for air and fighting to stay awake that much longer. That was when he felt Jacob’s breath caress his neck. And that was when Jacob raised his hand to rub it across Michael’s chest, soothing his racing heart.

“Shh. I’ve got you. Rest now,” Jacob said, lightly kissing Michael’s nape.

Michael took a minute to gauge his own response, no longer sure of himself. But his breathing had begun to even out and his heartbeat had slowed down somewhat. His muscles had been tense for so long there was nothing for them to do but relax.

Jacob squeezed him once. "Go to sleep, Michael."

And he did.

The next morning Michael woke slowly, dread and a heavy weight on his chest making him loath to face the day. Sometime during the night he must have gotten hot because he'd pulled off his t-shirt and unbuttoned his jeans, causing them to gap and reveal his boxers underneath.

It came to him then, the cause of the dread.

Almost at the same time he realized that the weight on his chest was Jacob.

Jacob, who was so fiercely independent when awake, was a cuddler in his sleep.

His head rested on Michael's shoulder, his dark hair soft against Michael's bare skin. He had thrown one leg over Michael's, his knee perilously close to resting on his morning wood. One arm wrapped across his chest and clenched the covers on the other side. There was no way Michael could get out of bed without waking Jacob.

He'd been suffering from overload ever since he'd gotten the phone call at work yesterday afternoon and knew that if Jacob had somehow ended up in the same bed as he and cuddling him even as recently as yesterday morning he would not have reacted with such unconcern.

But a lot had happened since yesterday morning. Enough that Michael had learned to take comfort where he could find it. And if that comfort came in the form of a hug from Lise's best friend then so be it.

So he lay there in bed, surrounded by Jacob, thinking about Lise. Wondering what had had her driving in such a downpour to see him at work. He'd proposed to her in such a downpour. He'd learned that day to save good news for sunny days because she refused to let something as insignificant as the weather keep her from sharing her joy with those she loved.

He had a mind for details, which made him an excellent detective, but he knew he was too emotionally involved to see things clearly now. If he didn't force things, it would all settle into place eventually.

So he'd wait and it would come to him. He would learn what had sent her in search of him -- what had precipitated her death. Simple as that.

Not so simple was the tensing of Jacob's body as he came awake and realized who he was in bed with. His hand slowly unclenched from the bedding, and his knee eased from its place by Michael's groin. Michael felt him take a deep breath before levering up to sit on the far side of the bed.

"I'll get some coffee started," he said, never looking at Michael. He ran his hands through his hair, presumably to neaten it but messing it up even more. His voice still sounds hoarse, Michael thought.

"Sounds good. Mind if I take a shower?"

"No, go ahead. There should be an extra toothbrush in the cabinet. And you're welcome to borrow a pair of sweats if you'd like."

"I'll change once we get back to the house, but thanks."

"Suit yourself."

Before Jacob left the room, Michael saw a faint blush rise on his cheeks and realized he'd taken it personally. That he somehow thought Michael didn't like him enough to even wear a set of his clothes.

It came to Michael then that, in his effort to maintain a distance between them over the years, he'd managed to make Jacob think he didn't like him. The opposite was true, but he was relieved Jacob didn't know.

It was bad enough Lise had suspected.

To have Jacob confront him would be the end of him.

Jacob heard the shower start and felt some of the tension leave his muscles. He pulled out a chair and took a seat at the kitchen table, impatient for the coffee to finish. He tried to think of any little task or chore that had to be done before he left, but packing was the only thing that came to mind. It struck him as ironic that when Lise was alive he could have come up with at least a dozen things to postpone his trip but now that she was gone -- he couldn't bring himself to think of her as dead yet, so she was simply gone -- now that she was gone, nothing seemed more important than getting to her as quickly as possible.

Knowing Lise, she was probably sitting on a cloud somewhere in heaven laughing her ass off at his predicament. With his elbows on the table he buried his hands in his hair and tugged, hoping the pain would help him concentrate.

He was a grown man -- he shouldn't be having panic attacks.

Tugging on his hair wasn't helping, so he tried to empty his mind, but Lise wouldn't leave him alone. No matter how many times Jacob thought about how they'd gotten together he was constantly amazed.

He'd been a quiet child, dirty and unkempt, while she was all sunshine and light in her cute little dresses and lacy white socks. That first day of school had been hell. Instead of being allowed to sleep as long as he'd liked, he'd been dragged from his warm bed by a hard hand.

"Get up, boy. Time for school," his father had said, pulling clothes from the pile on the floor and throwing them at him. "Get dressed. We're leaving in five minutes."

Jacob quickly pulled on the clothes laid out for him and met his father at the door. His father laid his hand against Jacob's head, guiding him out the door and down the steps to the bus stop down the block.

"When number 29 comes along, you get on it, hear? And you'd better behave, or for sure I'll whup your sorry ass. Got that?" his father had demanded, waiting for him to nod before he headed back the way they'd come.

Jacob had stood there, watching the adults rush this way and that, and got on the number 29 as his father had told him. He sat where the driver told him and got off with the other kids in front of a big brick building with tiny windows.

And when someone had asked him for his name, he'd shrugged and looked at the kids around him. The adult sighed in frustration before moving on to speak with the parent of one of the screaming children. Some of the kids his size were crying and clinging to their moms or dads, or both.

Except for him, who had no one, and one little girl who looked intently at the woman straightening her hair bow. The woman spoke to another adult before quickly hugging the little girl and turning to march from the building. He'd walked over and stood in front of her, in awe that such a shining angel stood so calmly amidst the chaos. They'd looked at each other for the longest time.

When she'd reached over to grab his hand, he'd jerked it back, not wanting to dirty her with the nastiness his parents said he was. She frowned at him and then grabbed his hand again. He wasn't expecting that -- he thought she'd be able to see the nastiness in him and know not to touch. But he guessed some people had to be told. He'd looked down at their joined hands and then back at her sweet face.

He hadn't known then the name for the feeling that flooded him. That made his heart beat faster and his breath quicken. That made him want to never let go of her. Before he ever learned the word for it, he knew it was important. That it was strong and good. And it came from him as much as it came from her. That meant there had to be something in him besides the nastiness. The feeling was fierce, too. It wouldn't let him stand by when the other boys in the class pulled her hair or the other girls teased her about her fancy dresses.

He got into more trouble than he'd ever been in before -- first with the teacher, then the principal, and finally his parents. But no matter how severe the punishment, he couldn't make the feeling go away. And he didn't want to. He might not understand it, but he knew it was worth fighting for. She was worth fighting for. So he did.

She clung to him and he to her. On that first day of school as they were standing among the other crying children, silently holding hands and looking at one another, a lady walked over and started talking to them.

Jacob didn't bother looking at her and he sure wasn't going to bother speaking to her. The adults he'd been around in the past had swatted him good for talking in their presence so he'd learned to only talk when he was by himself, playing quietly in the corner of his room with his sock puppets and collection of mostly broken secondhand toys.

"Hello, children. I'm Ms. Tompkins, your teacher for the year," she said, frowning slightly at Jacob but smiling brightly at the little girl he clung to. "You must be Analise Campbell. Your mommy spoke to me before she left and told me what a good little girl you are. I'm so happy you're going to be in my class this year."

She turned to Jacob, reaching between them to try to separate their hands.

"Let's not do that, you'll dirty her pretty dress," she said to Jacob. Though she tried, they refused to let go, clinging to one another with both hands now.

"Children! This is not a game. Now stop."

Despite her instructions they held tight, drawing attention from the other children and adults present. Finally Ms. Tompkins wrenched Analise away and began to rub her hands clean on a tissue she pulled from her sleeve.

Analise had looked at him, begging him with her eyes to do something. He wiggled between her and the teacher and wrapped her in his arms. She buried her face in his neck and held tight.

Jacob knew he would get into trouble for disobeying an adult, but he was used to it. So he rubbed his nose in her clean-smelling hair and prayed as best he could that he would never have to let her go.

Soon enough the teacher was back with reinforcements. One teacher crouched by his side, trying to convince him to release Analise, the other encouraging Analise to do the same. An awful feeling came over him at the thought of being separated from her, worse than even the time his father had beaten him to sleep.

He felt his throat working and struggled to speak in front of witnesses.

Analise was sobbing now, transforming from a confident child into a tearful terror in front of her teacher's eyes. Thinking back on it, Jacob realized the teacher must have thought it strange, how he and Analise had acted. It must have been obvious that his parents couldn't have afforded to send him to the exclusive preschool Analise had attended.

The teacher allowed them to stay together that first day but Jacob later learned that she'd spoken with Analise's mother, hoping to nip their friendship in the bud. But that was not to be. The next morning Analise's mother was waiting for their teacher by the school doors and told her how grateful she was that Analise had such an understanding teacher. How impressed she was with the sense of compassion she'd shown for Jacob.

"I know that as an educated adult you realize children are not responsible for the circumstances into which they are born," Analise's mother had said, surely causing the teacher's stomach to sink. "I've brought along a few things I thought you could let the boy use here at school. I don't want to shame him or his parents if I were to send too much with Analise, you see ..."

And Ms. Tompkins did see. She was an educated adult, so she chose to make a formidable ally instead of a staunch opponent.

And that, as they say, was that. Ms. Tompkins took no further steps to separate the two and made it clear to those who assisted in her classroom that so long as the children obeyed the rules established for them and respected the learning process she would let them be. As for Jacob's take on school, at first he had trouble linking "school" and "Analise Campbell" together.

He hadn't understood why he was no longer allowed to sleep as late as he liked or that when he went to school he got to see Analise. He was not a stupid boy but he had a much steeper learning curve than the other children. It wasn't like his parents had spent hours helping him learn his letters and numbers, after all.

He quickly learned that it was best to be out of the house on time, lest he feel a belt on his backside hurrying him along. The knowledge that he'd get a good meal for his troubles made it easier to bear. As did Analise and the sense of wonder she shared with him about everything.

For one thing, he knew the people who claimed him as their own were his parents, but he found it impossible to relate them to the loving images he saw on TV. In his little boy mind, he often wished it were otherwise.

Lise, on the other hand, was his ideal.

Her parents doted on her.

They gave her food to eat and made her take baths. They took her to the doctor when she got sick and got her a pet so she'd learn responsibility. Jacob had to wonder if his parents had ever been allowed to have a pet and thought not, which in turn made him wonder how two people who couldn't be responsible for a pet were allowed to be responsible for a person.

Despite his neglectful parents, he and Lise managed to stick together through grammar school and college, boyfriends and girlfriends, first jobs and the harsh realities of the world.

Nothing had ever come between them.

Until Michael.

Chapter Four

Jacob didn't understand what made Michael different but Jacob knew that he was. He and Lise had been so attuned to one another he had felt her reaction to Michael as though it were his own. He thought maybe it had been mutual until he realized Michael didn't swing that way. Or rather, didn't swing his way. Jacob had never felt a sincere sexual preference for man or woman.

Until Michael.

The day they met Michael, the day their lives changed forever, started out normally enough. Jacob's alarm clock hadn't gone off and he felt like he was running behind all morning. Somehow he managed to make time to meet Lise at their usual lunch spot at the sandwich shop across from the hospital where she worked as a nurse.

They had just sat down with their drinks and sandwiches when Michael walked in. Jacob thought he had the market cornered when it came to dark and brooding, but this man had him beat by a mile. He could feel his lunch hour slipping away from him but simply could not pull his gaze away from the newcomer.

He knew the instant Lise saw him, too.

Whenever Jacob and Lise were together, they were touching -- heads together, knees tapping, arms brushing. Something of his would have to be touching something of hers or they'd feel lost, cut adrift, disconnected. So he felt her jump.

And he heard her catch her breath and then slowly let it out.

When the man finally looked their way, he met Jacob's gaze before fixing his sight on Lise. Seeing the man's dismissal had freed Jacob from whatever spell he'd been under, and he had turned to look at Lise. Not because he had needed to see her face to know her thoughts, but because he couldn't help himself.

It was like watching a train wreck -- he could see it coming but could do nothing to stop it. Not that he truly would have.

After all, love wasn't a train wreck.

Or so he tried to convince himself. Just as he told himself it was a small earthquake he felt and not his world tilting on its axis ...

The memory of that day was almost more than he could bear. He pushed it back and made himself focus on his surroundings. In his state, even the drip of the coffee seemed loud. He grasped onto that image like a lifeline -- one drip turned into another, into another, until finally he was imagining a waterfall. He was about to go over the falls when Michael pulled him from his reverie.

"Hey, kid. I took you up on your offer. Hope you don't mind."

Jacob raised his head from his hands and took in the man standing before him. Michael was wearing one of his old Army t-shirts and a pair of worn sweatpants. When Jacob saw a pair of his socks on Michael's feet, he had to wonder if the man had borrowed his underwear as well. Not that he'd mind, exactly, but he did wonder.

He couldn't bring himself to speak yet, so he shook his head.

"Coffee's almost done, kid. How do you take yours?"

Knowing he couldn't ignore the man forever, Jacob dropped his hands to the table and looked Michael in the eye. "Straight up, no finessing. You?" he asked, the challenge evident in his voice.

Michael grunted and said, "I like finessing. Makes it go down better. Know what I mean?"

Jacob thought he saw something in Michael's gaze, but it was gone before he could determine what it might have been.

"Christ, I have to pack. Grab a bite if you like," he said and left the room before Michael could answer. He went to his room to throw a few things in a bag but couldn't find his suit. A few minutes later he was back down the hall and ready to go.

"I'm going to have to go into town and pick up a suit. If you'll give me your cell number I'll give you a call when I get to the hotel," he said. Pulling out his cell phone, he got ready to enter Michael's number into his address book but looked up when it wasn't forthcoming. The look on Michael's face was a cross between amazement and pity.

"What the fuck you looking at?"

Michael closed his eyes and slowly recited his number. While Jacob had been packing, Michael had changed back into his jeans.

Jacob snorted. "You tried, I'll give you that."

This time the look was one of pure anger. "What is it this time?"

Jacob gestured to his pants. "You had 'em on for what, five minutes?"

"I forgot to bring my tennis shoes and I refuse to wear my boots with sweatpants. And there's no way I can fit my feet into your shoes. Satisfied?" he asked through gritted teeth.

"Not by a long shot. Let's go," he said and turned to lead the way outside. As soon as Michael was through the door he pulled it to and locked it, letting the screen door slam shut behind them. He made his way to his truck and was buckling in when the passenger door opened.

"What are you doing?"

"What's it look like I'm doing?" he asked, pulling his seat belt on. "I'm riding with you."

Jacob sat there looking at him, not making a move to turn the key. He looked at Michael and then at Michael's car. It would be safe enough, he knew, but he didn't see the point in Michael's having to come back with him after the funeral and told him so.

Michael huddled closer to the door, using his black t-shirt from the night before to cushion his head. "You're killing me, kid. We'll settle all that later. For now, crank this bad boy up and get some heat flowing. I'm freezing."

Jacob did as he was bidden and started the truck, adjusting the heat to help Michael warm up. He let the truck idle a few minutes, composing his thoughts as it did.

"I'm sorry, Michael. Of course you don't feel like driving. Just rest, and before you know it we'll be home." He nodded at his own pep talk while at the same time he worried about his antagonism toward Michael this morning. It wasn't as though Michael had actually done anything wrong. He was the one who'd made Michael get into bed last night. And he was the one who'd made the decision to climb into that bed with him. And -- let's not forget this little fact -- he was the one who had wrapped himself around the other man like ivy.

"What's the matter with us?"

"Nothing's the matter with us, kid," he said, making Jacob realize he'd spoken at least part of his thoughts out loud. "It's called foreplay. Now get going. We can't keep Lise waiting."

Chapter Five

The ride back gave Jacob plenty of time to think but there wasn't enough time in the world for him to sort out his thoughts. The one fighting for his attention, though, went back to the night Michael had proposed to Lise.

He'd been standing by the front windows watching for her car, phone in hand in case she called. It had been pretty nasty weather that night -- hard rains and a strong wind made for poor driving conditions, and he had been worried.

When the phone rang, he about jumped out of his skin.

Seeing Michael and Lise's home number pop up on the caller ID, he answered, hoping she was calling to say she was staying at his place through the night, but fearing the worst.

"Hey, it's Michael."

"Michael. What can I do for you?"

"Lise is on her way home," he began. Something in Michael's voice told Jacob he wasn't going to like the rest of what he had to say.

"And?"

"And I just wanted to warn you."

By this time Jacob's heart was pounding, and he could feel sweat break out across his body.

"Christ! Out with it, man. I'm on fucking pins and needles here. What did you do to her?" The tense silence that followed didn't help him calm down any.

"I asked her to marry me," Michael said, softly, plunging the knife in. "And she said yes ... Jacob?"

Jacob heard Michael calling his name, but couldn't answer. The pain in his gut doubled him over. The phone clattered to the floor as he stood there with his hands on his knees, gasping for breath. Finally, finally, he started to go numb. He felt it, the numbness, seeping through his very pores until he could bend over and pick up the phone.

He cleared his throat and was surprised to hear himself speak calmly.

"I'm fine. Just swallowed wrong. Congratulations, man. Thanks for letting me know."

"Jacob --" Michael managed to convey so much in that single word -- concern, compassion, protection. And a warning.

"I'm fine, really. I'll act surprised. She'll never hear from me that you told," Jacob said. The sound of an engine grew louder and then there was a brief moment of silence followed by the slamming of a car door. "She's here. Gotta go."

Jacob ended the call and stood staring at the phone, wishing he'd never bought the damned thing. The numbness had settled deep into him, making him on the one hand hyperaware of his surroundings and on the other immune to them at the same time.

Jacob heard the front door close and then Lise's footsteps as she walked into the room. She came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist.

"He asked me to marry him," she said, squeezing him in her excitement.

Jacob closed his eyes as fear clenched his gut, but the numbness quickly squelched it. He cleared his throat. "Congratulations, Lise."

She squeezed him again and laughed. "Best wishes."

"What?" he asked, gauging his own reaction to hearing the news confirmed, probing the numbness to make sure it would hold.

"You're supposed to say 'best wishes' to the woman and 'congratulations' to the man."

"Fuck," he said, shrugging her arms away. "You'll forgive me if my less than stellar background prevents me from knowing the socially acceptable phrase to throw your way."

"God, Jacob. I didn't mean it that way," she said, softly caressing his back in a conciliatory gesture. "I'm sorry."

"Listen to you. You're sorry. I'm the ass and you're sorry. Shit," he said, hanging his head and fighting the nausea even the numbness couldn't hold back.

"Listen to yourself," she said, a hint of anger creeping into her voice. "You are an ass."

He sighed deeply in an attempt to calm his racing heart. "I'm the one who should be sorry, Lise. You just caught me by surprise, that's all."

She let out a breath and then slowly wrapped her arms around him again. He felt her rest her forehead against the middle of his back and rub her face against him.

"Please be happy for me, Jacob. I really love him. And he loves me," she added, her voice filled with wonder.

"What's not to love, squirt? Don't sound so surprised," he said, relishing this single moment with her. This last moment that would be solely theirs.

He laughed softly to himself, realizing the lie for what it was. The last moment they'd had together had been when they'd stood in line at the sandwich shop and ordered lunch all those months ago.

"That's better, Jacob," she said, her relief evident in her voice. "It's not often I can surprise you."

Striving for their old camaraderie, he pasted a smile on his face and turned to take her in his arms. "Promise not to do that again for a while, ok? I'm not sure my heart can take it."

She smiled up at him before reaching up to plant a kiss on his mouth and snuggling into his embrace. He hugged her as tightly as he could without hurting her, breathing deeply of her sweet scent before kissing the top of her head.

His throat worked but no sounds came out so he nuzzled her hair with his nose, holding her quietly for some time. When she pulled away he let her go, knowing he'd never be able to hold her like that again because if he did, he knew he'd crush her with the weight of his love for her.

She was smiling again, chattering a mile a minute.

"Jacob, there's something I want you to do for me. You know, I never thought I'd marry but I guess subconsciously I was still hoping. So when Michael asked me I just knew how I wanted everything to be. Silly, huh?"

Luckily she didn't require any response from him and continued on, pacing as she went, "Michael will be waiting for me at the end of the aisle. And Momma and Daddy will be sitting in their place in the first pew. And you will walk me down the aisle --"

He broke in, hating to ruin her plans but knowing he couldn't do what she was about to ask of him. "Don't ask me to give you away, Lise. I can't. I won't."

He clenched his muscles as tight as he could, warding off the chills waiting to rend him in two. He saw the pitying look in her eye and hated it.

"Oh, Jacob --" she said, walking back toward him.

"No, dammit," he said, humiliated that he couldn't do what she wanted.

"I don't want you to give me away. I just want you to walk me down the aisle and stand beside me as I marry the man I'll love. The only man I'll ever love beside you. I wasn't going to ask you to give me away, Jacob, I swear," she said, tears filling her eyes. "Jacob, I love you. I'll always love you. You'll always be a part of my life."

He shrugged her hand off and thrust his hands into his pockets.

"Jacob," she said, her voice breaking. "Please."

He shuddered once before pulling his hands free and jerking her to him.

"God, Lise. I don't know what I'll do without you."

She squeezed him tighter. "You'll never have to find out. I promise."

He clung tightly to her and to her promise, knowing he'd have to let both go eventually ...

The closer they got to home, the harder it was for Jacob to think about Lise. He couldn't stand to think of her not being there but he was having trouble thinking about how he'd left things between them.

"Christ, what'd she ever see in me?" he said, unwittingly giving voice to his thoughts.

"Her soulmate," came the gruff reply from the other side of the truck.

"What? She told you that?" he asked, unable to believe Lise would call him such to her husband.

"Several times. She made it quite clear to me from the very beginning how she felt about you. That never changed."

Jacob shook his head as some of the pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

"God, no wonder you hate me. She tell you how good I was in bed, too?"

"Don't be an ass, kid. I'm in no mood to put up with it."

Jacob pulled into the driveway and was saved from having to reply. They were home. Michael looked up at the sudden stop and then reached for the door handle but couldn't seem to make himself open it.

Jacob knew the hell Michael was going through and forced himself to act normally -- for him, at least. He threw open the door and hopped out, slamming it closed behind him. He walked over to the passenger door and wrenched it open, making Michael lurch backward to avoid falling out.

"Out," he ordered, pleased when Michael did as he was told. Seemed the fine edge the Army had put on his personality was still there after all, if a bit dulled from lack of use.

He marched them into the house, surprised when his old key still worked. But that was nothing compared to the surprise he felt upon glimpsing the house, practically unchanged from the day he'd left all those years ago.

Michael had been fine with letting Jacob be in control; he knew it was something they'd both needed. Seeing the look on his face as he walked inside, though, tore him up all over again.

Jacob glanced at him, a puzzled frown on his face. "Not much in the decorating department, I see."

Michael had expected no less. Jacob's past would always be a part of him. Something that cast a shadow over even the brightest of days. He could deal with that. He would. Starting now.

"Lise refused to change anything until you came home. She said it was half yours so you should have a say," he told Jacob, finding it easier to admit now than he would have early on in their relationship.

He'd been so concerned about their closeness -- so jealous.

Because he was so emotionally vested in the outcome it had taken him longer than it usually would have to see that they had needed each other like they needed air and water. He had realized that at about the same time he'd realized Jacob was aware of his own need -- how could he not be -- but unaware that it was equally strong for Lise.

Jacob had put her on a pedestal, just as Michael had done when he'd first met her. She'd realized what he was doing and with him was comfortable enough to point out that she didn't mind perching up high if he didn't mind catching her when she slipped off. Michael had asked her if she'd told Jacob that yet and she'd said no, that she didn't have to. She'd said Jacob knew if she was up on some pedestal somewhere then he was right beside her, like always.

What was so shocking to him was that while Jacob needed Lise with him, he was constantly trying to push her away, to sever their bond. Michael knew part of his broodiness was an act but only part. Most of it came from deep inside. From neglectful parents. From the music teacher's abuse. From a perceived inability to love. He truly believed that Lise loved him so much that it was reflected back at her through him, not because it originated in him.

Michael knew that after they buried Lise, Jacob would try to run.

To distance himself from Michael physically and emotionally.

And because of Michael's own actions in the past, Jacob thought he hated him.

So all the more reason to run, right?

Wrong.

Michael had already lost one of the people he'd loved most in this world. He wasn't about to let go of another without a fight.

So what would it take to make Jacob see what Michael felt for him wasn't a spur of the moment, grief-induced fancy that would fade to nothing? Jacob was used to only one person caring about him and for him. That would change. Starting now. Michael figured if he smothered Jacob with his affection, Jacob would think grief had prompted him to do so. But if he were subtle about it, if he just took care of the little things for him, day after day, night after night, eventually Jacob would see that Michael's feelings for him were real and lasting.

While Michael had been standing there, trying to solve the world's problems from the fierce look on his face, Jacob had been sliding glances around the room, looking for little knickknacks still in their old places and surprised over and over again to see them still there. As much as he, too, wanted to put off their grim responsibilities, it was up to them to take care of Lise, and they would muster up their courage and get it done.

Slapping Michael on the shoulder, he said, "Come on, man. Let's see if we can find us a couple of suits and then go see Lise."

Michael squeezed his eyes shut and slowly nodded his head before walking down the hall toward the bedrooms.

Chapter Six

They found one of Jacob's old suits hiding in the back of the closet that used to be his and threw it into the dryer to air out, before heading on to the funeral home to make arrangements. Between making arrangements and dealing with grieving family and friends, they managed to expend enough energy that they fell into bed -- separately -- and made it through the night.

The next afternoon they found themselves in a receiving line at the funeral home, shaking hands, giving and receiving hugs as they stood beside Lise's casket. The mortician had been able to clean her up for viewing, much to Michael's relief. He knew he loved Lise as much as any one person ever could, but he also knew it would have destroyed Jacob not to see her one last time.

"I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am. To lose Lise and the baby at the same time --" Terri, he thought her name was. A nursing friend of Lise's.

"What? What did you say?" Michael demanded, his voice hoarse with emotion. Unconsciously he tightened his grip on the woman's hand.

"I'm sorry. I should go," she said, trying to pull her hand away.

Ignoring her discomfort, Michael leaned toward her and said, "What baby?"

Jacob had been speaking with another mourner at Michael's side when he realized the other man's intensity and subsequently heard the word "baby." He carefully pried the woman's hand from Michael's grasp, calling attention to himself in the process.

"You knew --" he began, turning his hands in Jacob's grip and taking hold of his wrists.

"Not here," Jacob said. He didn't bother trying to shake off the other man's hold but stood calmly in the face of his increased sorrow.

"Somehow you knew," he said, his eyes wild. "You little --"

"Michael," he said, his voice at last cutting through Michael's pain. "Not here. Let's go."

The family had been granted access to restrooms at the other end of the funeral home away from the condolences of mourners. Jacob took Michael there. He pushed open the door to the men's room and locked it behind them, granting them even more privacy.

Before he could gather his courage and turn around, Michael grabbed him by one arm and swung him to stand between him and the small counter wedged between the wall and the stall door. Jacob braced himself for a punch that didn't come and opened surprised eyes when Michael pinned his wrists to the counter.

Michael leaned down to minimize the difference in their heights. So he could see into Jacob's eyes better. Jacob's eyes had misled him a time or two but he thought he was better at reading him now. He knew they wouldn't lie to him now. Not about this.

Jacob shook his head once and swallowed. "I didn't know, Michael, I swear."

As much as Michael wanted to believe him, he still had his doubts. "What about what you said to me? The night I told you ..."

Again Jacob shook his head. "Wishful thinking? I didn't know. How could I? We hadn't spoken in -- God -- in so long. I didn't know."

Jacob refused to fight, not because he didn't think he could hold his own against the bigger man, but because he wouldn't tarnish Lise's memory in that way. Not by fighting with her husband at her funeral. He flexed his wrists against Michael's hold.

"You can let me go now," he said, looking down at where Michael's hands touched him.

"Not yet."

At that Jacob jerked his gaze back to Michael's, but it was too late.

Too late to do anything but stand there like a deer in the headlights while the man he loved kissed him. In anger. When he didn't respond to Michael's tongue against his lips, Michael pulled his head back just enough to speak, his breath soft against Jacob's mouth.

"Kiss me back."

"No," Jacob said, leaning away from him.

Michael moved forward to recover the lost distance, pressing his lower body into Jacob's. His legs a solid weight against Jacob, two simple pairs of dress pants between them.

"Why not, dammit?" he growled, nipping at Jacob's bottom lip.

As long as Jacob had dreamed about him, about this, he couldn't make himself relax enough to enjoy it. So he did what he did best and pushed back, using words instead of fists to get him the space he needed.

"Because we're at Lise's funeral. Because less than seventy-two hours ago, you had your tongue in her mouth. Because --"

But he didn't get to share his last reason, and in less than a second he forgot what it was. Hearing the truth after learning he'd also lost a baby was more than Michael could bear.

He knew he wasn't acting like himself, but could do nothing to stop what was happening. His promise to himself of only the day before, to be subtle and go slowly with Jacob, fell away until only desire remained. He quickly shifted his grip from Jacob's wrists to his hips, hoisting him onto the small sink and wedging his broad shoulders between the two sides of the sink stall.

He stepped between Jacob's legs, grinding his dick against Jacob's through the thin layers of their clothes. The feeling was unlike any he'd ever experienced before. With Lise, their passion had been a steadily burning flame. One that guided them home, brought light to the darkened places in their hearts and shed a bit of warmth that was always appreciated. With Jacob it was a forest fire.

Uncontrollable and practically unstoppable. He wove his fingers into Jacob's hair and used his thumbs to pry the other man's jaw open. And then, nothing.

No thoughts bombarding him. No conscience to quell. Only Jacob. His taste, like bitter tears. His scent, blocking out the overpowering smell of too many perfumes and aftershaves to name. His feel, hard and solid and real. And warm. God, so warm. Michael never wanted to be cold again. He thrust his tongue into Jacob's mouth and used his teeth to nip at his lips, making the other man gasp. His position between Jacob's legs kept Jacob off balance, making him hold onto Michael's shoulders for support, lest he slip over the edge into the sink.

Soon Jacob's hands weren't just using him for balance but were roaming over as much of him as they could reach. Clenching and releasing in his pressed suit, popping open buttons and reaching under to tangle in his chest hair. The feel of this man's hands on him, rough and strong, determined to learn his shape and touch everything within reach, made Michael groan as if he were in pain. And he was. He'd never had his dick go from flaccid to rigid so quickly. He could feel precum leaking from him, adding that much more sensation for his overloaded senses to deal with.

Jacob was in a similar state and to say he was surprised would have been an understatement. He'd realized years ago that Michael was the only person who'd ever been able to call forth a sexual response from him, whether Michael knew it or not. Jacob's fantasies of them together were arousing and dimly satisfying, but he'd never imagined that the real thing would be so much more. More heat, more friction, more strength, more breath.

Jacob had made a choice, years ago, to keep space between them. He'd known Michael preferred Lise from the very first; it wasn't like there were any mixed signals. But he'd also known the limits of his own self-control, and he'd known being too close to Michael would push him past them.

That Michael had taken this step in his direction released him from that choice, and he took full advantage. He bit back at the mouth ravaging his and locked his thighs around Michael to grind their cocks together. The friction was unbearable, making him gasp for air and struggle to hold back the tide of his passion. He leaned his head back, concentrating to keep from coming, and Michael began licking and biting at his neck.

Jacob knew they had to stop soon, but not yet.

Not yet.

Not now.

Not when Michael was making him feel so good.

Not when he'd made him forget --

"Lise." Her name a sigh on his lips.

Michael bit the side of Jacob's neck when he heard him speak. Then he buried his face there, his tongue soothing the sting he'd caused.

Jacob held Michael to him. His hands were sure and steady against Michael's back as they climbed down from the ledge they'd been standing on. After a few minutes their breathing evened out, but still they clung together.

A soft wetness touched the side of his neck again and he crooned to Michael, nonsensical words meant to ease and comfort. But the wetness continued until he realized Michael was crying. Silently.

Jacob eased off the edge of the counter, but continued holding Michael as he finally grieved for the wife and child he'd lost.

In a burst of energy, Michael pulled away from him and ducked into the stall.

The sounds of violent retching were unmistakable in such close proximity.

Jacob pulled a little paper cup from a dispenser on the wall and filled it with cool water. He also snagged a couple of paper towels and wet them, then wrung the excess water out. He reached around Michael, nudging his arm to get his attention. He wasn't surprised when Michael wouldn't look at him.

Disappointed, yes, but not surprised.

"Here. Rinse your mouth out," he said, handing over the paper cup.

Michael rinsed and spit into the toilet and then wadded up the cup.

Jacob took the cup from him and handed him the paper towels.

Michael stared at them blankly for a moment before wiping his mouth. He slowly eased to his feet, bracing one hand against the far wall.

"I'm sorry, Jacob. I don't know what got into me."

Hurt that Michael still wouldn't look at him, Jacob lashed out, "That was my tongue. Next time --"

Finally Michael looked at him, and Jacob wished he hadn't.

"There won't be a next time, kid, so get that outta your head right now. Let's finish this and then go home."

So saying, he squeezed past Jacob and washed his hands in the sink before straightening his clothes, unlocking the door, and letting himself out.

Jacob stood there, a crumpled paper cup in one hand, and wondered what had just happened.

Chapter Seven

Somehow they made it through the evening. Michael shed no more tears despite his red eyes and the fierce ticking in his cheek. He managed to maintain his polite façade until they got home that night.

Once the door was safely locked behind them, he slid down it, coming to rest on his knees with his forehead pressed to the cool surface of the door. Despite his treatment earlier, he felt Jacob sink to his knees behind him and surround him with his warmth.

"God, Jacob, I can't. Please don't make me go back there --"

"Shh. It's almost over. Don't think about that now," Jacob said, his voice calm and soothing to Michael's weary nerves.

"Try to empty your mind. Take a deep breath." It was a struggle at first, but somehow Michael managed.

"Hold it. That's good. Now let it out. Good. Keep taking deep breaths until your head is clear."

"You trying to make me hyperventilate?" Michael grouched, hiding his grin against the door.

"Hell, no. I don't know where you keep the paper bags anymore. And mouth to mouth isn't exactly what I had in mind."

"I bet not, what with this afternoon's performance, huh?" Jacob started to stiffen away, but Michael grabbed his arms and kept them around him until he settled back down.

"It's not that," Jacob said.

"That' what?" Michael asked, wondering how deep a hole Jacob would dig for himself before he was done.

Jacob felt as much as heard the other man sigh, Michael's breath caressing the nape of his neck. "It's not the kiss, per se. More the timing of it. It just feels wrong."

"You don't deny you find me attractive?"

"Christ, what is this, a fucking fishing expedition?" Jacob asked, again trying futilely to pull away. The resentment in his tone was evident. "You're plenty attractive and you know it. But you're a widower of less than three days. You're not thinking clearly right now."

Jacob tugged again to free himself, to no avail.

He clenched his arms around Michael and rested his forehead between the other man's shoulder blades.

"Lise told me I was her heart and that you were her soul. Us. Her heart and ger soul. Us. Did you know that?" Michael asked, not waiting for a response. "A person's heart and soul should never have secrets between them. Please talk to me, Jacob."

Minutes passed in which Michael thought the man would never answer. Finally, though, Jacob opened the door enough for Michael to peek into his heart.

"You don't mean it," Jacob said softly, voicing his fear.

This time it was Michael who sighed and breathed roughly,

"I do. I do mean it, Jacob. To tell you the truth, if Lise were here right now, we'd all three be in that big bed at the end of the hall."

"Liar." He chuffed a laugh against Michael's back and was squeezed in turn.

Michael entwined their fingers, using his hands to guide Jacob's across his chest.

"We talked about you, you know."

"I figured you did," he said, testing Michael's hold on him.

"Give it up, kid. I'm not letting you go." Michael knew they'd have to get off the cold floor soon, but couldn't find the energy to pull himself up yet. Besides, tormenting Jacob was the most fun he'd had in days.

After a couple minutes of silence spent feeling the muscles and scars on Michael's chest, he caved. "So what did you say about me?"

"Lise told me a lot about your time together growing up. About school and ... the music teacher." Michael had braced himself before he said the last part and was ready for Jacob's violent reaction.

"Get the fuck off me. I mean it, Michael. I've had enough of this shit," he said, using his legs to lever himself up and away from him. Michael bounced up and maneuvered Jacob into the corner by the door. Michael buried his face in the warmth of Jacob's neck, hating to see the look in his eyes. Wondering how it compared to the one he'd had in his earlier.

"Be still now," he demanded, which set Jacob off even more. Pinned as he was, he slowly wore down until he was holding as tightly to Michael as Michael was to him. "There. That's it." Michael kissed Jacob softly on his head above his ear.

"As I was saying, we talked about you. We were relieved when you decided not to re-enlist. And we were anxious for you to come home. We were hoping you'd move back here -- the house is still half yours, you know."

Michael paused, trying to gauge Jacob's reaction from his body language. Jacob was leaning against him, one hand clenched in the material of his jacket, the other around the edge of his belt. Michael wondered if Jacob ever knew when he was doing that.

"Here," he said, nudging Jacob around. "Let's take this to the couch." Jacob looked at Michael in surprise, and Michael couldn't help but smile a little.

"You're right, the timing is all wrong for anything more. Please. But we need to talk. Come on, sit down."

Jacob sank warily onto the middle of the couch, keeping a cautious eye on Michael as he took a seat beside him and leaned back into the corner. Michael propped his feet on the coffee table and then extended his arm to Jacob in invitation, letting him make the choice to come to him or not.

Looking into Michael's eyes this time was a shock of a different kind. For Jacob to see such affection from this man, directed his way, was unexpected.

Slowly he shifted his weight until he was nestled into Michael's side with his arm around Michael's stomach.

"What happened to 'never again'?" he asked.

"I meant I wouldn't kiss you in anger again, not that I wouldn't love you whenever I got the chance."

Michael curved his arm around Jacob, bringing him into fuller contact with his body. The two men sat together in the quiet, gaining comfort from one another and rebuilding their defenses to face another day. Jacob felt Michael nuzzle his hair and took a chance, burying his nose against Michael's side and breathing deeply of his scent.

As much antagonism as there had been between the two men in the past, Jacob remembered caring and compassion had always been there, too. Especially when it came to Lise. He thought about the time the music teacher had come back into their lives and Michael's reaction to that event.

Lise and Michael had been married for a couple of years when Jacob decided he'd been away long enough and had come home on extended leave to visit.

Lise had later told him how she'd gone about her duties at the hospital, like any other day, and had gone to check on the patient in 3C when the past got mixed up with the present and the bogeyman paid her a visit.

She'd told him how she'd walked briskly into the room, reaching for the patient's chart, checking his name on the chart against his name on his wristband by rote before raising her eyes and opening her mouth to confirm his identity verbally ...

"And how are you tonight, Mr. ... Oh, my God," she said from lips suddenly gone numb. The chart slipped from her weakened grasp and clattered to the floor. She turned blindly and raced from the room, causing the other nurse on duty at the nurses' station to think the worst had happened with 3C.

"Lise, what is it?" the other nurse asked, calmly picking up the phone and preparing to dial the appropriate person.

Lise stood braced against the edge of the counter, gasping for breath and shaking her head, "It's him. It's him. Oh, God. Please. Call Michael. I need Michael. And Jacob. I have to warn Jacob."

The other nurse paged a colleague to check on 3C and then did as Lise had asked.

Lise heard him speaking as if from a long way away.

"Mr. Nicholson? It's Greg from St. Vincent's. I work with Lise." The professionalism he was known for was evident in the calm control of his voice.

"She's fine, but something's happened with one of the patients, and we need you here now."

Greg glanced over at Lise and slightly shook his head. "No, she can't come to the phone right now but I'll tell her. Goodbye."

Greg looked around Lise and quietly spoke with the doctor who'd been called from another wing to check things out.

Lise felt a hand, soft and gentle, settle on her wrist and instinctively jerked away, rubbing her wrist as though to erase the touch.

"Lise ..." he began, his voice soothing. "It's Dr. Jenkins. What happened in 3C?"

She felt so empty, it took all her energy just to blink and cling to the counter. "I want Michael. Where's Michael?"

Dr. Jenkins and Greg shared a look before Jenkins turned and walked toward 3C.

The sound of running footsteps penetrated the fog she was under but only by the slightest bit.

She felt rough hands grab her and couldn't prevent herself from flinching and trying to draw away. But whoever held her wouldn't let her go this time.

"Michael. I need Michael."

"Lise, honey, it is Michael. Look at me," he demanded but got no response. He jerked his gaze from Lise and met Greg's. "What the hell's going on? What happened to her?"

The warmth from his hands and the gruff tenderness in his voice sank in.

"Michael? Oh, God, Michael. It's him. He's here. In 3C. We've got to warn Jacob, please Michael, please, let's go."

Alarm bells had been ringing in his head from the moment he'd seen the hospital on his caller ID. It wasn't unusual for Lise to call him from work but somehow he'd known this call would be different just as he always seemed to know things about her without being told.

He continued running his hands up and down her arms, but resisted the urge to pull her to him and run away as she had asked and his instincts demanded.

"Him who? Who are you talking about, Lise?" He shook his head at his own actions. Looking to Greg, he asked, "Have you got a place we can sit down?"

"Sure, use the nurses' break room. It's around the corner." He pointed down the hall.

"Of course. Thanks." He guided Lise away from the nurses' station and toward the break room. But she dug in her heels and gripped the edge of the counter, refusing to go with him.

"No! I won't go. He'll see me." Her voice was barely a whisper. She switched her desperate grip from the counter to his forearms. "Don't let him see me again. He'll get me. He promised."

The awful realization came to him then and he sank his forehead and rested it against hers before swallowing back his emotions and dredging up his cop persona. He carefully set Lise away from him, gently prying her hands away from his arms. He shook her once and saw a bit of clarity enter her gaze.

"Stay right here with Greg. I'll be right back and then we can go find Jacob. I promise." Seeing her this way brought forth all of his protective instincts. If Lise said it was him, it was him. But he had to see the man for himself so he'd know what the enemy looked like.

"No, Michael --" she began, reaching for him.

"Lise, have I ever lied to you?" he asked, hardening his voice.

She licked her lips and shook her head before leaning against the counter once again.

They shared a look. He nodded and walked toward 3C. One of Lise's colleagues was standing guard at the door, but despite her protests, Michael shifted her gently to the side and went in. A man he recognized as one of the hospital's doctors was talking quietly with the only patient in the room.

Michael went up to the doctor, coldly eyeing the patient the entire time. He pried the patient's chart from the doctor's grasp.

"That's confidential, officer. You can't do this," he protested.

A certain light entered the man's eyes and he said, "Officer, is it? Whatever she told you is a lie. I've never seen her before today."

Michael said nothing, flipping open the chart, breaking eye contact only to skim the pages before him. He finished and handed the chart back to the doctor, who continued to stand between him and the man in the bed.

He turned his gaze on the doctor. "Outside. Now." Without waiting to see if he'd follow, Michael turned and walked from the room.

"Now see here --" he began, stopping abruptly when Michael grabbed him by the arm and ushered him to the window at the far end of the hall, away from Lise and anyone else hoping for a juicy bit of gossip.

Michael released the man and turned to look out the window. He could feel the man beside him shaking -- in fear or righteousness, Michael didn't know and he didn't care. He took a moment to clear his head and then cleared his throat before speaking.

"Lise is taking a leave of absence. I'm going to call each day and ask to speak to you. I'm going to ask you one question. All you have to do is say 'yes' or 'no' and hang up --"

"That's not going to happen. Hospital regulations --"

The force of Michael's gaze cut him off.

"That question will be 'Is he still here?' That's all I'm going to ask. But before we leave tonight, there's something you need to know."

"Unless it's regarding the man's health, I don't care."

Michael nodded and shoved his hands in his pockets, once again looking out the window. His reflection stared back at him. He could see Lise behind him, still leaning against the nurses' station. Someone -- probably Greg -- had wrapped her coat around her and placed her bag beside her on the counter.

He slowly turned until he was facing the doctor. "If that man so much as whispers Lise's name in his sleep and I find out, his health will come into play. But what you need to know is this: that man is a predator. Male or female, young or old. I recommend you double up when dealing with him or Lise won't be his only victim."

Dr. Jenkins had shivered in reaction and, Michael later learned, had followed his advice, doubling up on the shifts.

Michael turned sharply on his heel, settling his gaze on Lise as he walked down the hall. He wrapped one arm around her waist and picked up her bag with the other.

"Greg, thank you." Greg started to say something but looked at Lise, bit his lip and nodded.

"I'll call you later if that's ok."

Greg seemed relieved and said, "Sure. That'd be fine. Goodnight."

"Night."

"Night, Greg. See you tomorrow," Lise said, clearly on automatic. Michael once again met Greg's gaze with his own and shook his head.

"Later," he said over his shoulder as he walked Lise to the elevator. Her head was down and her hands were clasped loosely at her waist.

It was a short drive from the hospital to her home. Once there Michael guided her from the car and used his key to let them inside. He set her bag on the table by the front door before locking the screen and then the door itself behind them.

He'd parked behind Jacob's car so he knew he was home.

And unless Michael moved his car he wouldn't be going anywhere anytime soon. Jacob walked into the room from the kitchen, a bowl of cereal in his hands.

"Hey, guys. What's up? I was getting a snack before heading out. Got big plans for tonight?" he asked, wagging his eyebrows up and down. When that didn't garner the usual response from Lise he quietly scooped up another bite and began chewing, frowning at her. "Aw, honey. Bad day?"

Still not getting any response from Lise other than a vague smile, Jacob reluctantly looked over at Michael. "What's up?"

"Put that down," he said, indicating the bowl of cereal. Jacob shrugged but complied.

"Jacob?" Lise asked, her voice soft and hesitating.

Despite his aversion to being near Michael, Jacob came closer and held her hands in his own.

"God, Lise. You're cold as ice," he said, frowning at Michael as though it were his fault and wrapping her in his arms. He ran his hands up and down her back and was relieved to feel her wrap her arms around him in turn.

"Jacob's got you. That's it, baby. Now, what's going on?" At his question she stiffened and then tightened her grip on him.

"I saw him. He's here," she said, damning him with those five words.

Jacob shook his head in denial and saw Michael nod grimly out of the corner of his eye.

"No. You don't know what the fuck you're talking about," he said, directing his words at Michael.

Lise gasped. "Jacobson Sinclair, don't you talk to me like that. I most certainly do know what I'm talking about." Michael reached out and brushed his hand across Lise's back, bumping into Jacob's arm along the way. Jacob stiffened and pulled back, taking Lise with him. He didn't dare look at Michael. But Michael looked back at him, realization slowly dawning in his eyes.

"He raped you, too," he said.

Jacob heard the statement for what it was and flinched. He wondered when and how he'd given himself away. He didn't bother to deny it, knowing Michael was on to him. But he didn't feel he had to confirm it, either. So he stood there, holding the woman he loved and doing his best to soothe her terror. And watching the man he loved pick him apart mentally. He met the other man's gaze for as long as he could before closing his eyes and burying his face in Lise's hair.

Finally he picked her up in his arms and took her down the hall to her room. He knew Michael was following them but he couldn't find the energy to care. He placed Lise on the bed before tugging her sturdy nurse's shoes off and settling beside her. Michael paused to take his shoes off before sitting on the opposite side of her and then spooning himself around her smaller form. Jacob nudged her sock-clad feet with his own, bumping Michael's in the process. He started to pull back and then thought, What the hell?

Chapter Eight

Miraculously, they slept. For how long he didn't know. But he woke with a handful of Michael's shirt clenched in one fist and a handful of Lise's uniform clenched in the other. And his hard-on was pressed against the back of Michael's hand where it rested on Lise's stomach between their bodies. He felt a blush rise to his cheeks and started to loosen his desperate grip on them. The feel of a strong hand cupping his own to hold it against Michael's chest stopped him. He opened his eyes to see Michael looking at him over the top of Lise's head.

"You're fine. Leave it."

The feel of the other man's hand covering his own, the offer of comfort and compassion in his gaze, the twitch of Michael's hand against Jacob's dick as Michael caressed Lise's stomach, was more than he could bear. His hand on Michael's chest started trembling, and Jacob knew if he didn't distance himself from temptation he'd embarrass them all. He shook his head, pulled his hand free and jerked his hips back a few inches, waking Lise in the process.

She sighed deeply and burrowed into his chest. He loosened his grasp on her clothes as well and lightly ran his hand over her back, easing her awake. He leaned back so he could look into her face and saw the instant she remembered what had happened.

One minute she was smiling softly at him and wiggling sleepily against him. The next she had stiffened in remembered fear and was gasping for breath.

"Shh. We've got you. We're here, Lise. Shh," Jacob said, covering her face in tender kisses.

She grabbed the arm that was wrapped around her waist. "Michael?"

"Damn straight. Who the hell else would it be?" Michael answered, his voice gruff and somehow tender at the same time.

Silent tears leaked from her eyes, each one battering against Jacob's defenses. He knew he should leave and let the two of them handle this but he couldn't make himself let go.

"Please don't cry, Lise," he said. When she shook her head, the look of defeat on her face undid him. "Come on, now. If you keep this up you'll get snot on my shirt."

She smothered a weak laugh against his chest, wiping her nose against him for good measure.

"Ugh! Gross," Jacob said, relieved that she was able to laugh and tease but knowing they weren't past the worst of it by a long shot. "Girl cooties -- sheesh."

"Poor baby. You'd better go wash then," she taunted.

"Nah. I like wallowing in your girl cooties," he said, wiggling beside her until she giggled. "That's better."

She stopped giggling and looked down to where she was picking at the little hairs on the back of Michael's hand. Michael continued to softly rub her belly and nuzzle her hair, letting her know he was there.

"Jacob, will you make it all go away? Please?" she asked, raising her gaze to his own. At her tentative question Michael, too, raised his gaze to Jacob's face, looking for answers.

"Lise ..." Jacob began.

"Please. Help me, Jacob. Help me forget," she said, her eyes pleading.

Jacob studied Michael's expression but it gave nothing away. He kissed her on the forehead and gave her a squeeze before climbing from the bed. He walked into the adjoining bathroom and set the plug in the tub. After adjusting the water he threw a washcloth into the tub, pulled out a couple of towels from under the sink and squirted some bubble bath into the water.

As he was leaving the room he caught sight of his reflection in the mirror. His hands were stained and scarred from long hours spent wrist deep in the belly of an engine. His black hair was thick and shaggy, desperately in need of a trim. His lips were soft enough but even they managed to look hard in his dark face. And his eyes -- so black you knew there was evil in him. Everywhere he looked he found another reason others sought to distance themselves from him instead of befriend him. Except Lise.

He knew she needed him to help her feel better, clean again.

He just hoped she knew what she was asking had the potential to push Michael away. No other man he knew would be able to accept what was about to happen.

He doubted Michael would feel any different.

He walked back toward Lise where she and Michael snuggled on the bed, trying once more to give her a way out and Michael a way in.

"Bath's just about ready, Lise. I'm going to run and pick up some of that cherry ice cream you like while you and Michael clean up," he said.

"What? No, Jacob. I need you here," she said, rising to a seated position. He glanced at Michael before locking his gaze with Lise's.

"Are you sure, honey? Think about what you're asking." Once again he glanced again at Michael. She swallowed once but kept her gaze on Michael.

"He doesn't know what to do. It has to be you. Please," she said.

He couldn't bear to hear her beg him of all people for something he so desperately wanted to do. He took a seat beside her on the bed and without looking at Michael began to help her undress. Michael stiffened beside them but said nothing. Jacob reached to help her ease the top of her scrubs over her head and then stood. He held out his hand. She placed her hand in his and let him pull her to her feet.

Jacob steadied her with a hand at the small of her back and then eased her pants down her legs.

"Sit," he said, placing his hands on her hips and guiding to the edge of the bed.

Once she was sitting he tugged her socks from her feet, leaving her clad only in her bra and panties. He then pulled her to her feet once again, only then looking over her shoulder at Michael.

He met the other man's expressionless gaze with his own and then raised his eyebrows in question. Michael's gaze shifted to Lise's back where Jacob's hands rested and then he shook his head -- he wouldn't challenge Jacob now.

Jacob led Lise into the bathroom and turned off the water.

He held Lise's arms to steady her as she stepped over the edge and settled down into the water. Bathwater dampened the ends of her hair so he found her a hair elastic on the vanity and helped her pull it up before taking a seat on the closed lid of the commode.

He tugged off his socks before reaching up and over his head to pull his t-shirt off. As he stood, his hands went to the waistband of his jeans, where he dealt with the button and zipper. He looked over his shoulder and saw Michael leaning against the door to the bathroom. Meeting the other man's gaze, he pushed his pants down and stepped out of them.

Michael's gaze slid down Jacob's body, taking in his boxer-clad form.

Lise sat in the middle of the tub, gliding her hands in the water in a gentle motion, but Jacob could still see the memories in her eyes.

He looked at Michael and then at the light switch. The other man was so still, he seemed to not even breathe.

"Dim the lights, would you?" Jacob asked before stepping into the tub and settling behind Lise. Air hissed through his teeth as his warm back made contact with the cold ledge of the tub. "Come here," he said, sliding Lise to rest back against him. He then felt around under the water until he found the washcloth, keeping one hand on her smooth stomach.

Lise finally looked over at Michael, who still stood in the doorway as though unsure of his welcome. Jacob didn't blame the man, but this was Lise's show and he let her run it as she saw fit.

"Join us?" she asked, looking back down at the motion her hands made in the water, obviously not sure what Michael's reaction would be. She seemed to hold her breath then. Jacob didn't realize he was holding his until he let it out in a rush at Michael's words.

"Love to," the other man said, pulling his shirt off and then tugging his pants and socks off in one motion. His briefs cupped him lovingly, hiding very little.

Jacob had to look down at the rag he was soaping to keep from staring. Michael's body, so like his yet so very different. A little taller, a little broader. Darker and the slightest bit hairier. Jacob recalled that they'd been mistaken for brothers once when the three of them had gone out to dinner and wondered what that said about him. Probably that he was a sick fuck but he knew that already and chose not to dwell on it.

He bent his knees and pulled his legs up to rest against the sides of the tub, giving Michael room to sit across from them. The tub was plenty big enough for three, but it made for a close three -- they couldn't help but touch.

When Michael was seated, Jacob had to keep his legs bent lest his feet end up where they shouldn't. Once Jacob had the rag soaped to his satisfaction he guided Lise to sit forward. He saw her reach back and stilled her motion.

"I'll get it," he said, deftly dealing with the clasp of her bra and helping her slide the wet material off, dropping it to the floor on the other side of the tub.

To give Jacob room to work, she wrapped her arms around her knees and rested her forehead on them. He gently swiped the soapy cloth over her back, then down the backs of her arms. Tossing the cloth aside, he used his cupped hands to rinse her, then glided his hands over her clean flesh.

"You've got the prettiest skin, Lise," he said, keeping his voice soft. "I've been around the world and I've still never seen anything like it. So soft."

Jacob pulled her back to lean against his chest again and grabbed the washcloth to wash her front. He tucked his chin into the curve of her shoulder, bringing her head to rest in the hollow of his throat.

"I've never seen a person's outsides match their insides so well," he said, sliding the cloth over her breasts and across her belly. He dropped a kiss to the side of her neck before rinsing the soap from her body. While he meant every word he said and more that he'd never speak, his body was unresponsive to the goddess in his arms. As much as he loved her with his heart, and as much as he'd prayed to love her with his body, it had never happened. And it never would.

Despite his humiliation, he'd been to see doctors and specialists around the world. To no avail. They'd all told him the same thing: his problem was all in his head. There was no medical reason for his lack of response. Shrinks might hold the key, they said. If so, that door was staying firmly locked. There was no way he was exposing anyone to the darkness inside him.

He soaped the cloth once again and this time drew it along her arms, paying special attention to the graceful curve of her underarms and the folds between her fingers. As he rinsed her he nuzzled his head into her hair, savoring her fragrance. His task completed, he settled back against the edge of the tub and drew her tighter against him.

"What do you think, Lise? Shall we put Michael to work?" he asked her, his breath the faintest of sounds in the still room.

He felt her tilt her head and saw Michael shift his gaze to hers. The two considered one another for a moment before she nodded slightly.

Jacob nudged the cloth toward Michael and watched as the other man took over Lise's bath. He did his best to blank his mind before calling on his senses one by one to set the scene firmly in his mind. He knew when he was gone he'd have it to pull out on lonely nights in faraway places. A piece of home and all of his heart. He closed his eyes and let it all sink in, satisfied that Michael could take care of Lise.

Michael was surprised when Jacob offered to let him take over. Hell, he'd been surprised by the entire experience. While he wished he could have kept Lise from going through it at all, he was glad to see the tender concern Jacob showed her and gladder still to be welcomed among them.

He stared at her toes, carefully winding the cloth between each pink-tipped digit before moving on to the next. Then the bottom of her foot, which he wiped quickly, knowing she was ticklish. Before moving on to her other foot, he rinsed it and then rubbed it for her, easing the tension from her with each press of his strong hands.

It was only when she groaned softly that he realized he'd become aroused. He'd been on edge, having been unable to sleep. His protective instincts had taken over the moment he'd gotten the call on his cell. Lise needed him. His senses nearly exploded when he learned Jacob could be threatened, too. He had surprised himself with his reaction, wanting to get them both where he could watch over them.

And he had, alert to the noises the house made even while they rested. Every little pop and creak was dissected in his brain. When Jacob had reached over and touched the front of his chest in his sleep, Michael had frozen, wondering at the feelings it provoked inside him.

He wanted to claim them both.

To make them utterly his. To know no one and nothing would ever harm them again. He wanted the impossible, but he would willingly settle for whatever they gave him. He hated knowing Jacob would be leaving them soon, going into danger. And he hated knowing Lise would once again head off to work despite the knowledge that she might run into her own personal bogeyman. He would claim this time with them and hope it sank as deeply into their beings as it did his. He wanted nothing so much as he wanted them.

His decision made, Michael slowly clasped her feet and brought them to rest against his raging hard-on. She lifted her slumberous gaze to his, her desire evident in the way she licked her lips and pushed her feet lightly against him.

"I need you, Lise," he said. She hesitated before nodding once and lifting her feet away from him. He slipped his hands under the water and worked his briefs down his legs. Looking at Jacob, he reached toward Lise and carefully eased her panties from her body.

Jacob ran his hands up Lise's sides as Michael watched and then slid them to rest on her thighs, easing them open.

Michael gripped Lise's hips and pulled her pelvis flush against his, groaning as she wrapped her legs around his waist.

"God, Lise, the way you make me feel," Michael said, lust deepening his voice.

Jacob continued to support Lise's back, his legs on the outside of Lise's torso and thighs. When Michael fucked her, he'd be fucking him, too. The thought was enough to bring his dick to life, adding an edge of anticipation to the whole experience.

Michael carefully rimmed Lise's outer lips, his rough finger gliding along the warm folds before nudging gently against her nub. Watching her face for any sign of discomfort, he eased the tip of his finger inside her tight core. His action caused Lise to arch and moan, her hands reaching out to grip Jacob's knees.

Michael could feel Jacob tense as her nails bit into his skin.

Michael worked his finger in and out of her in the slowest of motions, knowing it would bring Lise closer to the edge. Her breasts were flushed pink with desire, the nipples hard pink cherries waiting to be plucked. Her mouth opened in a soft pant as he picked up the pace ever so subtly. Knowing she was close, he slid his cock along her opening, slipping only the head in.

It seemed Lise was further along than he thought because she arched her back and pressed hard against his flanks, easily accepting the first couple of inches that he gave her. His lungs were working like a bellows by this time, and he had to remind himself to relax his grip on her hips lest he mark her.

Michael adjusted his legs until they cupped Lise, his feet resting on the outside of Jacob's hips. Locking his gaze with Jacob's, he slowly tensed his legs, urging his lovers closer to him.

The look of wonder in Jacob's eyes was priceless and made Michael wonder what had put that look there. Had Jacob thought he'd forgotten the other man was there? Not bloody likely.

He glanced at Lise but she had closed her eyes as she usually did, to savor the feelings running through her body. He looked back at Jacob, watching the emotions cross his face as Michael eased into Lise. Letting the other man see his desire to ease into him as well. He noticed when Jacob's breathing picked up -- it was when Lise arched her neck and twisted her fingers in Jacob's where they rested against her stomach. He watched as Lise brought Jacob's hands to her breasts and urged him to fondle her.

Looking back at Jacob, Michael was transfixed by the other man's actions.

To see Jacob's strong fingers, stained and scarred, work her soft white flesh while Lise's pussy gripped his own cock almost undid him. He gritted his teeth and took a moment to fight the tingling racing down his spine.

As Michael sat there, surrounded by those he loved, he was amazed to feel tears prick his eyes. He swallowed hard, his fingers once again tightly gripping Lise's hips. He ground against her in a circle, working his hard flesh against the sensitive walls of her vagina.

Seeing Lise's pulse pound in her throat, he looked at Jacob and nodded before guiding Lise more upright on his shaft. While Lise wrapped her legs tighter around his hips, Michael used his feet to guide Jacob closer and hold him tightly to them.

Only then did he lean down and press his open mouth to Lise's, working his tongue in and out of her lips, seeking the taste of her tongue in return.

He slowly eased his hands from Lise's hips, knowing the weight of Jacob's body would keep her impaled on him. He then reached out, grabbing Jacob by the hips. He'd never felt such resentment as he did when the wet cloth of Jacob's boxers prevented him from clenching his friend's bare flesh.

Chapter Nine

Jacob had been half asleep when he'd heard Michael voice his need. This moment was straight out of his fantasies and he'd had no trouble going along with it. He was astounded at the level of nonverbal communication he and Michael had achieved -- he'd known when Michael had looked at him what the other man had wanted him to do.

And while he and Lise had shared a platonic relationship in the past, that was more because of the lack in him than in her. He'd never wanted her to desire him in that way, fearful the shadows in his soul would be brought to light and would harm the one person who loved him.

So he'd gladly shared in this experience, easily switching roles from comforter to lover. The thought that he should excuse himself was only a fleeting one. And he had always loved her in one form or another. His love for Michael had surprised him at first, making him fear the worst -- that their childhood trauma had somehow twisted him to crave sex only with those who would hurt him.

While that didn't seem to be the case, he wasn't going to remain unscathed in his dealings with Michael. How could he, when loving Michael meant possibly hurting Lise? And even if Lise were willing to share, which, based on their current situation seemed likely, he didn't know how Michael would react to the darkness inside him. Would he embrace him and all his faults or turn from him in disgust?

He was pulled from his musings when Michael grabbed his boxer-clad hips, pulling his lower body flush against Lise's back. No other hands had ever brought him such pleasure as did the feel of Michael's biting into his flesh. His cock nestled between the cheeks of Lise's ass and the friction as Lise moved against him, moving herself on Michael, was unbearable.

Despite knowing he couldn't reach fulfillment with them, he wanted to be with them completely in this moment. So he slid his hands to rest against Michael's bare hips, clenching the other man as fiercely as he dared. Pulling him harder and harder into Lise with each thrust until the water was frothing around them.

Jacob could tell from the sounds coming from Lise that she was close -- her breathing sped up and her gasps grew louder. And he could tell from the look on Michael's face that he was standing on the precipice, fighting to keep from going over. Using every bit of muscle and energy at his will, he increased the force of his movements but saw that Michael continued to fight it.

"Dammit, Michael. Now!" he said.

The moment Jacob spoke his name, Michael had come, roaring his satisfaction and jetting his cum deep into Lise. And she had screamed, clenching and releasing around him as the little death claimed her.

Even though he wasn't in her, Jacob could still feel the pulsations running through Lise's body. And he could see the pleasure as it raced through Michael's system.

To Jacob's utter disbelief, Michael managed to reach behind Jacob and run one finger along the sensitive opening of his ass. Jacob tried to wiggle away, but Michael held him still with his other hand still firmly clasped to Jacob's hip. The heat of the moment, the feel of Lise's ass on his dick as her pulsations slowly eased, and the pressure in his ass as Michael slipped his finger in managed to do what no other person had been able to.

Jacob came.

He felt the muscles in his legs clench, his back arch, and still he came.

Michael worked a second finger in and then leaned around Lise's head and kissed Jacob, sliding his tongue into his mouth, tugging gently at his lips as he pulled away. Finally Jacob's tremors eased and he felt Michael slip his fingers from his body.

Through it all Lise had been snuggled between them, seemingly at peace for the first time that night. Now that it was over Jacob felt awkward, wondering what to expect. Because focusing on himself never did him any good, he did what he did best and focused on Lise.

He watched as Michael carefully eased her from him before rinsing her with the rapidly cooling water. He watched as Michael lifted her from the water and then dried her like a baby before leading her to the bed. He was working up his courage to join them when he heard his cell phone ring.

Knowing there was only one reason for his phone to be ringing at this hour, he reached for his pants and dug his phone out, checking the caller ID as he did so.

Sure enough, it was Uncle Sam calling him back to duty ...

Thinking back to that night and to the phone call that had ended it, he couldn't help but run through "what ifs" in his mind. What if the phone hadn't rung?

What if he had followed them to bed?

What if he hadn't been duty-bound to God and country?

Would he now be bound to Lise and Michael? Would he have been home that awful night? Would he have been able to stop her?

Michael tensed against his back before pressing his mouth against Jacob's head.

"You'll kill yourself with 'what ifs,' kid," he said, his voice gruff. "Trust me."

"So what do we do?" Jacob asked, unashamed of the raw feeling in his voice.

"Love. She's gone from our sight, not from our hearts. As long as we love, we have Lise."

"I don't think I can, Michael. I want to. God knows I want to. But --" he began.

"It's going to be ok, kid, trust me." Michael gently squeezed Jacob within his embrace before relaxing his hold and sighing deeply.

"God, I'm tired. Let's go to bed, hmm?"

Jacob said nothing, but eased out of Michael's arms and stood in front of him, reaching his hands down to pull the other man to his feet. He stood there and watched Michael's leg muscles bunch and release as he walked down the hall.

Michael stopped in front of the doors leading to the two bedrooms.

"Sleep with me?" he asked.

Glancing at the darkened bedroom that used to be his, then toward the bed where he'd once slept with Lise and Michael, Jacob nodded and followed Michael into the room, closing the door behind him.

Michael headed to the far side of the four-poster bed and slowly began peeling his clothes from his body. Jacob felt tension knot his stomach, crying out for space. He had to clear his throat before he could make his voice work.

"Mind if I get cleaned up first?" he asked, indicating the bathroom.

"Go right ahead."

Jacob shut the bathroom door behind him and leaned against the sink. Once his breathing slowed he chose a toothbrush and began brushing his teeth with one hand while loosening his tie and unbuttoning his shirt with the other. He slipped off his shoes and leaned down to peel off his socks as he spit in the sink. He rinsed his mouth and then splashed water on his face before grabbing a towel from the rack and drying off.

As he was reaching for the door, he caught sight of the tub and froze in his tracks. Memories of their one night together washed over him, painful and soothing at the same time. They had so much love. It would last him a lifetime and still not be enough. Regrets washed over him as well, thoughts of his past mistakes and future ones bombarding him until he had to sit on the closed lid of the toilet or else fall to his knees.

He'd wanted to be with Lise so much, while at the same time he'd feared it.

Feared his strength and his desires would harm her. Only now, when it was too late, did he understand the true depth of her love for him. And only now was he finally able to realize the depth of his love for Michael. He prayed he was strong enough to overcome his fears, but doubt held him paralyzed.

And that was how Michael found him -- eyes closed, head resting in his hands, elbows on his knees.

"Come on, kid. Time for bed," he said, wrapping his strong hands around Jacob's wrists and pulling him to his feet. Then using those same strong hands to gently guide the shirt from his shoulders, letting it drop to the floor. His motions were brisk as he undid the buttons and eased down the zipper of Jacob's dress pants before letting them drop as well.

Jacob stiffened but kept his eyes closed as Michael slipped his hands under the waistband of Jacob's briefs and then tugged them down his hips and legs to land on his feet. Jacob turned his head to the side, denying what was happening, and brushed his face against Michael's bare chest in the process.

"Shh," Michael said, his lips caressing Jacob's ear. "It's going to be all right, Jacob. All you have to do is trust me."

Jacob barked out a laugh.

"Oh, is that all?" he asked, his voice dripping sarcasm.

"Well, it would help if you love me, too," he said.

Jacob's eyes popped open, at last taking in Michael's nude form. Nude, aroused form. The shape and size of Michael's erection captured Jacob's attention. The beat of his heart was visible in the vein that ran the length, his excitement visible in the drop of precum that coated the tip of his cock. Jacob's mouth watered with equal parts desire and fear at seeing the evidence of the other man's desire.

Vaguely, he was aware of faint tremors coursing through his body and of his own erection begging for attention. Michael wrapped his arm around Jacob's shoulders and guided him to the door, turning off the bathroom light as he did so. He'd already turned off all of the lights in the other room, leaving only the faintest beam of moonlight to guide them to bed. Jacob froze as memories rushed over him, smothering him with remembered pain and humiliation. Stunned, he felt his erection die a sudden death.

Michael stepped behind him, tightly wrapping his arms around Jacob as his tremors increased in number and violence. "Do you love me?" he asked, his voice soft in the night.

Jacob fought to speak but finally had to settle for a jerky nod. He didn't realize his hands were clawing at Michael's hands where they clasped around his waist until the other man squeezed him back.

"Thank God," Jacob thought he heard Michael say, but couldn't be sure for the blood rushing in his ears. "I'm never letting you go now. You know that, don't you?"

His nod was a bit less jerky this time but not by much. He felt Michael brush a kiss against the side of his neck.

"Climb up on the bed, love," Michael said, releasing Jacob from his grasp. Michael gently nudged Jacob along, using his hands on his hips to guide him to sit on the end of the bed between the two footposts. "That's it."

Jacob fell onto his elbows as Michael eased to stand between his legs. Slowly, ever so slowly, Michael eased his hands up the length of Jacob's thighs, squeezing and releasing the tense muscles as he went.

"I love you," he said, his kiss soft and sweet against Jacob's gasping mouth. "I've loved you for years."

Michael continued to run his hands up Jacob's trembling body, easing his thumbs along the crease between his thigh and hip.

"I love everything about you," he said. Feeling Jacob shake his head in denial, Michael nodded and bit at his lip, licking the small hurt away. "I love how you look -- dark and menacing. I love how you feel -- hard and strong. I love your loyalty and steadfastness. I'm so glad you love me, too."

Hearing the emotion in Michael's voice pushed Jacob closer to the edge and he felt his dick begin to harden once again. Michael bumped his cock against Jacob's, rubbing the heads together, coating the other man's penis with his precum.

"Um, that's it, baby," he said, settling his mouth against Jacob's for a long slick kiss. "You taste so good. I just want to eat you up."

Michael kissed a path down Jacob's throat, pausing to nip at the sensitive area where neck and shoulder came together.

"Would you like that?" he asked before sinking his teeth into Jacob's firm pectoral muscle.

Jacob realized he'd been asked a question and struggled to come up with an answer.

"Would you like it if I ate you up?" Michael asked, continuing to bite and lick his way down Jacob's chest.

"Oh, God," Jacob said, allowing his elbows to fall out from under him and coming to rest on his back. His hands clenched the bedding, his knuckles white with the effort not to grab Michael by the head and show him just how much he wanted that. "Please."

"I'll please you," came the soft reply.

Then, only sensation -- no words could describe how Jacob felt.

Wet heat enveloped his cock, soft flesh tugging against hard. Firm muscle against firm muscle. A mouth and throat wanting to be filled. A cock and balls eager to fill it. To no avail. Jacob struggled to come but couldn't. His past was as much a barrier as it had ever been -- maybe even more.

The darkness inside him fought for supremacy, demanding free rein. Despite Michael's strength, Jacob hesitated to release his inner demons, fearing the other man's reaction. Mouth and tongue left him, leaving his dick wanting. And his soul wailing. Without his permission his hands let loose of the bedding and tangled in Michael's dark locks.

"Please," he begged, his voice full of yearning. "Please."

"Shh. I'm not going anywhere," Michael said.

Jacob had only seconds in which to wonder about the soft slurping sound before Michael began rubbing his spit-slicked finger against Jacob's back opening. Feeling the insistent probe, Jacob fought the instinctive clenching of his muscles. Despite the moisture it burned at first, then Jacob was once again lost in sensation as his dick was swallowed whole.

Michael pushed his finger deeper as he took more of Jacob's cock into his mouth, knowing the other man was on sensation overload. Finally he found what he sought and rubbed his finger against Jacob's prostate. He swallowed over and over as Jacob's cock jerked and jumped, rubbing against the muscles of his throat as he came. Michael continued to caress him with his lips and tongue, pulling every bit of cum from him that he could.

He eased his finger from Jacob's body, reaching for the lube he'd left on the bed before he'd gone in search of Jacob. He popped the top and quickly coated his fingers and dick with the cool substance before carefully rimming Jacob's back hole and inserting two fingers, scissoring them to loosen the muscles. He pulled Jacob's feet up to rest beside his hips on the bed, giving him more room to move. He pulled his fingers out and pushed his dick against the tight opening.

Michael ran his hands up Jacob's body as his dick sank in the first inch. With just the tip in he froze, fighting not to come. After a moment he opened his eyes to see his hands tightly clenched on Jacob's hips and the other man's hands white-knuckled and clenched in the bedding.

Locking his gaze with Jacob's, he eased in another inch, stopping when he saw the other man start to slip away from him.

"Jacob. Jacob, look at me."

Lost in his own thoughts, Jacob fought to stay with Michael but felt hands from his past pulling him away.

He heard Lise crying and struggled to rise from the floor, managing to make it to his feet as the man turned on him.

"Sweet little Lise has had her lesson for the day. Now it's your turn," he said, reaching for Jacob.

Jacob launched himself at the man, hitting and kicking, hoping to hurt the man who'd hurt his friend.

What had happened then and the pain and humiliation from that time in his life had marked him indelibly and undeniably. In the back of his mind he knew that it was Michael touching him, loving him, but he was a child once again, helpless and hurting.

From a distance he heard Michael calling his name. Felt him cup his face with his rough hands. And then felt him begin to ease from his body. Feeling Michael slip from him prompted him to act.

Jacob arched his back and wrapped his legs around Michael's hips, adding pressure until the other man had sunk his entire length into him, balls deep.

"Jacob!" Michael said, his hands tightening on Jacob's face. He slowly eased his body down, giving his weight over to Jacob until they were belly to belly, chest to chest, with his head beside Jacob's on the bed. "Did I hurt you?"

Jacob wrapped his arms around Michael's back before shaking his head. Coming up on his elbows, Michael regarded Jacob carefully before asking, "Why'd you do it?"

Jacob's hands played across his back. "You were leaving."

If Michael hadn't already told Jacob he loved him, the look in his eyes would have made that clear. "I was pulling out because you were pulling away, but I wasn't leaving. I'll never leave you, Jacob."

Jacob swallowed, his fingers digging deep into Michael's back.

He felt tears fill his eyes and turned his head to the side, avoiding the pity in the other man's gaze. He loosened his grip on Michael and let his hands fall to the bed. Slowly he relaxed his muscles and did his best to empty his mind, unable to deal with the desire and need Michael inspired. He expected him to pull out, and this time he would let him go.

Instead Michael stayed inside him, wiggling a bit until his knees rested against the end of the bed. He settled his hips more firmly against Jacob and lodged his dick as deep as he could get, relishing the hot tight clasp of Jacob's flesh around him while regretting Jacob's emotional withdrawal. He was pained for the other man, knowing only time would convince him of his sincerity. Whatever it took, for however long it took, Michael would be here for Jacob.

Slowly Michael began thrusting, relishing the tight clasp of Jacob's ass around his cock. He adjusted the angle of penetration until he bumped against Jacob's prostate with every thrust, prompting the other man to arch against him. He ran his hands up and down Jacob's body, caressing every inch he could reach until finally taking the other man in hand once again. Jacob's dick remained limp at first, but Michael saw the other man's hands begin to fist in the bedding and knew Jacob was coming back to him.

He timed his thrusts and caresses until he was pulling his hand up along the silky hard surface of Jacob's dick while pulling out and clenching his hand at the broad base of his dick while thrusting in.

Jacob turned his head to lock gazes with Michael once again and was surprised to see only love, not pity, reflected in his gaze. He felt his friend, his lover, grow harder within him and knew he was close to coming. He also knew Michael wanted to make their first time last but Jacob had other plans.

He wanted to see Michael's face as he came. To see the pain and the pleasure as he spent himself deep in his body. So he wrapped his hands around Michael's upper arms and clenched his inner muscles to pull against Michael's dick on every outward motion.

"Jacob! God, baby. Don't do that," Michael said between clenched teeth, slowly sinking back into Jacob.

"Do what?" he asked, again squeezing his muscles. "This?"

Michael threw his head back, his hands biting deeply into Jacob's hips. "Yes that, you little tease. If you don't stop, I'm going to come."

"Is that a problem?" he asked, arching his back and squeezing once again.

"Dammit! Yes, that's a problem," he said, dropping his head back down until he could lock his gaze with Jacob's. "I don't want to come yet."

"Poor baby," he crooned. "We don't always get what we want, remember?"

Seeing Jacob was intent on having his way, Michael gave in. "Fine. Have it your way. But next time I --"

"So sure there's going to be a next time, hmm, Michael?" Jacob taunted, knowing it would push the other man to assert himself.

Responding just as Jacob had known he would, Michael growled, moving his hands from Jacob's hips to his shoulders, holding the other man in place for his thrusts. Jacob dropped his hands to clasp Michael's back and arched his head back into the mattress.

"This isn't a game, Jacob," Michael groaned.

"Isn't it?" he gasped.

"No," he panted. "No game. Love."

At that, Jacob felt his body convulse for the second time that night. Stunned that this one man could do what no other person had been able to, Jacob relished the feel of his cum shooting from his body to coat their bellies. He arched his pelvis and clenched his muscles as hard as he could, knowing he'd remember the sound of the other man's shout for the rest of his life. Nothing had ever sounded so wonderful.

"Jacob! Jacob, I love you!" Michael said, the sound echoing off the ceiling. As the words faded, Michael only hoped Jacob would allow himself to be loved. God knew he deserved it. His childhood had been one hellish moment after another.

He didn't know which had harmed Jacob more -- his parents' outright neglect or their vicious abuse. And losing Lise when they had would leave its mark for certain.

But Michael promised himself and Jacob that he would be there for the other man. He'd follow him around the world if that was what it took, but he wasn't letting Jacob out of his sight any more than he absolutely had to. He'd learned the hard way to cling to what he had while he could.

All these thoughts and more rushed through Michael's mind as he lay on Jacob, his face buried in the other man's hair. As his lungs bellowed in and out, he breathed deeply of Jacob's scent, knowing it as well as he knew his own or Lise's.

He darted his tongue out, tracing it along the pulse beating wildly in Jacob's neck. His salty taste held a hint of the musk that marked him alone. He placed a soft kiss on the edge of Jacob's jaw before coming to rest on his elbows.

He couldn't keep a small smile from his face as he saw the condition the other man was in.

Jacob, too, was having trouble catching his breath.

It was equally challenging for him to wrap his mind around the fact that he'd come twice in one night when he'd spent years unable to come at all. He supposed he'd proved his doctors right -- it had been all in his head.

He, of all people, knew the experiences he'd been through and how they had shaped him. But he hadn't wanted to admit that he'd allowed the past to have such a hold on him.

He battered back the regret he felt welling up inside him and decided to enjoy his time with Michael. He relaxed his grip on the other man and slowly ran his hands up and down Michael's back, wondering at the marks he'd probably left there. Eventually he felt Michael lick and kiss him and slowly reclaim control of his weight where he rested against Jacob. Seeing Michael poised above him and the smile that came to his face made him smile, too. This time when he felt tears come to his eyes he didn't try to hide them.

"Hey," he said, surprised at the hoarse sound of his voice.

"Hey yourself," Michael said, grinning down at him. His dick was soft now but still rested inside Jacob. Michael held himself carefully, wanting to remain inside Jacob as long as he could. "You ok?"

"I will be," Jacob said, managing to smile.

"Good." Michael eased out of Jacob and moved to stand once again between Jacob's legs at the end of the bed. He reached down and helped Jacob to his feet, pulling him into his arms as he did so. Michael brushed his chin back and forth into Jacob's hair, unable to resist snuggling against him for a moment more. He was surprised to feel Jacob wrap his arms around him before squeezing once and letting go.

"Let's go to bed -- to sleep this time," Jacob said, nudging Michael to the side of the bed and pulling the rumpled covers over him before going around to the other side of the bed and climbing in.

Michael was surprised yet again when Jacob pulled him into his arms, urging Michael's head to rest on his shoulder. "Go to sleep now. I've got you."

Michael wanted to remind Jacob that he had him, too, but couldn't seem to make his tongue work. He settled for rubbing the top of his head against Jacob's chin before closing his eyes and drifting off to sleep.

Chapter Ten

When Michael woke the next morning he was alone in bed. No light came through the shades so he knew it was early yet. Glancing at the bed, he couldn't tell whether Jacob had stayed the entire night or left soon after he'd gone to sleep. Something told him he'd been held all night long and that Jacob's absence was what had awakened him.

Knowing he had to get up and finish taking care of Lise, he found it difficult to make himself rise from the bed. He lay there listening for sounds of Jacob getting ready but heard nothing. Unprepared for Jacob's loss so close on the heels of losing Lise, Michael felt his eyes tear up and hastily wiped the tears away. He wouldn't let himself grieve until it was over. Then he could fall apart, but not before. Not until he'd made sure those he loved were taken care of.

He threw the covers off and eased his feet to the floor, feeling weary to the marrow of his bones. He ran his hands over his face and climbed to his feet. He stood there a moment to gain his balance before searching out a pair of briefs to pull on. He grabbed them and put them on as he walked out the door, hopping from one foot to the other as he did so. He made his way down the hall to the kitchen.

He got a pot of coffee going and was reaching into the fridge for a bottle of water when he felt Jacob's presence. Slowly, as though afraid of startling the other man into fleeing, Michael turned to face him. He ran his gaze over Jacob, searching for any sign that the other man regretted what they'd done the night before.

Jacob had hated leaving Michael but knew he needed his rest to face the day. So he'd left him sleeping and gone in search of something to fill his stomach. As quietly as he could, he'd gotten down a couple of bowls and found two spoons before putting the cereal and milk on the table in front of him. He hadn't heard Michael get up and figured that was something he'd have to get used to -- knowing someone else was in the house, but not being able to hear them.

Jacob froze with the spoon halfway to his open mouth. Only his eyes moved as he tracked Michael with his gaze. Michael of the bare chest, bare legs. Cripes, just about bare everything. Only a small pair of briefs hugged his slim hips and impressive package. He'd watched Michael put the coffee on and thought that was something he could do for the other man from now on. The idea of taking care of Michael appealed to Jacob more than he'd thought it would.

He'd always been afraid of being responsible for someone else, fearing he'd let them down. He still worried about that, but he'd made up his mind not to let it keep him from trying.

Jacob made himself lift his gaze and lucked out in doing so -- Michael was turning from the fridge, a bottle of water halfway to his lips, when he spotted Jacob sitting in the darkened breakfast area.

"Hey, you," Michael said, his expression softening as he took.

"Hey, yourself," Jacob said, finally taking his bite of cereal before using his spoon to indicate the other bowl and cereal. "Breakfast?"

Michael tried a grin but it fell flat. "Not today, thanks."

Jacob nodded and made himself finish his food, knowing one of them would need his energy to see the day through. He watched Michael, knowing the other man was holding on by his fingernails.

Michael leaned back against the sink, his bottle of water on the counter beside him. When the coffee finished he went through the motions of pouring himself a cup but he didn't take a drink. He stood there, cup in hand, staring at the coffee pot as though it held the answers he was looking for.

Wanting to comfort him, Jacob went to him, eased the cup from his hand and then wrapped his arms around him. Just as he had all night long.

He hung his head, bracing his hands on the counter in front of him. Slowly he shook his head.

"I can't do this yet. Jacob, don't let me fall apart now. It's too soon," he whispered, his voice harsh with desperation.

Jacob knew it was past time for Michael to grieve, but understood his determination to see things through first. He worked his hand between Michael's hips and the counter, cupping his morning wood in his hand.

He squeezed once, hearing the other man's breath hiss, before slipping his hand inside Michael's briefs. He worked one finger over and around his slit until he felt precum coat his finger. He then pulled the briefs down Michael's long legs, taking time to squeeze and marvel at the other man's muscles.

Seeing where Michael's hands gripped the counter, he placed his hands over Michael's and carefully worked them loose until he could turn Michael to face him. Their pain and loss bound them together as much as their love, but the look on Michael's face almost undid him. His reason for living was shattering right in front of him, and he had to help him hold it together. So he once again gripped the other man's dick, working moisture from the tip and coating his fingers in the process.

He knew any sign of compassion or sympathy would push Michael over the edge, so he hardened his voice and made his movements rough. He leaned forward and bit the chest in front of him, leaving teeth marks on Michael's pec before nipping his way across his chest and doing the same to the other. The whole time he was masturbating Michael's cock, working his fist along the thick shaft, squeezing the base and rimming the tip.

Michael's pervasive grief slowly eased as his lust grew. His breath worked in and out of his lungs faster and faster, quickening as he drew closer and closer to the edge of oblivion. He sought release with every fiber of his being. The only thing holding his focus now was Jacob. Jacob, who thought himself unworthy of love and loyalty. Jacob, who feared his inner demons would overwhelm any who encountered them.

What Jacob didn't know was that Michael's inner demons were worse.

This was something Michael had accepted long ago. And something he'd learned to control long ago instead of allowing them to control him. He was the one who called them forth. He was the one who could push them back. Seeing Jacob sink to his knees in front of him, feeling his dick brush cum against Jacob's soft lips, was enough to wake his demons.

They screamed for release. They demanded their due. They howled in delight at the feel of Jacob's warm, wet mouth enveloping his cock. Michael forced them back, not wanting to scare Jacob with the force of his desire. But at that moment, when it was crucial he focus on maintaining control, Jacob raised his gaze to him and let him see the longing and love there.

At that point, all Michael's experience and self-control flew out the window.

He felt sure the counter would have grooves from where his fingers gripped it so tightly. He dug his heels into the floor and began fucking deep into Jacob's mouth, seeking to lay claim to the promise evident in Jacob's eyes. He felt the other man's fingers dig deep into his hips and at that moment he hoped they'd leave bruises. He wanted a visual reminder of this moment, knowing it would help him get through the next few days. He felt his balls draw up tight and the tingling begin along his spine. He was close to coming but he fought it. He'd yet to take his time with Jacob, but still he resisted.

Jacob must have sensed this, because he eased a finger along either side of Michael's dick and coated it with his saliva and Michael's precum. Still gripping Michael's hips with one hand, he worked his moistened fingers between Michael's legs, brushing along his balls as he did so, before working them into Michael's ass.

Michael felt as much as heard Jacob groan as he sank his fingers deep. At the same time Jacob worked his throat muscles along Michael's dick, breathing deeply through his nose. Michael felt the rush come over him then, running along his spine and through his balls before shooting out his cock. He heard his roar from a distance, his senses focused entirely on his dick. Jacob continued to suck and rub, coaxing as much semen from him as he could before swallowing and licking along the softening shaft.

Michael loosened his fingers from the counter and threaded them through Jacob's hair, carefully guiding Jacob as he licked him clean. When every last drop was claimed Jacob looked up at Michael from his kneeling position at his feet and softly kissed the tip of his dick before slipping his fingers from the tight clench of Michael's ass.

Jacob rose to his feet, trapping Michael between him and the counter. Michael dropped his hands to his sides, resting them lightly along the cool surface. Jacob covered his hands with his own as he looked deep into Michael's eyes. Seemingly satisfied with what he saw there, he nodded once and then reached up to kiss the corner of Michael's mouth.

Michael grabbed Jacob's head with both hands, holding him steady as he leaned in and licked the corner of his mouth.

"Missed a spot," he said, his voice soft and relaxed.

Jacob wrapped his hands around Michael's wrists.

"I was leaving that for you," he said, a smile evident in his eyes if not on his lips.

"Were you, now?"

"Of course. It wouldn't be right for me to have all the fun, I mean cum, would it?"

Michael smiled in sudden understanding. He eased Jacob away from him and ran his gaze down to Jacob's crotch where a wet spot was growing on his briefs. Michael shuddered once and then clasped Jacob tightly to him.

"I love you, man," he said, his voice roughed with emotion. "Don't ever forget that."

"I'm counting on you to remind me if I do," he said.

* * * * *

The day of Lise's funeral dawned bright and beautiful, not a single cloud in the sky. Jacob thought it appropriate. The past two days had been for friends and family to say goodbye. This was a day in which to celebrate her life. And except for one dark cloud, forever gone from her sky, her life had been bright and beautiful.

Her smile made even the darkest pessimist want to do the same. Her laugh could bring them to their knees. And her tears could break their hearts. She was so sweet, giving unselfishly of herself to lovers and strangers alike.

And to the men in her life, she was a miracle. Loving unquestioningly. Fiercely protective. Her legacy was both a blessing and a burden. Something to share and to be worthy of.

As they stood beside her grave they knew it would not go unfulfilled. It took losing Lise to find one another. They wouldn't let her down.

Helen Gabriel

A romantic at heart, I enjoy happily-ever-after endings. I believe love can conquer all, and, luckily for me, so do the characters in my head clamoring for their stories to be written. Questions are second nature to me, which is good because this lets me learn new things to make my stories come alive. When I'm not plotting new stories or arguing with my characters I'm reading – I have a modest library and quick access to the web of knowledge. Or watching TV, true crime mostly.