



FINDING THE  
WORDS

TERRY O'REILLY

Aspen Mountain Press

Finding the Words  
*by Terry O'Reilly*

**Aspen Mountain Press**

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## **Finding the Words**

Ryan Phillips, a speech and language pathologist in the physical rehabilitation unit of a major university hospital has recently been wounded by the ending of a relationship. He is called in to treat a patient suffering from a traumatic brain injury. In the course of his treatments he begins to have feelings for the man. But is he ready to be healed, and will the patient heal enough to be able to return the love that appears to be growing between them?

Praise for the Writing of Terry O'Reilly

### Awakening

All I can say is WOW!! I loved this book from start to finish.

Blondie, 5 Stars, Rainbow Reviews

Mr. O'Reilly has done a wonderful job of bringing Puritan society to life in *Awakening*. Although this is not a happily-ever-after story, it is very thought-provoking, and it is more than worth the read.

Whitney, 4 Angels, Fallen Angel Reviews

Walking in Two Worlds

From the very first chapter the research and attention to detail Terry O'Reilly poured into it is very evident. Readers will enjoy *Walking in Two Worlds* on many different levels.

Ley, Joyfully Reviewed

Finding the Words  
by Terry O'Reilly

*Walking in Two Worlds* delivers the compelling message that everyone must find their place in this world and be allowed to live in peace with love and honor.

Chocolate Minx, 4 nymphs, Literary Nymphs Reviews

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## **Finding the Words**

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## Chapter One

The elevator stopped on the fifth floor of the rehab wing of University Medical Center. The door opened and Ryan Phillips stepped back to let two of his fellow workers exit before him. He held his venti mocha against his chest to keep it safe. Exiting the cab himself, he walked to the reception desk. It felt strange to be carrying only one mocha into work: strange and sad at the same time. But it was better this way. No chance of being torn apart anymore.

"Morning, Ry," always cheerful Rita, the receptionist in the cubicle, sang out. How's the handsomest guy in the clinic doing today?"

"Good morning, Rita," he replied with a smile.

He avoided making any comment on his current state of being. He had always been rankled by the perfunctory 'fine' response everyone always gave when you knew damn well half the time they weren't. So, to avoid thinking himself a hypocrite by saying he was okay when he wasn't, he just said, "I'm the only guy in the clinic, Rita. And it's, 'most handsome,'" the language therapist in him interjected.

"Well, you didn't used to be the only guy, and even then you were the most handsomest."

*Ouch!* He left himself open to that. Rita's good natured teasing reminded him, as did the single venti mocha he carried, that Jeff was no longer around.

As if to rub salt into a wound she didn't know existed, Rita asked, "Have you heard from Jeff since he left? How's he doing over at St. Joe's? That's where he went, right?"

"Er ... Yeah, that's right ... St. Joe's. No, I haven't heard from him."

Technically, that wasn't a lie. He hadn't talked to Jeff since he'd left his position at the U for a new job in physical therapy at the other major hospital in town two weeks earlier. He had received several phone calls which, when he had seen Jeff's number come up on caller I-D, he let go to voicemail. They were still there, unheard. *I should just delete them*, he thought. But somehow, he couldn't do that either, just yet.

"That's strange," Rita was saying, "you two seemed so close."

Once again, Ryan let the virtue of silence intervene for him.

"Well, when you get in touch with him, tell him 'hi' from me."

"I will," Ryan said. Then to change the subject, he added, "So, what's the schedule for today?"

"Here you go." Rita scanned a sheet of paper. "Your ten o'clock cancelled just before you came in so I didn't have a chance to change it on the printout. But that will give you a chance to look in on this referral you got from ... let's see.... Dr. Newman, in neurosurgery."

Rita handed Ryan the printout of his schedule and the referral paperwork. He stood for a moment looking over the information he had received.

"Morning Ry, Rita," a female voice said.

Ryan looked up. "Hi, Gwen," he said to the young woman, also a therapist in the clinic, who had just arrived to check in for her day's assignments.

Gwen and Rita started a conversation; Ryan took the opportunity to carry his Starbucks and papers to his therapy room/office. He set them on the desk and opened the blinds to let in the morning light. His room faced west and in the afternoon the sun shining through the windows was blinding at times. But the soft light of morning reflecting off the trees in their blazing fall colors made him glad he had this spectacular view.

Sitting behind his desk, he went over the schedule. At nine he had a session with an outpatient: Bobby Jenkins, a twelve year old with a stuttering problem. Ten was free so he could address the referral he had just received. At eleven he had a joint session with Julie, an occupational therapist, and Mrs. Welty, a stroke patient. He would work on pertinent vocabulary while the O.T. concentrated on meal preparation skills. The afternoon was full, too. He would go over that part of the schedule at lunch. Right now he wanted to look at the referral information on this new patient.

Name: André Thompson. Age: 46. Diagnosis: Post-op Ruptured Arteriovenous Anomaly repair to the left parietal lobe. Possible loss of language and motor function. Service request: Full language evaluation and prescription for therapeutic intervention if needed. Referring Physician: Reed Newman.

Ryan thought how a case such as this would have been one he and Jeff would possibly have handled together: he

would be doing the language remediation, Jeff the physical therapy. He thought of how they would joke about a threesome with the distinguished and handsome Dr. Newman, even though that would never happen: at least as far as Ryan was concerned. He let himself think about the times they had joked about things such as this over the three years they had worked together. He allowed himself to wallow for a few seconds, before roughly bringing himself back to the present with a stern remonstrance to let the past lie in the past. He got up and started to prepare for Bobby.

\* \* \* \*

Ten o'clock found him donning the required white lab coat for his trip to the ninth floor of the main hospital. As he walked past the nurse's station, a nurse looked up.

"Hi Ryan," she said with a smile. "Here to see Mr. Thompson?"

"Yes," Ryan replied, returning the smile.

"Well, he's in 346. Dr. Newman is there with the family explaining things. If you get in there quick you can get credit for another miracle if the edema goes down."

"That's me, Annie Sullivan, Miracle Worker," he quipped. He thought about the number of times he had been present when a patient with stroke, closed head injury or other head trauma began to spontaneously recover language as a result of reduced brain swelling. The families who witnessed these 'miraculous' recoveries often gave him the credit for it and heaped praise on him. It had become a hospital in-joke.

Ryan stopped at the open door to the room. He looked in and saw Dr. Newman, a woman and two teenagers. Evidently becoming aware of Ryan's presence, the woman looked over to him. Dr. Newman followed her gaze and turned around.

"Ah, Mr. Phillips." Dr. Newman turned to him and Ryan stepped forward. As he did, he looked beyond the group and saw the form of a man lying on the bed. His head was bandaged, an I.V. dripped into his arm and the heart monitor gave a steady beep, beep. His chest rose and fell regularly. Even at a distance, Ryan could see the man had a rugged, attractive look to him. Ryan felt himself stir in his Calvins. He couldn't deny, despite his vow to swear off relationships which had, up to that point, only left him wounded, he still could respond to the sight of a nice-looking man.

"Mr. Phillips is one of our speech pathologists. I have asked him to evaluate your husband...."

"Ex-husband," Mrs. Thompson corrected tersely.

"Yes, excuse me," the doctor apologized. "Your ex-husband. Ryan," he said, turning to him. "I was just beginning to explain what was going on with Mr. Thompson to his ex-wife and their sons, Connor and Todd."

The young men came forward and shook hands with Ryan. Ryan judged them to be in their early to mid teens. Both were handsome. Both were clearly concerned about their father.

Facing the family again, Dr. Newman said, "Arteriovenous Anomalies are not highly unusual. They occur when an artery and vein join with few or no capillaries between them. Many people have them and live their whole life without knowing it. In some cases, as with your ... ah ... Mr. Thompson, they

rupture and can cause damage to the surrounding tissue. Unfortunately, in his case, the anomaly was in the area of the brain that controls language and motor function."

He paused, seeming to want to make sure Mrs. Thompson and the boys were following him. They appeared to be, so he continued.

"We went in surgically to tie off the artery to stop any further bleeding. We cauterized the vein. We did this to prevent as much damage to the brain as we could. The surgery was successful in that we accomplished this."

"It sounds like there's a 'but' in there somewhere," said the young man Ryan thought was named Connor.

"Well, yes there is," the doctor continued. "Whenever these ruptures occur in this area, there's always the possibility of language and motor function loss. Right now he is in a state of post-operative trauma. His brain and the surrounding tissue are swollen. As the swelling goes down, we will monitor his condition and determine how much function can be regained."

"Are you saying he may not recover completely?" the ex-wife asked.

"Yes. But I'm not saying he won't recover fully, either. In cases such as these, there is a wide range of prognosis. We will be better able to assess the eventual outcome in a few days."

"How long will he be hospitalized? And will he need long-term care if the recovery isn't complete?"

Something about the way the ex-wife asked these questions raised a pink flag in Ryan's mind. He had a brief inkling of why they might have divorced.

"Both of those questions will be better answered in a day or so. That's one of the reasons I asked Mr. Phillips to come down and make an initial assessment. By comparing assessments over a period of time, we can ascertain the rapidity of recovery and project a more accurate outcome. I've asked someone from physical therapy to do the same later today."

Dr. Newman looked from one family member to another. Ryan knew he was waiting to see if there were further questions. When none were forthcoming, the doctor turned to the therapist.

"Ryan, Mr. Thompson regained consciousness an hour ago. At that time he seemed disoriented and non responsive to verbal and tactile stimuli. He is asleep at the moment. I think it would be all right to try to wake him and see what you find."

Ryan nodded. Dr. Newman turned again to the family. "If you have questions or concerns, please let me know."

He shook hands with each of them and left the room. Ryan smiled at the family, who now looked to him for instructions.

"If you would step out of the room for a few minutes, I can start my evaluation. There is a family lounge down the hall."

"And just why is it you want us to leave?" the ex-wife asked in a rather confrontational voice.

Ryan's less than positive opinion of the woman deepened. "At this time, as the patient is just beginning to recover, the

presence of family or friends can cause a patient to feel pressure to communicate. That sometimes makes it harder to accurately assess their current level of ability."

"I see," the woman said coldly.

"Come on, Mom. Let's get out of the way and let the man do his job," the taller of the two sons, whom Ryan remembered as Todd, said, taking her arm and steering her to the door.

The three Thompsons walked to the door. The two sons turned back and looked at their father. The ex-wife did not.

After they had left the room, Ryan stepped to the side of the bed. He carefully lowered the guard rail and looked at the man lying there. Once more, he thought him to be nice looking. But he had a professional reason for studying the man's face. He wanted to see if there was any asymmetry as he lay relaxed and asleep. There was none. *A good sign*, he thought. *Less chance of dysarthria*.

He then took a tongue depressor from his lab coat pocket, peeled back the paper and lightly touched the corners of Mr. Thompson's mouth. There was a slight twitch in response to the stimulation. He repeated the tactile probe in various places on the man's face. Each time there was a response. Ryan nodded his approval: an improvement from Dr. Newman's earlier assessment.

Ryan then placed his hand on Mr. Thompson's shoulder. He gently shook him. "Mr. Thompson can you hear me? Mr. Thompson?" Ryan could feel a solid, well-developed muscle beneath the fabric of the hospital gown.

The man's eyes fluttered; there was an increase in the steady beeping of the heart monitor. Ryan shook him gently again. This time he opened his eyes. At first they looked unfocused, but after a few seconds he blinked and began to look around the room. He found Ryan's face and he looked up into his eyes.

*God, he has beautiful eyes.*

Ryan smiled. Mr. Thompson narrowed his eyes. He opened his mouth and ran his tongue over his lips. He made a soft moaning sound. Ryan made note of all this.

Ryan turned and picked up a cup and poured water from the pitcher on the bed table. He placed a straw in the water and held the cup to the man's lips. He took a sip and swallowed.

*Very good, Ryan thought. He has some basic reflexive function.*

"Mr. Thompson, I'm Ryan, I'm a speech therapist. Do you know where you are?"

The patient opened his mouth. Ryan watched to see if there was tongue movement as he tried to form a response. Mr. Thompson gave up and breathed through his nose and closed his eyes. Ryan placed his hand on his shoulder, again.

"That's fine. It will get better. Now, try to shake your head or nod while I ask you some questions."

Mr. Thompson blinked.

Ryan asked again if he knew where he was. This time Mr. Thompson shook his head slightly.

"You're at University Hospital. You had surgery for a problem in your brain."

The widening of the man's eyes told Ryan he had understood. Ryan took his left hand and squeezed it reassuringly. The man returned the pressure.

"We're taking good care of you. Your surgery was successful. You just need to rest and let some healing take place. Do you understand?"

Mr. Thompson nodded.

Ryan squeezed his patient's hand again, then proceeded to ask a series of questions.

"Is your name David?"

Mr. Thompson minimally shook his head.

"Is your name André?"

He nodded.

"Are you twenty-six?"

Mr. Thompson treated Ryan to a slight smile and gave a soft snort through his nose.

"You wish?" Ryan asked.

Mr. Thompson nodded and gave a slight smile.

After a series of questions, Ryan began to ask the man to imitate simple sounds. He couldn't and became mildly frustrated. Ryan assured him again that things would get better.

After about a half an hour, Ryan knew Mr. Thompson needed to rest.

"That's about enough for today," Ryan told the man. "You're doing very well for just having had surgery."

Mr. Thompson frowned slightly.

"I'm going to be working with you every day while you are here. Probably twice a day. How does that sound?"

Ryan received the biggest smile yet.

He took the man's hand once more. "You get some rest. The physical therapist will be here later to see how well you are doing. Okay?"

Another nod.

Ryan started to remove his hand to leave. Mr. Thompson tightened his grip. Ryan stopped and looked down into the man's face. A tear formed in the corner of his eye. He raised his head slightly off the pillow and nodded, his tongue against his upper lip. He blew a puff of air from his mouth.

"Thank you? Is that what you want to say?"

The man nodded again. Another tear rolled down his cheek.

Ryan took his hand with both of his. "You're very welcome."

Mr. Thompson nodded, lowered his head to the pillow and released Ryan's hand.

This time it was Ryan who held on just a moment longer.

\* \* \* \*

As Ryan reached the door to the room, he looked back one more time. The man had apparently fallen back to sleep: chest rising and falling regularly, the heart monitor beeping steadily.

The nurse he had spoken with earlier appeared at his side.

"How's he doing?" she asked.

"It's hard to tell just yet. Have to let things play out. He's asleep now, I think."

"I'll take his vitals," the nurse said and entered the room.

Ryan watched a minute more as the nurse carried out the procedure, and then walked down the hall to the family lounge. As he entered the room, the Thompsons stood and walked toward him. Since there were other families in the room, Ryan led them to a small conference area.

"Well?" the former Mrs. Thompson demanded, "Will he get over this?"

"I'm pleased to say he's alert and responsive," Ryan said with a smile that hid his dislike for the woman.

"Thank God," one of the young men said.

"He should show some improvement over the next day or two, but right now he appears to have some expressive aphasia as well as apraxia."

Knowing from past experience that relatives rarely understood such terms, he went on to explain. "Aphasia is the loss of language function. In Mr. Thompson's case it is mainly expressive as far as I can determine at this time. He appears to understand, but has trouble when asked to respond with speech."

"What is the other thing you mentioned all about?" Mrs. Thompson asked.

"Apraxia?"

"Yes."

"That's a condition in which you know what you want to do, and are able to do it, but can't make the connection to do it voluntarily."

Seeing they were puzzled, Ryan explained further.

"Say you wanted to unlock a door. You know what you want to do, but even though you are holding the key in your

hand, you can't make the connection between holding it and inserting it into the lock.

"In your husband's ... uh ... Mr. Thompson's case it's oral apraxia. When I asked him to make certain sounds, he moves his tongue and lips, but he can't make the proper connections to produce them. However, I know he has the motor ability, because he can swallow and lick his lips involuntarily."

"Will he get over these things?" the shorter of the two sons asked.

"I can't say for sure, but there is every reason to believe that he will recover all or, at least part of his language function."

After explaining to the Thompsons that Mr. Thompson would have further evaluations, and would begin both speech and physical therapies, he left to return to the rehab wing. The family returned to the patient's side.

As Ryan was waiting for the elevator, a tall, handsome young man walked up and stood beside him.

"Hi, Ry," he said. You up here to do an eval?"

"Yeah, Mr. Thompson, 346."

"Oh yeah, I helped with the prep for surgery. He's a pretty hot guy for an old man."

Ryan ignored the remark, but admitted to himself he agreed with the young man's assessment.

The elevator door's opened. The two men got in. They were alone. The young man pressed five and then two. "See, I remember where you live," he said with a smile.

Ryan returned the smile.

"Uh ... I hear you and Jeff aren't seeing each other anymore."

Ryan visibly stiffened.

"Hey, sorry, man," his elevator partner said.

"It's okay, Ben. No, we're not seeing each other anymore."

The elevator stopped at five, and the door opened.

Ben held the door as Ryan got off.

"Could I maybe give you a call sometime?"

Ryan half turned. "I don't think I'm ready yet, but thanks."

"Well, okay, maybe in a couple weeks?"

Ryan just smiled as the doors slid closed. *It'll take more than a couple of weeks, try a couple of millennia*, Ryan thought sarcastically.

Ben was sweet, handsome and young. He had shown an interest in Ryan ever since he had started work at U Hospital as a nursing assistant a year earlier. Then Ryan had let him know that he had a boyfriend. Maybe he should have been more direct and let Ben know that even if Jeff hadn't been in the picture, he wasn't interested in guys that much younger than he was. In fact Jeff was a bit of a stretch as he was nearly ten years younger than Ryan at 25. But Jeff's energetic charismatic nature and good looks had overcome his resistance, and he let him into his life and heart.

He wished now he had stuck to his convictions.

He continued on his way to his office to make notes on the Thompson evaluation, before joining the O.T. to work with Mrs. Welty.

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## Chapter Two

Later that afternoon, Ryan sat at his desk transcribing his notes on Mr. Thompson into a report to be sent to Dr. Newman and the Physical Therapy department. As he did, he couldn't help but think of the man lying there looking so masculine, yet so helpless. He thought of the tears that he had shed the smile and the feel of his hand holding his.

*What would it be like to hold him ... kiss him ... take away his pain? Whoa. This is a patient, off limits emotionally. Besides, you're not going there again, remember. And he was a married man.*

*I wonder why he got divorced, though? Stop right there, Phillips!*

His thoughts were interrupted by his phone ringing.

"Hello, Ryan Phillips."

"Ryan."

His heart stopped, then raced. It was Jeff.

"Ryan?" The voice came again. Ryan tried to hang up, but he couldn't. Finally, after Jeff had called his name into the phone a third time, he responded.

"What?" His voice was cold, flat. He tried to stay in control.

"Ryan, I love you," Jeff said in a pleading voice. God, Ryan hated that!

"What do you want me to say? That I love you, too? Meet me at my place?"

"That would be nice." This time the voice was warm and light.

"Well, it ain't gonna happen, friend."

"Aw come on, Ry. You know that guy didn't mean anything to me."

"And I do?" Ryan kept telling himself not to get into this conversation, again. But he couldn't hang up.

"Of course you do. You know that." Jeff was turning on all his charm. His voice was soft and warm. Ryan could picture the sweet smile, the deep blue eyes.

"If I mean so much to you, why do you insist on dancing to the tune of, 'If I'm not near the man I love, I love the man I'm near?'" Ryan sang sarcastically, in a parody of a song from a Broadway show.

"Oh, Ry, I love it when you sing to me," Jeff teased.

"Damn, Jeff! Quit it! I'm serious. I can't be in a relationship with someone for whom commitment means so little."

"I am committed to you."

"That's why you slept with ... with ... what's his name? Because you were committed to me?"

"Danny. But that doesn't have anything to do with how I feel for you."

Exasperated, Ryan didn't know what to say.

"Ryan," Jeff said softly. "I've tried to explain. It's how men are wired. It's in our genes. We're basically polygamous."

"It's promiscuous, and we're not having this conversation again." Ryan's voice was rising in anger.

"My anthropology professor explained. He said...."

"Yeah, yeah I know, 'monogamy is a social convention that lies outside the bounds of human biological evolution.' Well, I don't buy that load of shit."

"Are you claiming he's wrong, and you know more about human nature than he does?" Jeff sounded as if he were also getting agitated.

"No. All I'm saying is if that's your idea of how relationships work, fine. Just don't expect me to be the one that's on the other end of that relationship. Maybe some guys can put up with their boyfriend sleeping around, but not this one."

"Even if we love each other?" Jeff was calm again.

"Even if we love each other."

There, see, you admit it. You do love me." Jeff sounded like he had just scored a touchdown.

"Goodbye, Jeff."

"Ryan, wait ... I...."

Ryan hung up the phone.

He sat for several minutes trying to regain composure. When Ryan felt he was under control, he dialed Rita.

"What do you need, Ry?"

Trying to sound reasonable and aloof, he said, "If Jeff calls again just take a message, please."

"I'm sorry, Ryan; I didn't know there was a problem."

"No problem. Just don't want to take personal calls at work," Ryan fudged.

Rita apologized again and hung up. Ryan got up and walked to the window. The late afternoon sun was blazing on the trees outside. He tried not to cry. He wasn't a drama queen. He did love Jeff. They were good together in so many ways. He knew that Jeff didn't sleep with that Danny guy to hurt him. He didn't even really try to hide it. He actually

believed that you could love someone, be committed and still have sex outside the relationship. He had even suggested a three-way would be fun. Ryan tried not to judge him. If that was the way Jeff thought it worked, fine. Just don't ask him to be part of it.

Still feeling a dull ache in his heart, he sat back down at the desk to finish his report on Mr. Thompson. When he opened the file to insert the account of his findings, he saw the physical therapist had already submitted her findings.

Quickly scanning the document, he was disheartened to find that at the present time, the man was suffering from hemiplegia affecting the right side of his body, involving both the arm and leg. Sensory response was strong. *That's good.* The prognosis was guarded, but the therapist felt there was a good chance the paralysis could progress to hemi paresis or even beyond, as the edema subsided. In-room therapy was to begin the next day.

That reminded Ryan to call Rita once more and schedule Mr. Thompson for two in-room therapies a day, starting tomorrow.

\* \* \* \*

"Hi, Sally," Ryan greeted the nurse at the station on the ninth floor the next morning. "I'm here to see Mr. Thompson in 346. Any new notes in his file today that I should be aware of?"

"Good morning, Ry. Let's see." Sally pulled the chart from the rack. "Vitals were good all night ... Oh, yeah, here's

something you'd want to know. Seems he started saying 'yes', 'no' and 'but.' That's good isn't it?"

"Yes it is. Thanks."

Ryan proceeded down the corridor to the patient's room. When he came through the door, Mr. Thompson was sitting with the bed in an upright position, watching the TV mounted on the wall. When he saw Ryan, he brightened and broke into a broad smile.

"Yes, yes," he said and waved Ryan in.

Coming into the room, Ryan looked at the man sitting in bed. His eyes were bright. He was smiling and he looked, to Ryan, even more handsome than the day before, the several days' growth of salt and pepper beard enhancing his rugged good looks.

"Good morning," said Ryan as he walked to the side of the bed. "You remember me, then?"

"Yes, yes," Mr. Thompson said, raising his left hand and taking hold of Ryan's. Ryan noticed his right arm was in a sling. He shook the man's hand and released it.

"Do you remember my name?"

"Yes, yes," came the response.

*Uh-huh, automatic speech,* Ryan thought.

"Can you tell me my name?"

Mr. Thompson moved his tongue over his lips. He pressed his lips together. "Yes, yes, but no, shit," he said, looking exasperated.

Ryan smiled and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

"That's okay, it will come. Let me give you a little test, okay?"

The man nodded.

"Is my name Don?"

"Yes, yes, no, no, no." He was shaking his head.

"Is it Amy?"

Mr. Thompson knitted his brows and gave Ryan a 'you've got to be kidding look' and said, "Shit, no."

Ryan laughed. So did the patient.

"How about Ryan?"

Mr. Thompson smiled and said, "No, no, but yes, yes, yes."

"Very good, Mr. Thompson."

"No, no, no."

"You're not Mr. Thompson?"

"No, no, ah, yes, yes, yes, but no."

Ryan said, "You are Mr. Thompson but???"

Mr. Thompson pointed to himself and said, "No, no, but yes, yes," and pointed to himself again.

Ryan was used to the frustration of dealing with a patient for whom language was re-emerging. Clearly Mr. Thompson was experiencing recovery of some spontaneous utterances. He knew what he wanted to say, but word retrieval and apraxia were keeping him from saying it. However, the fact that he was working so hard and not giving up were excellent signs.

"Let's try again," the therapist said. "You are Mr. Thompson."

"Yes, yes, but..."

"But you want me to call you something else?"

"Yes, yes, yes." Mr. Thompson smiled and nodded his head vigorously.

"How about André? You want me to call you by your first name?"

"Yes, yes, yes,"

"All right, André," Ryan said. "Now can you try to say it for me?"

Ryan gave André a visual example by saying, "Ahhh ... nnn ... André opened his mouth and said, "Ahhh."

"Good," Ryan encouraged, and repeated his cues.

"Ahhh, ahhh, ahhh nnn, Ahh ... underwear!" André looked startled. Then he laughed.

Ryan smiled. "Well, we're making some progress."

By the end of the hour, Mr. Thompson had continued to improve, although he still called himself 'Underwear.' Ryan had determined: that 'yes' meant just that and 'no' meant 'no'. A series of 'yes' and 'no' with a 'but' or two thrown in meant that they were on the right track but needed to search further. 'Shit' was used when frustration or something negative needed to be expressed. André could also say various words that were clear, but not the target word he was shooting for: all classic symptoms of anomial aphasia and oral apraxia. Just how much spontaneous recovery there was still to be expected, Ryan did not know, but he was encouraged.

One thing Ryan did know was that he was beginning to like Mr. Thompson, André, very much: a realization that both pleased and disturbed him.

"Well, that's about enough for this hour."

"Ummm," André said frowning.

"But I'll be back this afternoon and we can work some more, okay?"

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*by Terry O'Reilly*

"Yes, yes, yes," was the enthusiastic response.  
Just then the door opened and the ex-wife walked in.  
"Shit," said Mr. Thompson.

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### Chapter Three

The ex-Mrs. Thompson walked to the side of the bed. She glanced at her former husband, then turned to Ryan.

"Well, he's sitting up. That's something. So, how is he doing?"

Ryan felt himself bristle. The bitch hadn't even greeted André. She talked to Ryan as if the man in the bed couldn't understand her. He looked beyond her to André, who had a wry smile on his handsome face and a twinkle in his eye. He stuck out his tongue at the back of her head. Then he winked at Ryan.

It was all Ryan could do to keep from laughing. He did note however, that Mr. T was able to volitionally will his tongue to do his bidding: another sign of recovery.

"Good morning, Mrs. Thompson," Ryan said pointedly to emphasize her lack of manners. "Mr. Thompson is doing quite well as a matter of fact. He shows surprising signs of recovery every minute," he said smiling over the woman's shoulder at a smirking André. "Why not try talking directly to him?"

Mrs. Thompson gave Ryan a look that indicated she thought that a novel idea and turned to her ex husband.

"Well," she said, "How are you?"

"Yes," came the reply.

"Yes?" Mrs. Thompson turned to Ryan, looking puzzled.

Ryan smiled. "He has some trouble saying exactly what he wants to say, but he is improving." The pair turned to Mr. Thompson.

"André," Ryan said to his patient, "Let's try that again. How are you?" Ryan pressed his lips together and made a soft 'buh' sound to stimulate a response.

André imitated the sound.

"Buh ... buh ... bunner. Ah no, no, bunny. No, shit ... buh ... buh ... butter?" he said, as if not sure he was correct.

Mrs. Thompson turned to Ryan. "What's this? You call this improvement? He sounds like some sort of idiot."

At this, Mr. Thompson laughed out loud, which took Ryan by surprise. His own response to the rude statement by the woman had been anger. But the target of the insult merely laughed.

Mrs. Thompson turned back to her ex and scowled.

"He is trying to say "Better," Ryan explained.

"Better," Mr. Thompson sang out clearly and correctly. He smiled 'a told you so smile.'

Mrs. Thompson, looking more like an idiot than her ex-husband, as far as Ryan was concerned, was clearly flustered. She then spied the sling.

"What's that for?"

"He's paralyzed on his right side." Seeing Mrs. Thompson's look of panic, he added, "For now. We're hoping that will also improve over time."

At that moment, the physical therapist arrived for Mr. Thompson's in-room therapy.

"Ah, Mrs. Thompson, this is Gwen. She's a physical therapist and will be working with André. She can answer all your questions better than I can. Gwen," he said, "this is André's ex-wife." He emphasized the 'ex'.

Gwen greeted and shook hands with the woman, then turned to Mr. Thompson, greeting him warmly. While the therapist and Mr. Thompson were engaged, Ryan addressed the ex-wife once more.

"In order for me to work more effectively with Mr. Thompson, I need to have some background on his likes and dislikes, hobbies and interests. That way I can build conversations around things familiar; hopefully stimulating more language recovery. If you have time after you speak with Gwen, you could come to my office on the fifth floor and we could do that today?"

"Fine," came the curt reply.

"Thank you. Gwen can direct you to the rehab wing whenever it's convenient for you."

He turned his attention to André, who was having his range of motion stimulated by the therapist. Ryan had a brief surge of envy for Gwen's ability to have legitimate physical contact with the man.

"André."

The man looked at him and smiled warmly. He raised his good hand and Ryan grasped it. André squeezed Ryan's hand tightly. Then pulled him toward him and gave him a clumsy one-armed hug around the neck.

"I'll see you this afternoon," Ryan said grasping André's arm and squeezing it. He felt a rush of warmth pass through his body, and center itself in his groin.

"Yes, yes, yes," André said enthusiastically, which brought a soft 'humph' from Mrs. Thompson, the meaning of which escaped Ryan.

Ryan stepped back from the bed and excused himself. Walking out of the room, he pondered Mrs. Thompson's response to the exchange between him and André, and chided himself for allowing his attraction to his patient to manifest itself.

\* \* \* \*

"Thank you for taking the time to talk with me," Ryan said, addressing Mrs. Thompson as she sat across the desk from him in his office.

"Yes, now what is it you need to know?" she said impatiently.

"As I said earlier, knowing something about Mr. Thompson's life before the incident will—"

"Yes, yes, you told me all that," Mrs. Thompson interrupted. "Just what do you want to know?"

Once again, Ryan repressed his growing dislike of the woman.

"Just tell me how he liked to spend his leisure time. I know he taught accounting at Washington Junior College. But what did he like to do outside of that?"

"Well, he likes sports, mainly football. He played golf and tennis. He loved his dogs. We have three of them. I should say 'had'. They moved out with him when we separated. My sons are taking turns going over to his place and caring for them. That's becoming a real pain, let me tell you."

"What are their names?" Ryan asked, taking notes and ignoring her complaint.

"Todd and Connor. You met them yesterday. Don't you remember?" she said haughtily.

"I meant what are the dogs' names?" *Now who's the idiot*, Ryan thought.

"Oh. Yes of course. Rosie, ah ... Daisy and Bob. They are labs, or lab mixes, I think. I never paid much attention to them.

"His favorite football team?"

"Patriots I think. He graduated from Florida, so the Gators. I never really paid much attention. Of course, he's a big fan of the University team here. Brutal sport if you ask me."

*No one did!* Ryan thought angrily. "Anything else you can think of that would help me with his therapy?"

"Well," she said in a strange tone of voice, which made Ryan look up.

"Recently he got into blogging. I am sure you could find out a lot about him from reading his blogs. I definitely did."

Ryan caught the bitterness in her tone. His curiosity was piqued, but he refrained from prying into the statement further.

"If that's enough information for now," Mrs. Thompson was already rising from her chair.

Ryan also rose. "I think I have enough to start with. I'm sure that soon Mr. Thompson will be able to fill in a lot of the blanks himself."

"I certainly hope so. I wasn't too thrilled when.... ah ... Gwen indicated that he may need some home care until things get better. That would be awkward to say the least."

The two said their goodbyes. Ryan returned to his desk, a feeling of anticipation he couldn't explain stole over him. Was he contemplating trying to find André's blog on the internet? No, no he couldn't do that.

*Damn, I should have asked her for the web address.*

\* \* \* \*

That evening, Ryan busied himself in his kitchen making his dinner. His afternoon therapy session with Mr. Thompson had gone well. There was more improvement in André's ability to hit target words more clearly, although he still came up with some amusing ejaculatory responses. A young nurse's aid had arrived to give him fresh water and announced it was her birthday.

"Well, Hippy birdbath," André had said cheerily.

This was greeted with a surprised look from the young woman, and a chuckle from Ryan.

"Hippy Birdbath?" Ryan had said to help André monitor his responses.

André had looked puzzled at first; then seemed to realize his error, and also laughed. He wouldn't let the aid leave until he got the salutation right. It took about five minutes. That encouraged Ryan. André was intent on recovery.

The only disturbing moment came when they were discussing André's interests. He had been enthusiastic to try to talk about football and ecstatic to talk about his dogs, which, Ryan could tell, he missed terribly. However, when Ryan mentioned his blog, he seemed almost to cringe and became nervous. Ryan dropped the subject.

Ryan watched the evening news as he ate his supper. However, he hardly paid attention to the events depicted on the screen. His thoughts were on André and his apparent reluctance to share anything about his blog. Ryan fought a growing temptation to try to find it and see what he could learn about his patient. On one hand he felt it was an invasion of privacy. On the other, most blogs were public and anyone could share thoughts with the author.

After the meal was cleared away, Ryan had convinced himself a little peek at André's blog wouldn't be too much of a breach of professionalism. In fact any information he might glean could help him with his therapy. He sat down at his computer to start a search.

He Googled André's name and added 'blog.' His initial attempts failed to find any matches. Then he hit on the idea that maybe André was using an alias.

*What are the chances of my finding out what he might call himself?*

He thought.

Despite his pessimism at the chance of discovering what name André might go by, he decided to try a few obvious ones.

He tried 'Andy Todd.' None of the hits were for his André. He tried Andy Connors. Again nothing relevant came up. Then he typed in the names of the dogs in quotes and added Patriots. There was a blog belonging to a Tom Anderson. Well that was a pretty common name. *But what the heck,* he mused.

He clicked the link for Tom Anderson. Quickly perusing the entries, he found Tom Anderson was part of a fantasy football league, followed golf and tennis and had three dogs named Rosie, Daisy and Bob. By some stroke of fate he had found André Thompson.

He read some of the entries. The ones regarding the dogs interested him the most. Ryan was more a dog lover than a sports fan. In fact he missed his Susie, his big lovable shepherd, who he had recently had to have put down from old age.

Ryan had just about decided he had learned about everything he could from the blog. He wondered what Mrs. Thompson had discovered that she had found so interesting. He also wondered why André had reacted the way he had that afternoon, when the subject of his blog had come up. Everything he had read so far was pretty ordinary.

He read a bit further and came upon some exchanges with a guy named Barry. At first they talked about the dogs and sports. Then about things they liked other than these topics. Barry had then suggested they go to the private chat area.

Ryan scanned the site page. He located the tab for private entries. It needed a password. This was private. He really would be going too far to intrude here. But still.

*I'll just try a couple of passwords and see if I can....*

*This is nuts!* he told himself. But he couldn't seem to stop.

Figuring André had used names before; he tried the dog's names, his real name, and then toddconnor and finally connortodd. It worked.

"Well, I'll be damned," Ryan exclaimed in surprise.

He read the entries from the top.

*Barry: i thought maybe we could be a little more open in here*

*Tom: yeah. what's on your mind?*

*Barry: well, u said something about being interested in exploring new things*

*Tom: yeah, i did.*

*Barry: well*

*Tom: lol*

*Barry: come on. what r u interested in investigating*

*Tom: this is awkward. i don't know if we r talking about the same thing don't want to step in a pile of shit*

*Barry: ok ill be brave and go first ... im into man 2 man sex*

*Tom: wow that's pretty direct*

*Barry: well???*

*Tom: I'm married*

*Barry: so am i*

*Tom: and u have sex with men?*

*Barry: if i can find a guy that needs discretion and is interested yes*

*Tom: u think i am*

*Barry: i don't know r u*

*Barry: u still there*

*Barry: tom*

*Tom: yeah*

*Barry: well yes or no you want to find out about man to man sex?*

*Barry: tom? you there?*

*Tom: yes*

*Barry: yes your still here or yes you want to find out about sex with guys?*

*Tom: both.*

Ryan stopped reading and looked up at the ceiling. *Oh my God!*

He sat for several minutes: his heart pounding, his hands sweating, his dick twitching.

Ryan looked back at the page opened before him. He took a deep breath and shuddered. He continued to read. The two men went on to discuss the fact that André had never had sex with a man. That he had suspected most of his life he had leanings in that direction, and only recently decided to do something about it, but he was hesitant. Finally, he and Barry had gone on to set up a time and place to meet. Barry had sent him a picture. He wasn't anything to write home to mother about. Then the entry.

*Barry: what's up man i was at the M-6? did i get the time wrong or did you chicken out? contact me*

*Tom: sorry barry i don't know what to say my wife found the blog stupid fucking me left it open and went to the bathroom she knows what we set up things r really bad here she's talking divorce i'll try and get back to u*

That was the last entry. Ryan sat for a long while, rereading the journal several times. It explained so much: Mrs. Thompson's strange behavior toward the affection André had shown to Ryan, her veiled reference to the blog, André's reluctance to talk about it and the divorce. Finally he logged off and shut down the computer.

What should he do with the information? What did he want to do with the information?

Later that night he lay in bed staring at the ceiling. Thoughts and images crowded his head. André Thompson was gay ... or at least bi. He thought of his handsome face. He had noted that the same salt and pepper hair of his beard curled around the edges of his hospital gown. That could mean he had a hairy chest. His chest did look pretty well developed. Ryan liked a big hairy chest.

Without realizing it Ryan had started fondling his cock and balls. He was now almost fully erect.

He had tried to set something up with that Barry guy. But his wife had found the blog and he never followed through.

His eyes were so deep, so kind looking. His smile was sweet and inviting.

Ryan was now completely hard and stroking himself rhythmically. His ass muscles contracted and relaxed in time with his strokes.

The discovery of the blog had brought about a divorce. *Man, that must have been a scene.*

André's lips looked so soft, so desirable. Ryan imagined what it would be like to kiss those lips, to feel his tongue probing his mouth, seeking out Ryan's, dancing, thrusting, dueling.

"André," Ryan called out as he arched his back and shot his load onto his abdomen and chest. After several shots he lay back trembling, his hand coated in his cum, his heart pounding in his chest.

"Crap."

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, Ryan sat at his desk still wondering about what he had discovered the night before. He felt guilty for having pried into a patient's private life. He felt guilty that he had given into a fantasy about the man. Yes, it was true, the more he knew about his clients, the better he could help them. In recovery from aphasia, familiar language patterns were always helpful. But this?

*"Let's work on some names that you'll want to use: Todd, Connor, Rosie, Daisy, Bob and ... oh yeah ... Barry." That would go over well.*

He got up to go to his first in-room appointment of the day: a young boy who had sustained a closed head injury in a car crash the day before. He gathered some materials that he could use to stimulate conversation, and headed for the elevator.

Just as he reached for the button, the door opened. There in a wheelchair was André. Ben was escorting him.

"Yes, yes," André said, with a broad smile on his face. "I ... I ... gl ... gla ... shit ... yes."

Ryan felt a rush of excitement at seeing the man he had been with in his fantasy the night before.

"They released him to come down here for P.T. and then to see you," Ben said.

"That's great," Ryan replied putting his hand on André's shoulder as Ben pushed him out of the elevator. André reached up with his good hand and covered the therapist's.

Ryan looked up to see Ben giving him a knowing look. Ryan slipped his hand away.

"He couldn't wait to get up here. Could you, big guy?" Ben said. "Took me awhile to figure out it was you he was all hot to get to. You finally said 'Ryan.' Didn't you?"

"Yes, yes, Ryes, Ryt, Ryan! Yes yes." André's smile was even broader.

Pleased, both that André was improving, and that he wanted to see him, Ryan smiled. "That's great, André. I have to see another patient right now, but I'll be back and we can do our session in my office. Okay with you?"

"Yes, yes."

Gwen, the P.T., arrived at that moment. "Hi Mr. T. How are we this morning? Ready to get started?"

André nodded vigorously and looked up at Ryan.

"I'll be back. You work hard for Gwen."

Once more the man nodded. Ryan got in the elevator as Mr. Thompson was wheeled away to physical therapy. Ben returned to the cab with him.

"I think you got yourself a live one," said the young, handsome nursing assistant. "Too bad he's so old."

"He's not old," Ryan snapped, defending André. Then catching himself, he added. "I don't know what you're talking about."

The elevator came to a stop on nine. The door slid open. Ryan started to exit.

"Oh, I think you do," Ben said with that knowing smile once more. "I think you both got something goin' for one another. Maybe you don't want to see it, but I can."

The warning bell rang and the door slid closed. Ryan watched as Ben leaned to the side in order to keep eye contact with him as long as possible. Just as he was cut from view, he winked.

Ryan was shaken. He didn't know what he felt for Mr. Thompson. He found him attractive, yes, but beyond that? He wasn't ready for a foray into another relationship. Then again, why had he played Dick Tracey and sleuthed out that blog? And, if there was something there, was it so apparent that Ben could see it? André seemed to like him ... a lot. But wasn't that just gratitude for all the help he felt he was getting? Ryan pulled himself out of these thoughts, and headed for the nursing desk to find out where Jonas Daniel's room was. He had a job to do.

\* \* \* \*

Returning to the rehab wing following his therapy session with Jonas, Ryan glanced in the direction of the physical therapy clinic. He wondered if André was done with his appointment with Gwen. Walking to the doors, he saw that the two were still working.

André was walking between Gwen and another therapist. He held a tripod cane in his left hand. His right leg dragged as he walked; only by leaning on the cane and elevating his hip, could he bring it forward enough to support his weight so he could move his left leg forward. His face was contorted with concentration. Ryan stood at the doorway and felt a surge of compassion for the man who was working so hard to overcome the events of the last seventy-two hours. His desire

to rush to his side and support him was almost overwhelming. He had to leave the room.

He went into his office and closed the door behind him. Thoughts of his discovery on André's blog, Ben's intuitive observation and the feelings that had just washed over him had his head reeling. He felt warm tears on his cheeks.

He didn't know how long he stood staring out the window at the blaze of color painting the trees on the hills surrounding the medical center.

He was pulled from his reverie by the sound of the door opening behind him. He quickly wiped his cheeks and turned around.

"Jeff! What the hell are you doing here?" Ryan almost shouted in his shock at seeing his former boyfriend striding toward him.

*How did he get past Rita?*

"I came to pick up my last check from the U, and I thought as long as I was here.... Well, if I came to see you face to face, you maybe would consider...."

Ryan closed his eyes and sighed. Opening them again he said, "Jeff, how many ways can I say it. I can't be with you any more. We're ... we're just too different. Our goals for a relationship are too different."

Jeff took other step closer, arms outstretched. Ryan held up his hand. He knew what Jeff intended: take him in his arms and press himself against Ryan. Ryan knew Jeff knew only too well his weakness for tender embraces and offers of gentle love making.

"No, Jeff."

Jeff stopped and dropped his arms. He took on his kicked puppy dog look.

"Not even if I promise to try to—"

"Been there, done that." Ryan hated that cliché, but it fit. Several times in the last year he had agreed to give Jeff one more chance, and each time Jeff had gone back to his 'I love you, but I need variety,' stand.

"Look, you believe in polygamous monogamy. I believe in monogamous monogamy. Neither is wrong if both parties believe in the same thing. We don't. End of story.

"But Ry, I love you. I miss you. It's not the same without you."

Ryan sighed again. "Jeff, I believe you love me. But I don't believe you love me enough to change your point of view. I loved you too much to change mine.

Jeff was about to respond, when Ryan's door opened and Gwen wheeled Mr. Thompson into the room.

"Jeff," said Gwen as she walked around the wheel chair and hugged her former work mate. "How are you? Come to beg for your old job back?"

"No, not my old job," said Jeff with a look over his shoulder at Ryan, "just had to tie up a few last bits of business and say 'Hi' to old Ry here. Haven't seen him in a while."

"But I thought you two were...." "She looked at the patient who was sitting in his wheel chair, watching the proceedings. "It's good to see you, Jeff. I have a few minutes. Drop by the clinic when you're done here and we can catch up."

"We're done here," Ryan said with finality. "Goodbye Jeff."

"Bye, Ry." Jeff put his hand on Ryan's shoulder. "If you change your mind and want to talk...."

"Goodbye Jeff," Ryan repeated and physically removed his hand from his shoulder.

He glanced at Mr. Thompson and saw what he thought was a flicker of confusion cross his face. The man raised an eyebrow.

Jeff turned toward him. "Hi, I'm Jeff Anderson. I used to work here." He took Mr. Thompson's hand in his and shook it. "You're in good hands with Ole Ryan here." He looked over his shoulder at the therapist. "He's the best."

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Thompson and smiled broadly in Ryan's direction.

"Well, guys, so long. Ry, think about it, okay?"

He left.

"You k?" André asked.

"I'm okay," Ryan said, "Yeah, I'm okay."

*What did André think was going on? Has he figured out that Jeff and I were...?*

\* \* \* \*

Trying his best to control the distraction of knowing André was at least bi if not gay, and wondering if he might have guessed the truth about him, Ryan started the therapy session. He wheeled André to a kidney shaped table in the corner of the office. He brought out the materials he would need to give the man a more thorough evaluation. He could pretty well predict what he would find from his observations,

but insurance companies required formal testing in order to justify their payouts.

As expected, André breezed through the receptive language portions of the exam. He showed no signs of not being able to understand everything that was said to him. The expressive segments of the test showed he did, indeed, have anomial aphasia; difficulty with word retrieval, syntactic disruption; inability to put words together into sentences and apraxia; an inability to make specific sounds and sound combinations on command. He had automatic phrase recall and could, with difficulty, produce some words. He also often spontaneously spouted words which, while near the targeted word, often were humorously off the mark. His written language mirrored the spoken. He could read silently anything given him and accurately respond to content questions. But was not able to do more than scribble a few non-connected words. All in all, Ryan was pleased with the progress Mr. Thompson had made since the initial insult to his brain. However, since he was now more than forty-eight hours post-trauma, the prognosis for further spontaneous recovery was not high. Further improvement would come through therapeutic intervention.

"That's about it for testing," Ryan said. "You're doing very well. We'll start our therapy tomorrow and see what we can do for you."

Ryan smiled at his patient. André looked sad.

"What, what is it?" Ryan asked.

André placed his good hand on his limp right arm lying in the sling. Then on his right thigh which he rubbed vigorously. He looked up at Ryan with concern in his eyes.

"No, no, no," he said raising his left hand in a gesture of despair and dropping it on the table.

Instinctively, Ryan reached out and covered the hand with his own.

He gently rubbed the back of André's hand. "I know you get tired of hearing it, but it will get better. Just how much we don't know, but if you keep work—" Ryan stopped talking.

André had turned his hand over and grasped Ryan's. With his thumb, he massaged the back of Ryan's hand. He was looking deeply into the therapist's eyes. His eyes shone with tears.

"Tank oo, Rynat," he struggled to say. Then he lifted his hand and tapped the left side of his chest. He nodded his head.

Ryan shuddered.

\* \* \* \*

As Ryan showered before bed that night, he thought of André's touch on the back of his hand, the gesture as he tapped his chest. Could those be more than mere expressions of gratitude? Could he be trying to find the words to say something more? Did Ryan want them to mean something more?

He began to picture what it would be like to be showering with André, to let his hands roam over his body. He had touched him enough to know he was in good shape. He

Finding the Words  
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imagined what his firm chest and flat stomach would feel like. How his ass would be firm and full. He had no idea of what his manhood was like but he would like to think it would fill his hand, mouth and ass perfectly.

Before he knew it he was coating the side of the shower stall with cum and his knees were buckling. Shakily he finished his shower and went to bed.

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## Chapter Four

"Ryan? What brings you to social services?" Becky asked brightly.

Becky Williams was the social worker assigned to André's case.

"Hi," Ryan returned. "I came down to talk about André Thompson."

"What can I help you with?" the pretty young woman asked.

"André's been here a week. He's about ready to be sent home. I was wondering if you had a discharge plan?"

Pulling up his file on the computer, Becky replied, "Well, he's made good progress with his physical therapy and his language recovery is adequate as you know. But his self care skills are still under par. He won't be able to completely care for himself alone. I talked with both Mr. Thompson and his ex-wife. It seems they are both very adamant that he not go to live with her."

"I figured as much," said Ryan. "What other options does he have?"

"His insurance doesn't cover a stay at a rehab center. That would be ideal. His insurance would cover a day nurse and twice weekly home visits from a speech therapist, PT and OT for a month. But he would be on his own in the evenings and overnight. He said something about a dog. But I couldn't catch exactly what he was getting at."

"He has three dogs. His sons are going over to his place to care for them right now. He's worried they aren't getting enough exercise and attention," Ryan filled the social worker in on the canine situation.

"You don't think he can make it with that level of home care then?" Ryan asked.

"He would probably be alright, but it would be tough, especially taking care of the dogs at night. He needs a cane to walk and only has the full use of his left hand. I thought his sons could give him a hand. I explored that option with his ex when I thought it was only one dog. She never mentioned that there were three. She said that the constant running back and forth was taking time away from the boys' homework and sports activities. They don't live very close to one another. Sounds like it's a forty minute drive one way."

Ryan thought for a moment. An idea started to form in his mind. He resisted it.

"Well, thanks Becky," he said at last. "I'm sure something will work out for the guy."

"I'll keep working on it," Becky said, smiling at him.

Ryan left the social worker's office. As he stood at the elevator the inspiration that had presented itself moments earlier came back. This time he did not dismiss it and send it back to the confines of his unconscious. By the time he reached his office, he was allowing the thought to have free reign; he liked what he was coming up with.

*It just might work, he thought. It just might.*

\* \* \* \*

Ryan sat at his desk, waiting for André to be delivered to his office for another session. He was studying a report from the occupational therapy service concerning Mr. Thompson's retention of job skills. Ryan was pleased to see the examining therapist felt André would be able to perform basic accounting tasks, and seemed to have lost little of his knowledge of the mathematical skills required to do the job. He could use a calculator and still remembered computer programs, although the restricted use of his right hand made the process slow. The drawback to employability was his language, he still spoke in a kind of jargon, and many attempts at speech were garbled. This would definitely preclude his returning to his job as an instructor at the junior college. However, he could handle something in accounting that did not require complex linguistic skills.

Ryan looked up from the report when he heard the latch click. Mr. Thompson walked into the room, having opened the door on his own. Gwen followed close behind.

"Rynan," the man said with a happy smile. "See door. Me."

"Yes, I see. You did that all alone. Good job." Ryan was pleased with the man's progress, pleased and proud. He was also aware of a now familiar response from his lower regions whenever André was near.

When she was sure Mr. Thompson was settled, Gwen left the two men.

Seated across from his therapist, Mr. Thompson, still smiling said, "Home two die."

"Die?" Ryan offered a monitoring cue.

"Die?" André repeated. "Oh, no, no, shit. Home two day."

"Do you mean today?" the therapist continued to probe for more exact language.

"No ... ah.... Home ... ah.... home ... in two day."

"That's better." André smiled. Ryan went on, "It's good you're going home. We'll have no talk of dying."

Ryan smiled. André laughed.

"No, no," he said making a wave off gesture with his left hand.

Then he became serious. "But, but no um. No can ... shit. No can shirt, pants, dog, eat. You see?"

Ryan understood what he was trying to get across.

"You can't dress yourself, care for the dogs, or fix meals."

"Yes, yes. Thank you, Ry. You know, you know."

"Well," said the therapist. "You'll have a nurse and the O.T. will come and help you learn to take care of your daily stuff."

"Yes, But, but not night. What night? Alone. No, no.

"What will you do at night when you're alone?"

"Yes."

Ryan smiled. Here was the opportunity he was looking for. "Would you feel better if there was someone with you at night?"

"Oh, yes, yes. But?"

"But who could you find to come and stay with you?" said Ryan, interpreting André's statement.

"Yes, who?"

Ryan hesitated a second, then said, "Well, how about me?"

Ryan watched André intently to gauge his reaction to the question. He felt his anxiety rise. André first looked stunned.

That was quickly followed by expressions Ryan took for joy, then fear, and finally, resolve.

"Oh, no Ry, no."

"No?" Ryan felt disappointment.

What had he expected? André to leap across the table into his arms, cover him with kisses and shout 'My hero?'

"Look," he said calmly, attempting to reason with the man who now sat looking dejectedly at his hands on the table top, "I have a ton of personal leave coming. If I don't use it, I'll lose it."

Ryan looked for some response from his patient. There was only a slight shrug of his shoulders.

"And, you're not quite ready to be alone at night, right? You said so yourself. You need help with dressing, fixing dinner."

André nodded, still looking wary.

"And you need lots of help with Rosie, Daisy and Bob."

This caught André's attention. Ryan pressed on.

"I love dogs. I lost mine last year and I miss her. I'd love to take care of your babies ... and you." As he said the last two words he dropped his voice to a soft tone, almost a whisper.

Ryan looked into André's eyes. He could see the man was struggling with some inner emotion. Tears welled up.

Ryan continued, "Look, you don't have to make up your mind today. But the offer stands. I'd take a few days off to make sure you're settled in. Then come back to work and stay with you evenings and overnight."

With that he let the conversation of staying with André go. He returned to the therapy plan, and they started working on word recall strategies and simple sentence structure. But he could tell André was distracted, mulling over the offer. For his part, Ryan wondered what it was that made André uncomfortable about his staying with him. Had it anything to do with André's being gay ... or bi? Ryan realized he knew about André, but André didn't know that. Would it make a difference if he did? How could he reveal that he knew?

And what about the other way around? How could he let him know he was gay as well? Or had André figured out he was gay? Had he seen something in the exchange between him and Jeff? Ben seemed to think that it was pretty plain that they were attracted to each other. But then what?

After André left Ryan turned his chair to the window. He leaned back and closed his eyes. What would it be like to live with André: to finally get a chance to see him, all of him, to take him in his arms and hold him, kiss him, explore every aspect of his maleness? What would it be like open his eyes in the morning to find him already awake, waiting to make gentle morning love?

Feeling his cock hard and straining against the fabric of his slacks, Ryan let these thoughts go. He had another client in a few minutes. He couldn't greet Mrs. Carson with a raging hard-on. He chuckled and began to prepare for the therapy.

\* \* \* \*

That afternoon, Ryan went to the personnel office. He arranged to have the rest of the week off; starting the day

André was to go home. He made arrangements with Rita to have one of the other SL therapists take his clients for a couple of days. He hadn't a clue as to whether or not André would be willing to accept his offer; but he thought it would be best to be prepared. Even if André didn't accept, he figured he could use the time off. He hadn't had any in a long time, and hadn't even taken any after the break-up with Jeff. The thought of that caused him to stop and ponder why he was doing this. Was he just being a Good Samaritan, or was he hoping for sexual release with a great looking guy? Or was he stumbling down yet another path to a relationship that would wind up hurting him again?

Ryan's last appointment was with the Daniels boy who was still receiving in-room therapy. He was on André's floor, and Ryan would stop by and see the man before he checked out for the day. As he walked down the hall toward Jonas' room, he heard a loud "Shit" come from André's. He stuck his head in the doorway. André was sitting in a chair next to his bed. Becky, the social worker, was in the room with him. She looked concerned.

"Hi," Ryan said pleasantly as he stepped into the room.  
"What's going on?"

"Ry, Ry, you tell. Tell you come."

Ryan was confused. He looked at Becky.

"I was telling Mr. Thompson that he may have to stay awhile longer since we couldn't find anyone to be with him evenings and—"

"Ry, Ry tell you come." Mr. Thompson pointed to Becky.

"And he started saying your name. Am I missing something here?"

Realization swept over Ryan. The threat of not being able to go home as planned somehow pushed André in the direction of accepting Ryan's offer; outweighing any objections he had.

"I said I'd stay with André for awhile," Ryan said, smiling at the man in the chair. "I guess he's decided to take me up on the offer."

André responded with a vigorous nodding of his head in Becky's direction.

"See, see Ry, Ry," he said. Then he looked at Ryan. "Okay, Ry?"

"Yes, its okay, André, definitely okay."

"Well, I guess that's settled, then." Becky said. "I'll finish making the arrangements for the visiting nurse, O.T. and P.T. services. I guess I won't add speech therapy to the list as you're going to be there with him."

"Yep, I am," said Ryan, still smiling in André's direction.

Becky said goodbye and left.

Ryan walked over to André and sat on the bed facing him. "So, you changed your mind?"

"Yes," André said. However, his smile was weak. "But not know." He shook his head.

"I know something is bothering you about this arrangement. I hope we can work out whatever it is. I'm more than happy to help you. It'll be fine."

André bit his lower lip and cocked his head to one side, eyes down. Ryan squeezed André's shoulder and left for his

therapy session with Jonas. He was happy that André had accepted his offer. At the same time he wondered what it was that made him hesitant. They would find out and work through it, whatever it was.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning Ryan was in his office getting things set up for his replacement. He had slept, but not soundly. He continued the mental exercises that had him tossing and turning most of the night. It had all started out with his thinking about what might be causing André to be hesitant about him staying with him. That had led to Ryan questioning his motives for wanting to serve the man in this way.

Altruistically, he wanted to make sure someone he cared about was going to be safe and continue to recover from the condition that had brought him to the hospital. But was that his only motive? If he were to be honest: no. He wanted to spend more time with Mr. André Thompson. That was clear. Did he want to have a relationship with the man? Yes, he thought so. Was he ready for a relationship so soon after Jeff? Did André want a relationship? Ben, the nursing assistant sure thought so, and he lost no chance of letting Ryan know that the two of them would be so hot together. That thought brought Ryan to the next. Were his intentions sexual? Professionally he chided himself for thinking that way. Personally he couldn't deny he did have a strong physical attraction to the man. He had engaged in those sexual jack-off fantasies all week. On it went as Ryan tossed, dozed, checked the clock and dozed again.

Finally, he gave up, showered and headed for the hospital over an hour early.

He sat at his desk, making notes on the patients he would be turning over to one of the other therapists while he was gone. He would check with Rita to see who that would be, and go over the notes with them. At 8:00 he got up and went out to the front desk to check in.

"Ryan? I didn't know you were here. Well, there goes my record of being the first one in for the last 100 years," Rita said with a laugh. "I just took a call for you from Old Man Peters' office. I would have transferred if I'd have known you were in. But here's the note."

"Good morning, Rita," Ryan said, while reading the paper he had been given. "The note says Peters wants to see me. Do you know why?"

Dr Peters was the head of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation. He was a portly older doctor and not known for his sense of humor, to put it mildly. The staff generally dreaded a summons to his office.

"No clue," the receptionist replied to Ryan's question. "You have a free hour at ten. I told them you would be up then. That okay with you?"

Ryan shrugged. "Yeah, that's okay." He had planned to go to see André in his room and talk about arrangements for the home coming, but that could wait until their therapy session in the afternoon.

"Here are the notes for whoever is going to stand in for me while I'm gone."

"That'll be Maggie. She has the lowest case load right now," Rita said.

"That's fine. Tell her I'll get in touch and go over the plans."

Ryan returned to his office to prepare for his first client of the day, wondering what old doc Peters wanted.

\* \* \* \*

"Come in, Ryan," Dr. Peters said, waving in the general direction of his desk.

The director barely looked up as the therapist entered.

"Thank you," Ryan said.

He waited while his boss continued to study the papers in front of him. Not knowing exactly what to do, he looked around and saw a chair. Not wishing to stand waiting for Peters to acknowledge him, he decided to sit down.

Dr. Peters was bald and, Ryan guessed, around sixty. For a doctor of physical rehab, he didn't seem to have much respect for his body. His belly hung over his belt and the joke around the clinic was when they thought he would deliver. His tie was always crooked and his shirts always seemed to have the last button above the belt undone revealing a small triangle of hairy stomach. His eyes were small and his cheeks blotchy. *Not exactly a gay man's choice as wallpaper for the computer desktop.*

Ryan looked around the office at the plaques, framed degrees and awards that hung on the walls. He guessed, despite the man's reputation for being a hard nosed old bastard, he had had a commendable career as a physician.

He had never been called to Peters' office before. The only time he had been here was at his hiring interview several years before. He had heard stories of others on the staff that had been called in for one reason or another. They were not pretty ones.

Eventually Dr. Peters looked up. At first he seemed surprised to see someone sitting in front of his desk.

"Oh yes, Ryan," he said. "Thank you for coming in."

"Sure," Ryan replied.

Peters got right to the point of the meeting. "I understand you are taking the rest of this week off?"

"Yes."

"And I have heard that you are going to stay with one of our patients that will be discharged?"

"Yes," Ryan said again, wondering why his reasons for taking personal leave were being shared with anyone.

"I highly recommend that you reconsider your decision to do that."

"Sir?"

"I said I highly recommend that you—"

"I heard you," said Ryan, realizing he had just cut his boss off in mid sentence, letting his irritation get the best of him. "I thought the whole intent of personal leave was to take care of private business? It's not subject to approval from the administration."

Dr. Peters' reaction let Ryan know he was on thin ice. The man bent forward in his chair, his distended belly creased by the edge of the desk. He leaned on his elbows, his hands folded. He raised his eyebrows as he spoke.

"When that 'private business' involves the personal life of a patient and compromises the professional ethics of the hospital, it becomes a subject of approval from the administration."

"Excuse me, Dr. Peters?"

"Ryan, it is no secret that you and Jeff Anderson were ... shall we say ... involved."

Ryan felt his anger rising. The implication that he was going home with André to become, as Peters put it, involved, was offensive. However, it put his whole personal struggle with his motivation for helping the man into confusion. At the same time, who was this pompous fat old bastard to be judging him for his lifestyle and personal motives? He fought for control.

"Yes, Jeff and I were friends," Ryan said as calmly as he could. "But that has nothing to do with Mr. Thompson's need for someone to take care of him and his dogs. I assume since you know so much about my plans, you have also read the social service report, indicating he needs support twenty-four hours a day in order to insure a successful recovery?"

Peters took a deep menacing breath, but before he could respond, Ryan continued. "I felt I could offer assistance with that need, as he doesn't have the means to provide that level of support for himself."

The doctor took another breath and attempted to speak, but once more Ryan forged ahead. "The insinuation that I would be doing this for any reason other than my desire to help a fellow human being in need, is highly offensive to me."

In spite of his words, Ryan knew deep in his heart there were other reasons for going home with André, but he also felt the hospital administration was out of line to suggest censure of any kind as to his personal life.

Dr. Peters didn't respond immediately. Ryan imagined this might be a new experience for him: someone standing up to him, rather than cowering before him or dissolving into tears. He waited to hear what was coming next. After a while, when the older man didn't respond, Ryan grew uncomfortable.

Finally, Dr. Peters said, "You would make a good candidate for the legislature with your oratory skills, Mr. Phillips."

"Thank you," Ryan replied, wondering what the shift from his first name to his surname meant.

"You are right, of course. What you do on your own time is your business, not mine. However, any situation that would reflect negatively on the hospital—"

"Would we be having this conversation if one of the female nurses was hired to be Mr. Thompson's night nurse, or if you had never heard of my so-called 'involvement' with Mr. Anderson?"

The doctor didn't respond.

"I didn't think so," said Ryan. He was surprising himself at his assertiveness.

Apparently not knowing where to go next, Dr. Peters said, "Well, I just wanted you to be clear on where the hospital stood on activities that would reflect negatively on the institution and the staff."

*Bigot*, Ryan thought.

"That will be all. Thank you for coming in."

Ryan stood, said goodbye and left the man to shuffle the papers on his desk.

*What a waste of time,* he thought as he waited for the elevator. Yet, as the cab took him back to his floor, he realized the interview had done one thing for him. Although he defended his reasons for helping André as being completely professional, he came to see there was more to his desire to help than he had been willing to admit. He did want to explore the possibility of some sort of relationship. The question now was ... how would André react to that?

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## Chapter Five

Ryan's Focus hatchback pulled up to the curb in front of a modest frame house on a quiet street on the old west side of town. It was early afternoon. Ryan had been told by the ex-Mrs. Thompson that André had purchased the house as a fixer-upper before the divorce. He had had it completely remodeled and furnished. It had been on the market as a rental for university students when the marriage broke up. André and the dogs had taken up residency instead.

"Yes, yes, here, here, Ry," André sang out as the car came to a stop. Ryan opened the door of the driver's side and went around to help André. He could hear the dogs barking excitedly. The barks were not of an aggressive, warning nature, but were rather joyous. Recognition that their master had come home. Ryan was concerned that André might be overwhelmed by their enthusiasm to greet the man they had missed for the past several days. He was still not completely steady on his feet.

"What about the dogs?" he asked as he helped André to exit the car.

"Yes, yes, fine, okay, Ry, okay," he said, impatiently.

André seemed confident, so Ryan stayed beside him as he made his way up the walk to the five steps that led to a half-wall porch that covered the entire front of the small house. Ryan had to assist him a bit navigating the stairs, as there was no railing; just a two level wall on either side of the steps. He made a mental note to have a rail installed.

André stopped outside the door. Ryan could hear the dogs on the other side. They were whining and boofing. He could imagine them writhing in excited anticipation. He hoped André knew what he was doing. Ryan took the key that he had been given at the hospital from his pocket, pulled the screen door open and inserted it in the lock.

André raised his hand holding the tripod cane, indicating Ryan should wait. He moved in front of Ryan and took a deep breath. "Okay," he said and gestured to the door.

Ryan reached around him and pushed the door open.

André raised his hand again and said, "Wait, sick, ah ... sit."

Ryan watched in amazement as all three of the obviously deliriously happy hounds, sat down. Although they were trembling with excitement, and polishing the hard wood floor of the entry with furiously wagging tails, they obeyed their master impeccably.

"Bat ... bat ... No ... back, back," came the next command.

Again all three obeyed as one. They backed up and sat down once more. André made his way to the couch, which was to the left of the door and in front of three frame windows. Once he sat, he patted the cushions next to him and said, "Come."

He was immediately inundated with canine love. The dogs jumped on the couch and covered him with doggie kisses. One was on his left, another on his right and the third between his legs, on his lap with hind feet on the floor. Ryan shook his head and smiled, then saw tears well in André's

eyes as he buried his face in the soft fur that surrounded him. He sobbed quietly.

After a few minutes, André looked up at Ryan, who still stood in the doorway.

"My babies," he said with a smile, eyes still glistening with tears.

"Yes," said Ryan. "Your babies."

Indicating the largest dog, a cream-colored male on his left, André said, "Bob."

Bob responded to his name by renewing his cleansing of André's cheek. The dog on his right also renewed her efforts.

While Bob looked like he was a lab mixed with something else, she was definitely a yellow lab, and intent on not being outdone in giving André the affection she felt he deserved.

"Daisy," he said.

Ryan smiled.

The remaining member of the crew had dropped down to the floor and was sitting between André's feet. He leaned forward and put his hand under her chin and kissed her nose. She in turn licked his cheeks and then lay down and rolled on her back. With some difficulty, André bent forward and scratched her tummy.

Looking sideways at Ryan, he said, "Rosie."

Ryan could see why that name had been chosen. Rosie was a reddish brown and the smallest of the three. Her breeding was completely undeterminable. She had small pointed ears, a kind of shepherd face, and a tail that curled up and around like that of a scorpion. Ryan thought she was one of the cutest little mutts he had ever seen.

"Come," André said, patting the sofa next to him.

Ryan sat with Daisy between him and André. She turned to him and offered him kisses.

Bob jumped down, walked over and pushed his big nose between Ryan's legs, his tail wagging furiously. Rosie jumped up on Ryan's lap and turned herself over so he was holding her in the crook of his arm like a baby. He bent his head forward and she licked his ear.

Looking toward André, he smiled. "Quite a homecoming."

"Well comb home, Ry," André said.

Ryan didn't know what to say.

\* \* \* \*

Later, Ryan stood on the small back porch and watched as André and his brood played in the large fenced yard. It was landscaped with attractive and well placed shrubs and beds of flowers. The fall foliage was at peak, and the burning bushes at the side of the one car garage were bright red, while the Forsythia leaves along the fence were yellow. The two maples in the middle of the yard were orange.

Once Ryan was sure that André could manage, he went in to explore the house to see what problems might arise in a home built in the early twentieth century. André had done a wonderful job of remodeling and refurbishing. The original floor plan had been preserved. The dark, rich mahogany wood moldings and hard wood floors had been retained. However, despite its charm, it was not designed for someone with physical limitations.

The first floor comprised the living room in front, with a dining room and small kitchen in the rear. All three small bedrooms, and the only bath, were up the steep stairway to the right of the front door. There were eight narrow steps to a landing, then a left turn and six more to a rectangular hallway, off of which was the bathroom and the three bedrooms. Navigating the stairs could prove a problem.

The bathroom could also present difficulties. It was very small. André had preserved the charm of the early twentieth century lavatory. The floor was the original hexagon pattern of white tiles encircling a single blue tile.

The high sided, eagle-claw foot tub would be difficult for André to get into. He had had it re-plumbed so a shower had been added, which came out of the ceiling over the tub. An oval shower rod had been installed so the curtain would keep the spray in the tub.

The stool was next to a window. Under the window was a radiator. The pedestal sink looked like it could be the original; as did the tub. It too had been fitted with new fixtures. A small shelf above the sink was the only surface on which to place toiletries. A tiny medicine cabinet was mounted above the shelf.

Both the stairway and the layout of the bathroom concerned Ryan. He made a mental note to speak with the O.T., P.T., and nurse about how to make the situation work for his patient. *Patient?*

Was André still his patient?

"Ry? Ry? Where Ry?" André's voice came up the stairs. Followed by the galumph of paws on the carpeted steps.

All three canines appeared at the top of the stairs, in search of their master's quarry.

"Up here, André," Ryan called as he made his way through the search party, scratching ears and stroking backs as he went. "What do you need?"

"Batmat," came the reply.

"Batmat?" Ryan asked as he came down the steps.

"No, no ... um ... bat room."

"Okay, I'm right behind you," Ryan said, maneuvering around André as he stood at the bottom of the stairs.

André had improved enough that he had some flexion in his right leg, but his right arm still was pretty weak and semi-paralyzed. He had worked on stair climbing in the physical therapy clinic, but he still needed to take one stair at a time. Ryan positioned himself behind him as he had seen the P.T. do.

André used his tripod to steady himself on the step. Ryan placed both hands on André's hips. He immediately felt warmth spread through his body; he shook it off.

*Stop perving on the man!*

It was slow going. At the P.T. clinic there were only four steps to practice on. Here there were fourteen, and they were narrow. However, André did a good job, navigating the climb well.

At the top of the stairs, he turned to Ryan and said, "Yes? Yes?"

"Yes, you did great. Good man."

André moved toward the bathroom. Ryan followed.

"You need help in there?" he asked hesitantly.

"No. No," came the reply.

André went into the room and closed the door. Ryan waited outside. He heard sounds of piss hitting the bowl, the toilet flushing and water running in the sink. It took awhile for the door to open. When it did, Ryan could see André was frustrated.

"Ry?" he said indicating he couldn't get the top button on his pants done. His sweatshirt was pulled up and his shirt and undershirt were untucked.

"You're a mess," Ryan chuckled.

André nodded with a small smile.

Ryan helped him pull his sweat shirt off over his head. André undid his belt, unzipped his fly and the two worked on getting his shirts tucked in. He zipped up the fly and looked at Ryan. Once again the warmth flowed over Ryan as he touched André while he re-buttoned the man's pants.

Clothing problem solved, André turned and pointed into the bedroom behind him.

"You, Ry."

"That's my room?" Ryan asked.

André smiled and nodded. He walked to the other side of the landing.

A medium-sized bedroom had been set up as a home office. Pointing again he said, "Comput ... ah computer. Okay, you."

"Thanks," said Ryan understanding that André was offering him use of the computer.

Continuing the tour, he went to the last bedroom. All the rooms were small in this turn of the twentieth-century home.

But this one seemed even smaller as a huge king size bed almost filled the floor space.

"Dogs, me," André said with a big smile.

"Your dogs sleep with you?"

"Yes, yes."

*Lucky dogs*, thought Ryan.

"Me nap now, okay?"

"Sure. I'll bring our stuff in and get settled. You sleep as long as you like."

"Thank you, Ry. You good fiend. Oh, no, no, friend."

Ryan smiled. "You're a good friend, too, André and you're doing well."

"Hope," said the man. He turned and walked into the room. The dogs followed him. Ryan watched as they waited for André to get situated on the bed; then arranged themselves around him.

*Wonder if there's gonna be room for one more?* Ryan thought wistfully; then admonished himself again.

\* \* \* \*

While André slept, Ryan brought in their gear from the car. André had very little, as he had been rushed to the hospital by ambulance, and had worn mainly hospital issue while there. Ryan had a suitcase and personal items. He brought both upstairs.

He looked in on the sleeping André. The dogs raised their heads and then lay back down. Ryan pulled the door partially shut to minimize any disturbance he might cause, and then went into his bedroom and unpacked.

His room seemed to be the smallest of the three. It had an attractive brass bed, chiffarobe, and a small dresser with mirror. Small, but comfortable and cozy were Ryan's assessments.

He went then to the bathroom, taking both his and André's toilet articles with him. The challenge here proved to be a bit more formidable, as there was only the one small shelf under the medicine cabinet. The cabinet itself was small, and André had several things on the shelves already.

*What did folks do for storage back then, for God's sake?*  
Ryan mused.

In the end, he decided to put only André's articles in the bathroom. He would keep his on the dresser in his room and transport them when necessary.

These tasks completed, he went back downstairs to check out the food situation in the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator. It was nearly empty, save for mustard, ketchup, a corked bottle of merlot, margarine, and salad dressings.

*Looks like someone cleaned out the perishables for him.*

Thinking for a moment he might run to the grocery nearby while André slept, he decided to be safe and stay, so if André woke up, he wouldn't have an accident trying to come down stairs.

*We can order pizza or something for dinner.*

Walking back into the living room, admiring André's or someone's taste in furnishings, he noticed a door next to the stairway.

*Basement?*

He opened the door, found the light switch and descended the very steep, narrow steps. The basement was cool, damp feeling and sort of musty as they often are in old homes.

He found the light at the bottom of the stairs and pulled the string to turn it on. There before him, to his surprise, was a well equipped work out area: home gym, free weights and bench, treadmill and stationary bike. A small TV sat on a table and under that was a dehumidifier.

*Pretty nice set-up. At least I won't go to seed while I'm here.*

Ryan then checked out the utility area where the furnace and water heater were kept. He heard a voice calling his name. Realizing it must be André, he hurriedly came up the steps, through the kitchen and into the living room.

"I'm coming, André," he called.

He climbed the stairs to the first landing. André and his three constant companions were standing at the top of the second set of steps.

"You're up. Have a good nap?"

"Yes, yes good," André replied and started down the stairs. He made the first two and then tripped on the third, falling forward into Ryan's arms.

Ryan staggered backward against the wall, holding André tightly around the waist. Their chests pressed against each other and their faces were centimeters apart. They stood that way for several seconds, staring into each other's eyes. Ryan had an almost uncontrollable urge to cross the infinitesimal distance between their lips and kiss him. But before he could do so, André broke the chance embrace and stood up.

He stared at Ryan. A frightened look came into his eyes. Ryan knew it was not the fall that had prompted that look.

"I ... I ... sorry, Ry ... I...."

What was he sorry for? Ryan wondered: falling or something else? Something that Ryan knew he had no reason to be sorry for.

"It's okay. We're both fine. No harm, no foul."

As Ryan helped André down the rest of the staircase, he wondered if he should have taken that moment to reveal he knew André's secret.

\* \* \* \*

That evening, after a dinner of pizza, breadsticks and salad, the men sat on the couch watching the flat screen TV that hung on the opposite wall. West Virginia was playing Auburn. What Ryan knew about football could be inscribed on the head of a pin, although he could readily appreciate the muscular male bodies displayed before him, especially those fantastic buns in those tight pants. André, however, was a connoisseur. He couldn't tell Ryan what he was thinking in words, but his body language and spontaneous utterances left no question of his appreciation or disgust regarding what was happening on the screen.

Ryan had found some microwavable pop corn; they sat each with a bowl, legs propped on the deep rich cherry wood coffee table. The dogs were, of course, part of the scene as well. Bob was curled up on the love seat on the side wall. Rosie was on André's left and Daisy on his right, between him and Ryan. Both of the girls had their heads on André's lap.

Once more, as had happened several times that day, Ryan envied their position in André's life.

The game drew to a close with West Virginia the victor. This seemed to please André. As André took his legs off the coffee table and Ryan stood, the canine members of the group all lined up on the opposite side of the table, looking expectant.

"Time to ... talk. No no. Time to walk."

Upon hearing the word walk the decorum that had prevailed evaporated and three writhing, tail-wagging bodies bounded around the room.

"André, are you sure?"

"Yes, yes," he said making his way to the kitchen with the jubilant pack frolicking around him.

Ryan was concerned, but he saw, even though the crew was decidedly excited, they never impeded their owner in any way.

André walked to the back door. There, hanging in a row on hooks, were three leashes and a nail apron. André took one leash off its hook and turned to the dogs, who now sat with tails working feverishly.

"Bob," he said.

Bob stepped forward. With his good hand, André clipped his leash to his collar. He did the same for Daisy. Rosie, however, chose to roll over on her back and André handed the leash to Ryan, who did the honors.

André then handed Ryan the nail pouch. On the left side were plastic bags, on the right small doggie treats.

"Here, you," André said, making a gesture around his waist.

Ryan tied the pouch. André handed him Bob's lead to add to Rosie's, and kept Daisy's for himself.

They made their way out the back door, down the steps, around the side of the house and out the gate. Despite the furious display that the pack had put on at the mention of the word walk, they were now the picture of perfect ladies and gentleman. They walked peacefully at the sides of the men, with only an occasional lunge or sudden stop as they encountered some delicious scent which was beyond the capability of human olfactory sensitivity to appreciate.

Even though the dogs were being exceptionally good about walking with loose leashes, their occasional abrupt sojourns into aroma heaven caused André to lose his balance. Ryan decided to offer his help and took André's weaker right arm in his. They continued their walk arm in arm. After twenty minutes, they returned to the house.

Once inside, André turned to Ryan. His eyes were shining. "Good be home," he said. "Thank you, Ry."

\* \* \* \*

Later that night, the men and dogs were on the second floor, getting ready for bed. André came out of the bathroom in his sweats with no shirt. Ryan, toothbrush in hand, was on his way in. He was also bare-chested. They both froze. Ryan tried not to stare. André had obviously not been away from his workouts long. His muscular torso covered with thick salt

and pepper hair caused Ryan's groin to tighten. He redirected his gaze to André's face. He saw André look away as well.

After an awkward moment, André put his hand on Ryan's shoulder. He didn't say anything. He didn't have to. Ryan knew the man appreciated all that he was doing for him. He resisted the urge to pull André into a flesh to flesh embrace. Instead he just placed his hand over André's.

"Good night," he said. "Sleep well."

"You do too."

"Call me if you need anything."

André nodded.

They parted company. Ryan watched the man, whom he was coming to care for much more than he had anticipated, make his way to bed with his three sleep mates. Smiling, he turned and walked into the bathroom.

Finished with his nightly routine, he lay in bed. Their first day together had been a good one. It felt good to be here with André. It felt good to be close to him, to be able to touch him. He thought this would be how it would feel to live with André. He had never lived with Jeff, or anyone, for that matter. He had never been willing to go that far. But this seemed different somehow.

Where would this go? He didn't know how to let André know what he had discovered, or how to let him know he was of the same mind. As he lay contemplating this hurdle, he began to review scenes from the day. What came to the fore were the moments of closeness, both physical and emotional. Without thinking, his hand slipped below the waistband of his sweats. He was hard.

Ryan began a slow stroking motion. He pictured the scene that had just transpired in the hallway. This time however, he and André did not avert their eyes. This time they allowed themselves the indulgence of visually inspecting each other's bodies. Ryan remembered how André's muscular chest tapered off to a narrow waist. How the thick rug of hair disappeared into the waistband of the sweats that now, in his mind, were being stretched as the bulge he had briefly observed began to expand as André became aroused.

In his fantasy they did not just say good night and part company. The brief contact their hands had made was transformed into a prolonged embrace during which Ryan imagined he could feel the hard erection of his soon-to-be sex partner pressing firmly against his own.

He was close to climax. He didn't want this to end just yet. He slowed his stimulation and took several deep breaths.

Next he imagined André taking him by the hand and leading him to his bed. André sat on the edge and, as Ryan stood before him, pulled his sweats to his knees. He reached around with one hand and massaged his ass while with the other he fondled Ryan's cock and balls.

Ryan was pumping faster and harder now. He imagined his fist to be André engulfing him, sucking him. His breathing was becoming irregular; he was making muffled moaning sounds, his legs involuntarily twitched. He felt that telltale tingle in the base of his spine, he was going to cum. In seconds, with an image of André's handsome face in his mind, he achieved release. He lay there rubbing his warm cum into his pubic hair

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and abdomen, whispering André's name. Soon after, he fell asleep.

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## Chapter Six

"Ry ... Ry."

Ryan heard André calling his name from what seemed like a long distance away.

"Ry ... Ry." The call came again: this time closer.

Ryan opened his eyes and found he was face to face with three wet black noses resting on the side of his bed. He raised up on one elbow and scratched the furry heads each in turn. As he did so, he looked toward the doorway to find André leaning against the jam, smiling.

"Dogs need out," he said.

At the word 'out', the three stood back with tails wagging furiously. It seemed they understood Ryan was assigned to the task of morning turn out.

Ryan threw the covers back and swung his legs off the bed and stood. Only then did he realize his morning erection was prominently displayed under the stretched fabric of his sweats.

He glanced at André. The display was not lost on the man, although Ryan couldn't read his expression. Deciding to take matters into his own hands, literally, he reached inside the sweats and re-arranged himself.

"Sorry about that," he said.

André didn't respond.

"Uh ... let me go to the john and I'll take them out," he said, walking past the man in the doorway and heading for the bathroom. As André turned sideways to let him past, the

hairs on both their chests lightly brushed. Ryan stopped. They looked at each other for an instant. Ryan continued to the john and closed the door.

The brief tactile encounter made it difficult for Ryan to get his cock to deflate enough to piss. He let out a deep breath and stared at the ceiling, reciting the litany of the saints from the prayers of the faithful.

*I have to find a way to let him know. I can't keep embarrassing him.*

After finally completing the act, Ryan came out of the bathroom. André had pulled on his sweatshirt.

*Definitely need to find a way,* Ryan thought again.

Ryan moved to the stairway and watched as the dogs descended before him, their tails and butts wagging on the stairs. When he got to the bottom they were seated in a row with a 'What took you so long?' expression on their faces. Then they took off for the back door.

Ryan stood on the small back porch in the pale early morning light. He watched the three scamper around the yard, trying to find the absolute best place to make their morning deposit. He only lingered a moment. The chill October air raised goose bumps and caused his nipples to harden under his arms that were crossed over his chest.

Shivering, he left them to their business and returned to the kitchen. He glanced at the clock on his way through: 6:45. The day nurse was to arrive at 7:30 and, although Friday was not their usual day, both the physical therapist and the O.T. were coming to check out the house and see what might need to be done to make it work for André. The

therapists would be coming on alternate days starting the following week.

As Ryan mounted the stairs, he thought about breakfast.

"André?" he called through the bathroom door when he didn't find the man in either his room or at the computer.

"Yes, Ry," said André.

"As soon as your done, I'm gonna run to the corner dairy to get us some coffee, juice and bagels for breakfast. That okay with you?"

"Yes," came the response.

Ryan then went into his room and got dressed. He figured he could shave and shower later. Just as he was finishing, André came out of the bathroom. He was dressed in his jeans and sweatshirt. He seemed a bit agitated.

"Need wash, shave. But...."

"The O.T. will show us how to handle that when she comes later. Don't worry. It'll work out."

André didn't seem convinced. But he didn't say anything more. He just walked to his room, beckoning Ryan to follow him.

When they were in the room, André sat on the bed and pointed to his shoes. The laces were untied.

"Sorry, Ry. Please?"

"Sure," Ryan replied, kneeling down between André's legs to do the honors.

On his knees in that suggestive position, he felt his dick react. He finished the job, avoiding André's eyes.

"There you go," he said standing up and giving André a hand to do the same.

"Thank you, Ry." The urge to pull André into a hug was strong.

Ryan helped André down the stairs, once again being more aware of his physical presence than he was comfortable with, at least for now. He brought the dogs in, fed them at André's direction, and left him on the couch watching the morning news with all three draped on his lap or the furniture.

"The nurse will be here in a bit," he reminded André as he pulled the door shut behind him. Then Ryan stuck his head back in and asked, "Regular or decaf?"

André made a face. "Doctor say, decaf."

"Doctor's orders, huh? Okay, decaf it is."

Feeling the need of exercise, Ryan jogged the short three blocks to Washington Street Dairy. Although his apartment was on the other side of town, near University Hospital, he was well aware of the small dairy and convenience store. They were famous for their enormous hand dipped ice cream cones and their home made doughnuts.

*Mmm, doughnuts. Scratch the bagels.*

Walking back from the dairy with his purchases, he mused about the good feelings the morning had engendered. He was becoming more and more enamored of the idea of co-habitation ... especially with André. He reiterated his resolve to find a way to let André know that they were of the same mind when it came to their orientation.

*The sooner the better.*

When he approached the house, he saw a car parked in the drive. He assumed it belonged to the visiting nurse. He

was glad he had thought ahead and gotten enough coffee, juice and doughnuts for three.

Entering the house, he found André on the couch with a thermometer in his mouth, a blood pressure cuff on his arm and a look of exasperation on his face. A portly middle-aged woman sat next to him taking his pulse. She looked up as Ryan entered the room.

"And you are Ryan, I suppose," she said.

Taken somewhat aback by the manner in which he was greeted, he responded, "I suppose you're right. Nice to meet you ... ah...."

"Maybelle, Maybelle Sietz. I'm Mr. Thompson's day nurse. You may call me Nurse Sietz."

*Well, duh. I didn't think you were the dog catcher.* With that thought, he said, "Where are the dogs?"

"Outside, where they belong. Can't have the filthy beasts bringing their germs in and getting them all over our patient, can we." She addressed the last sentence to André, who, Ryan could see, was seething, his face turning red.

Misreading the reason for André's expression, Maybelle said, "Oh, sorry, Dear," and took the thermometer out of his mouth. "Ah good, normal."

"My dogs not dirty," he said, emphatically.

"Of course they are, Dear. All dogs are."

Ryan, hating to make a hasty judgment, but doing so anyway, repressed the urge to call her a name that would demean the dogs and changed the subject.

"I have breakfast: coffee, o.j. and fresh Washington Street doughnuts."

André smiled. "Yum."

Maybelle however said, "Hardly what I'd call a healthy meal for a sick man. And he shouldn't be drinking coffee."

"Doctor said, yes," André said loudly.

"The doctor said he could have decaf, and we don't have much in the house for breakfast. I was planning on grocery shopping this morning. I ... uh ... got you a coffee and doughnut, too."

"I never drink coffee," Maybelle announced regally. "Only herbal teas. And I wouldn't put all that cholesterol into my system," she said as she removed the blood pressure cuff from André's arm.

"Suit yourself," Ryan said testily, beginning to lose his temper. "I'll put 'herbal tea' on the shopping list." He emphasized *herbal tea* in as sarcastic a way as he could.

He went to the dining room table and placed the coffee, juice and bag of doughnuts there. André made his way to the table and sat down. Maybelle sat with them, having taken out a pad of paper and pen from her bag.

"I will make out a list of foods that should be purchased, so we can make sure our patient gets his proper nutrition."

André and Ryan made eye contact. Ryan could tell they were in mutual agreement about Maybelle Sietz.

After eating, Ryan cleared the table and put the bag of remaining doughnuts on the counter in the kitchen. The dogs were at the back door. He let them in. Maybelle started to protest, and as she did, André began his counter argument as the three made the rounds of the dining room, sniffing out any crumbs that may have escaped to the floor.

"Maybelle," Ryan said.

"Nurse Sietz if you don't mind," she responded.

*Oh brother!*

Taking a steadying breath, he started again. "Nurse Sietz, could I have a word with you?" He turned and walked to the kitchen. She followed. André got up and took the dogs to the living room.

He spoke in a low voice. "Look, André has had a very emotional couple of months. He has been through a divorce and now this medical problem. His dogs are his solace right now. So cut him some slack, please."

Nurse Sietz didn't respond. She gave a small snort through her nose, raised an eyebrow and walked out of the kitchen. Ryan shrugged his shoulders and followed after her. She took a position on the love seat, opened a fabric bag, took out some knitting and started to click-clack away. André looked up at Ryan, who responded with a covert thumbs-up.

Just then, the dogs got up and walked to the door, sensing before the humans could that someone was about to knock. The knock came. Each of the dogs gave a single bark and came to André, who rewarded them with a pat. Ryan opened the door.

"Hi, I'm Jim, Jim Bailey, Mr. T's P.T."

Even in his jacket, Ryan could see the handsome, dark haired young man with the warm winning smile had the build of a gymnast.

*Damn!*

\* \* \* \*

Ryan stood in a long line at Kroger's that stretched into the aisle. Angry at the delay and impatient to be off, he drummed his fingers on the push bar of his grocery cart. *The day before a big football game, all the tailgaters are out stocking up and the cheap jerks open one check out. Idiots.*

He sighed deeply and shifted his weight. As he moved into the checkout lane, he glanced at the magazines on the rack: *Health and Fitness.*

*Shit!*

There on the cover was some muscle guy that looked remarkably like Jim the physical therapist, who was at home right now and probably had his hands all over André.

*Where did that come from?*

Yes, Jim was built. Ryan's initial assessment was confirmed when Jim entered the house and took off his jacket. He wore a tight fitting tee, making him look more like a personal trainer than a P.T. Yeah, the tee had the medical services logo on it, but still, he could have worn a less revealing shirt. His well defined pecs, with the prominent nips, the biceps, the flat stomach, to say nothing of the nicely proportioned ass, were all out for inspection. Ryan noticed the display was not lost on André.

The line inched forward.

*Get a grip, Phillips. Where is this jealousy coming from? Doesn't jealousy usually come with some level of commitment? Of feelings?*

Ryan couldn't answer his own questions. He only knew he was feeling very protective and possessive of a man who had

no clue that Ryan was ... what? Was falling for him? He shook the thought off as he reached the cashier.

Driving back to the house, his thoughts re-emerged. What was he feeling for André? He found him very attractive. He liked his pluck, his determination to recover from his cerebral insult. His sense of humor pleased him. He was enjoying his brief sojourn into the routine of domestic life. Yes, he had to admit it. He more and more wanted something to work out between them. But, what the nature of that something was, he didn't know ... yet.

He pulled up in front of the house. André and Jim were on the porch, working on navigating the stairs. Sure enough, Jim had one hand on André's bicep and the other was holding on to his belt as he helped the man to balance as he descended the steps.

*Strictly professional*, Ryan told himself. *Strictly professional*.

Seeing Ryan, André's face brightened into a smile.

"See, Ry, Ry. I can ... I can."

Ryan nodded as he walked up and clapped André on his shoulder.

"He's doing really well," Jim said. "He's a fighter all right."

"That he is," Ryan agreed.

"We probably should get a safe rail for these steps, though," Jim suggested.

"That's what I was thinking," Ryan replied.

Ryan walked back to the car.

"Can I give you a hand with the bags?" Jim asked as Ryan popped the hatch and started lifting the groceries.

"No, I can manage. You keep on working. I'll call you guys when lunch is ready."

"I can't stay. I have another patient to see, but thanks," Jim said.

"Okay," Ryan replied, silently thanking the fates.

After several trips to the curb, Ryan put the last of the grocery bags on the counter and floor of the small kitchen. He noticed the sack in which the doughnuts had been earlier. It was empty. He looked back into the living room where Maybelle sat knitting. Were those crumbs on her navy blue sweater? Ryan laughed softly to himself.

\* \* \* \*

Friday night found the men and dogs in the living room, watching another football game. Ryan had no idea football was on the tube so frequently. They would also be watching a game the next day, too. Or, he supposed, several games, as there would be multiple broadcasts on Saturday. André's sons would be joining them. Connor had called that afternoon and said he and Todd wanted to see their dad. So the plan to spend the afternoon with football was hatched. He hoped he could develop more of an interest in the sport than just ogling the beautiful butts in tight pants.

That night's snack was ice cream: hand packed ice cream from the Wellington Street Dairy. Ryan had picked up a quart of cookie dough earlier while running an errand for the occupational therapist.

He and André sat next to each other on the couch. There was light contact between them, and Ryan was glad he had a

large bowl of cold ice cream to hide his tumescent reaction to the close proximity.

Bob and Daisy were lying on the floor. Rosie had positioned herself between Ryan's legs, and watched his every move as he raised the spoon from the bowl to his mouth.

"Beggar!" André said, and then chuckled. Rosie dropped her head and looked ashamed.

"Go. Lay down," André commanded. Rosie reluctantly obeyed, but she kept her eye on the bowl and spoon.

As they sat and continued to consume their evening treat, Ryan reviewed the day. Maybelle was a pain. Jim was a hunk and that bothered Ryan more than he wanted it to. But what was really on his mind was Carla, the O.T., who had visited after lunch. She had inspected the house and decided that, with the addition of a couple of railings to make stair climbing safer, the only other modification needed was in the bathroom.

The three of them were in the small second floor lavatory. Maybelle stood in the doorway. The dogs were on the floor of the hallway. Ryan could tell Carla was not pleased with the tub situation.

After looking it over, she sighed and said, "I'm not sure about this at all."

"What?" André had asked. Ryan knew that one word was really a longer question. 'What's wrong with the tub?'

"Well," Carla had responded, "there's really no way to install safety rails, so a shower is out of the question. I would

recommend you take baths instead. Even then you are going to need help for awhile getting in and out of the tub.

"No, bath, no," André had protested. "Shower?"

"Don't worry about it," Maybelle had interjected, I can help you with your bath."

"No!" had been André's immediate and emphatic response.

"It isn't anything I haven't done or seen before," she had said.

"No!" André repeated.

Maybelle had shrugged.

"Safety first," the pretty red-haired therapist had said gently. "Now, maybe your P.T. could work with you on getting in and out of—"

It had been Ryan's turn to say no. He did it so quickly, Maybelle, André and Carla had turned to him in surprise.

"Ah ... I mean ... André doesn't want to wait until Monday when we see Jim again, so I guess I would be the one to help him."

André hadn't protested, he merely fidgeted and looked down at his shoes.

Carla had gone on, "A shower is definitely too dangerous for you now, Mr. Thompson. Maybe in a few weeks, but right now I think we should work on a bath. Ryan can help you. At any rate we need to install skid strips on the floor of the tub. We could do that today if you can run and get them from the hardware?" she said, looking at Ryan.

Ryan had agreed and so the strips had been procured. Once installed, the adhesive strips needed to dry overnight

before they were functional. That meant the first bath would have to wait till Saturday.

As André whooped at the scoring of a touchdown, Ryan was brought back to the present, but the thought of that upcoming bath was making it even harder for him to suppress his growing arousal. He would see André naked. He would touch André's naked body as he helped him in and out of the tub.

"All done," André said, handing Ryan his bowl. "Thank you, Ry."

Ryan smiled in response, took the bowls, rose and covering his 'condition' walked to the kitchen. The dogs followed.

*Sorry, the boss man says no ice cream for you guys.*

Looking as crushed as a dog can, they walked dejectedly out of the kitchen.

That night, he took care of that 'condition' as he lay in his bed. In his imagination, he could see André, naked and getting into the tub. He pictured for the umpteenth time what André's cock and balls were like. He fantasized about his full, round ass. In his mind he was right behind him. André held the curtain back and Ryan stepped under the warm spray. André enfolded him in his arms, nuzzled and kissed his neck. Looking up into Ryan's eyes, he said, "See why shower better?" He kissed him: a long deep kiss that Ryan kept going, in his mind, for several seconds.

As Ryan continued to work his swollen shaft, he imagined it was André's soap covered hand massaging him. With his

free hand, he played with his hard nubs and pretended it was André.

*This is what it will be like*, he thought, conjuring an image of his rock hard dick, sliding easily into the deep recesses of André's firm round ass.

But mostly, as with every other time he had done this, it was André's face that brought him to the peak: the sweet smile, the soft loving eyes, the ruggedly handsome features. In the end, it was André, the inner André, that was the real turn on.

Feeling the afterglow following release, he tried once more to formulate a plan for letting André know they played for the same team. He wondered, though, what André's reaction would be.

*I don't know what kind of man he's attracted to. Maybe if I come out to him he wouldn't be interested at all. Well, so what. I've been turned down for a hook-up before. I survived.*

The word 'hook-up' seemed to leap out at him. Then, with insight that sometimes comes out of the blue, Ryan realized why he was so reticent to come out to André. It had more to do with his growing affection for the man than anything else. If he let André know he was gay there could be certain expectations on André's part. Especially since André was new to this. Ryan now realized he couldn't just have casual sex with him. If he was to have sex with him, it would be because he had deeper feelings. It would be because he was willing to let a relationship grow and establish itself. He knew, right at that moment, he was still too afraid; afraid of repeating the hurts of the past.

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No, it would be easier and better for André, who was still a beginner in the game of man to man love, if he didn't know Ryan shared his orientation. That way, if Ryan found he couldn't offer this wonderful man more than a quick tryst in bed; he couldn't be or wouldn't be in a position to hurt him, and he knew hurting him in any way was not going to be an option. With that understanding, Ryan drifted off into a restless sleep.

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## Chapter Seven

"When would you like to try that bath?" Ryan asked as he came back upstairs from letting the dogs out for their morning constitutional. "Those skid strips should be ready by now."

André stood in the bathroom in front of the sink. Apparently he had just finished washing up. A wet washcloth was hanging on the towel rack, and he was holding a towel in his hand. Naked to the waist, Ryan admired again the thick matt of salt and pepper hair that glistened with water droplets accentuating his deep chest. He was glad he had come by that insight the previous night. *Yes, he thought, it is better he doesn't know.*

André didn't look at Ryan when he answered Ryan's question about taking a bath.

"Uh, ah, walk dogs, eat, maybe after game?"

Ryan could see he was uncomfortable. He felt badly for the man. He knew he could relieve much of André's stress by simply revealing they were on the same page, but his realization that he cared too much to risk hurting him, held Ryan back.

"Okay," Ryan said lightly. "Whenever you're ready."

With that settled, the men finished dressing and made their way downstairs. The dogs were at the door, ready for their breakfast. André insisted on fixing it for them. Ryan felt good that he wanted to assert his independence. He admired

André's will to get better. He opened the back door and let the pups in.

After he and André had their own breakfast, which Ryan prepared, they took the pack for their morning walk. Ryan had lived in the town for many years. However, he lived on the opposite side from the stadium. Since his interest in football was casual, at best, he had only thought of home game football Saturdays as a nuisance: one hundred thousand people descending on your city, clogging traffic and making you a prisoner in your own home had really irked him.

André's house was only blocks from the football field. As the five of them walked along, Ryan could hear the band warming up for their half-time performance. Since it was a noon time kick-off, the streets were full of folks dressed in sweat-shirts and hats advertising support for the home team, heading for the parking lots around the stadium to participate in the ritual of tailgating. Ryan found himself getting caught up in the excitement of the day.

"Maybe ... you, me ... go game ... next?" André asked tentatively.

Ryan found himself unexpectedly pleased with the idea.

"That would be fun. Yes, I'd like that. But, how would we get tickets? Aren't all the games usually sold out?"

"Scalpers ... ticket ... all time," André replied with a big smile.

Just as they arrived back at the house, a car pulled up in front. André's sons bounded out the vehicle. The dogs went into a frenzy of tail wagging and buffing. They nearly pulled

both Ryan and André off their feet. The men let the leashes go and the three happy canines rushed to greet Connor and Todd.

After the doggy greeting was completed, the boys came up to the men. André was hugged by his boys. Ryan stood back and watched wistfully. He had always kind of wanted kids. He knew it would never happen, but it didn't stop him from wishing. He was surprised when Todd, the younger son, turned and bear hugged him.

"Thanks so much for all you're doin' for our dad. You're super."

Ryan hugged the boy back, and, swallowing hard, said, "You're more than welcome. You're dad's pretty super himself."

They all piled into the house. The big TV was turned on and the boys headed for the kitchen with the "provisions" for the game: fixin's for nachos, chips, dip and pop.

"Sorry we couldn't pick up any beer for you 'old folks'" Todd quipped, "but they have this dumb rule about being of age," he laughed.

There was still about an hour before kick-off, but the Thompson clan tuned in Sports Center, Game Day on ESPN and started talking football. Ryan was excited by how much André was able to contribute to the conversation despite his limited linguistic abilities. He was also pleased his sons seemed to accept his attempts without obvious discomfort. But Ryan did feel like an outsider on two counts: they were family, he was not and their talk about football left him completely in the dark.

Ryan went to the kitchen. He busied himself getting bowls and plates ready for serving the game treats. Connor came in.

"I want to thank you for all you're doing for Dad," he said, echoing his brother's earlier statement.

"No problem, he's a great guy and I'm happy to help."

"He really likes you, too," Connor continued. "When we visited him in the hospital, all he talked about was Ry, Ry, Ry." Connor laughed. "It really ticked Mom off for some reason."

Ryan nodded. He figured he knew why that would upset Mrs. Thompson.

"Anyway I just wanted to thank you."

"Like I said, my pleasure." Ryan silently thought how true that was.

"Here, let me give you a hand with that," Connor offered as Ryan began to gather the goodies to take to the living room.

The group settled in and started scarfing down the chips and nachos. The game started and the partisan crew was cheering wildly as the home team handily scored on the opening drive.

"Tonnor, Codd," André said. They all looked at him and laughed.

"What?" he said.

"Tonnor, Codd?" Ryan said cueing the error for André to process.

André laughed. "No, No, Connor, Todd," he corrected himself. "You help Ry. No no, football."

"What do you mean, Dad?" Connor asked.

"I think he wants you to help me understand football. I'm a novice when it comes to appreciation of this sport." Ryan smiled warmly at André.

"Yes, yes, you tell him how," André said enthusiastically.

What followed was a running commentary and crash course on first downs, sacks, snaps, wide receivers, running backs and field goals. By the end of the first quarter, Ryan's head was spinning with an overload of information, but he was gratified the boys were so enthusiastic about tutoring him in the finer points of the game. Ryan was feeling very good about how the afternoon was going. 'Their' team was winning and he was feeling part of the group gathered to cheer them on. He sat back in the love seat across the room, with Daisy lying next to him, her head on his lap. He soaked in the scene before him: André, his sons and dogs. Ryan was part of it. Maybe, after what Connor had said, just maybe he could think of something more with André.

The two dogs abruptly rose from the floor where they had been patiently waiting for the humans to drop a chip or two. Daisy sat up and looked at the door. Once again, their superior senses were alert to the arrival of someone coming onto the porch before the men were.

"Someone come," André said turning his head toward the door. Ryan could see a silhouette through the gauzy curtains at the window.

Todd leapt up at the knock that followed. He opened the door. Ryan was behind him. The dogs milled about with tails wagging.

"Jeff!

\* \* \* \*

The fledgling feelings of warmth of family, and the faint hope of the possibility of a life with André fled like dry leaves in a wind. They were replaced with resignation and anger. Resignation to the conclusion that a committed relationship was out of his reach, and anger at Jeff for being the agent of those thoughts, bringing with him reminders of failed relationships and betrayal.

"What do you want? What are you doing here?" he said letting his anger show.

"Hi guys," Jeff sang out in his usual charming way. "Just dropped by to see how André was doing."

Realizing he was making a scene, Ryan backed down. He turned to the group and said, "Uh this is Jeff. He and I were...." He faltered.

"Ryan and I were work buddies. I used to work at the U. I met André last week when I came to visit."

Jeff had come through for him when he didn't expect it. Ryan was grateful. He introduced the boys, who quickly invited Jeff to stay and watch the game. André greeted the man, but he seemed wary, edgy.

Everyone's attention was diverted as a roar came from the TV. They all turned to the screen to watch the replay of a spectacular pass play that resulted in a touchdown for the home team. They all joined in the cheering.

"That fade to the post works every time. Great call," Jeff exclaimed.

Ryan fumed inside. Good old Jeff: charming, knowledgeable, and infuriating.

They all settled in as the game continued. There was much good natured bantering among the boys and the uninvited house guest. André had become somewhat more subdued. Ryan was still included, being informed of the nuances and rules of the game. But he felt more embarrassed than involved as some of the information was coming from Jeff.

"You never seemed to be this interested in football before. What's the deal?" Jeff asked casually, popping a dip covered Dorito into his mouth.

"Just trying to broaden my horizons, my friend," Ryan said with a forced smile.

*Damn him!*

At half time, the boys got up to refill the bowls with chips and get more drinks.

Ryan stood and said, "Jeff, can I see you ... out here?" He indicated the door as he walked past him to the porch.

Ryan leaned against the half-wall, staring into the street, his back to Jeff. He tried to control his emotions. He could hear the sounds of the band's half time performance from the stadium only blocks away.

"What's up?" Jeff asked innocently.

Ryan whirled around. "What's up? What's up? You fuckin' shit ... What's up with you coming here like this when you know very well I meant what I said. We're history."

"Hey man, calm down. I just came to see how André was doing and..."

Ryan cut him off. "Just came to see how André was doing my Aunt Frieda's fat ass!"

"Okay, okay," Jeff said. "I came to see you, okay. You happy now?"

"No."

"Ryan, listen, I love you. I know now what a jerk I've been. I just want one more chance to show you I mean it when I tell you I'll play the game your way. Please?"

Ryan closed his eyes and shook his head. He opened them again and looked directly into Jeff's pleading ones.

"You hit the nail that time, buddy. Game. That's what all this is to you."

Jeff opened his mouth to speak. Ryan held up his hand. "The sad thing is, you believe you're sincere. You really think you love me enough to 'play the game' my way. But, the reality is the rules will change just as soon as some hottie with a killer smile and a hard body tries to pick you up. No, my friend, not this time. Not ever. Please Jeff, just go."

Jeff sighed. Ryan could see a tear in his eye. He felt a momentary sadness for the handsome, charming young man. But he stood his ground.

"Okay. I'm sorry I butted in and spoiled your day."

Ryan felt he meant that. Jeff went to the door and stuck his head inside. "Hey guys. Gotta run. Enjoy the rest of the game. Go U!"

Ryan could hear some mumbled responses from the living room.

Jeff turned to him. "One hug for the road?" he asked.

Ryan hesitated, then acquiesced. The men embraced. For a brief moment, the memories of the good times they'd shared filled Ryan's mind, then faded. Jeff broke the hug and held him at arm's length.

"See ya," he said. "Good luck with André. You two will be good together."

Stunned, Ryan stood with his mouth open as Jeff made his way down the steps. As he hit the sidewalk he turned and waved. There was finality in that gesture. Ryan felt, for the first time, that his life with Jeff was in the past. He turned and looked at the door. Could Jeff see what he couldn't? Was his future inside?

\* \* \* \*

Standing at the sink cleaning up after the Thompson's traditional celebratory pizza dinner, Ryan was glad the boys had accepted his lame excuse that Jeff had to leave for a post game party. André had seemed relieved that he was gone. They quickly settled in to watching the rest of the game and post game victory antics: high fives, fists punching the air and the rest. They had all taken the dogs for a walk and greeted fellow jubilant fans as they made their way back to their cars, parked sometimes blocks from the stadium.

Now the boys were gone and the house was quiet. Ryan let his musings about the day go as he turned his thoughts to André. His emotions had swung back and forth in the previous twenty-four hours: from firmly resolving to avoid any involvement, to entertaining the possibility of making another attempt at finding ... what? Love?

He put the last of the plates he had been drying in the cabinet and made his way to the living room. He glanced around to make sure it was all in order before going upstairs. Satisfied, he climbed the stairs. André's door was partially shut. He knocked softly and pushed it open.

André was sitting on the edge of his bed. He was dressed only in sweat pants. He sat with his head bowed and his hands folded between his knees. He looked up and smiled weakly as Ryan entered the room.

"Bath?" he asked tentatively.

"If you're ready?" Ryan returned.

André shrugged his shoulders and said, "Guess?"

He rose and walked toward Ryan. He was using his tripod cane less and less. Ryan was pleased. André was improving so much.

Ryan let him pass and followed him into the bathroom. André turned and looked at him.

"You go ahead and fix the bath," Ryan said. "I'll be right here if you need help."

André supported himself with his stronger arm and turned on the water. He held up the stopper at the end of its chain and turned to Ryan.

"Please?"

Ryan took the stopper from him. There was brief contact as he bent to plug the drain. He felt himself responding to the closeness and the anticipation.

*Damn, I wish I had time to jack off.*

When the tub was half filled with warm water, Ryan checked it. Often patients with brain injuries lost sensitivity to

heat and cold and so could injure themselves by not realizing how hot the water was. It was a good temperature.

Ryan stood up facing André. The older man looked uncomfortable.

"Okay, stud, strip," Ryan said with a laugh, trying to lighten the mood.

André didn't laugh, but he did manage a smile. He turned his back to Ryan and pushed his sweats down and let them fall to the floor. Ryan steadied him with his hands on his waist as he stepped out of them.

*Oh God, he thought. What a gorgeous ass.*

André's ass was indeed very nice: smooth, round and full. Just as Ryan had imagined it. He fought the urge to caress it and felt himself plumping in his jockeys.

Continuing to steady André with hands on his waist, he helped him into the tub. As his friend sat down into the warm clear water, Ryan got his first glimpse of his cock: partially hard, thick and uncut, surrounded by a dense bush of pubic hair that had not yet begun to acquire the salt and pepper character of his chest, head and beard. Ryan began to recite Hail Mary's to distract himself.

"Good job," he said encouragingly as he handed André a washcloth and bar of soap.

"Shower better," André said, as he began to wash himself.

He soaped up his arms, chest and neck. Then awkwardly tried to do his back.

"Here, let me," Ryan offered.

André hesitated, before handing Ryan the washcloth. Ryan knelt beside the tub and lathered up the still muscular back, despite the weeks of inactivity. He felt his heart rate increase.

Handing the cloth back to André, he asked, "Anything else?"

André shook his head. He soaped up each leg in turn, carefully lifting it out of the water and then he washed his face. Ryan followed his every move, taking in every contour of the man's body, appreciating him more and more with each passing second.

"Help, please," said André as he tried to get up.

Ryan helped him to stand. As André washed his ass and cock, Ryan felt himself go completely hard. André himself was getting harder as the friction of washing stimulated his penis. Ryan tried not to look, but the temptation was too great. André was hung. His nuts were full and dark. His dick was to die for.

Ryan gazed up at the man's face. He looked embarrassed. But he forged ahead.

"Shampoo, please?"

Ryan opened the bottle for him and poured some into André's hand. He rubbed the shampoo into his hair and began to massage his scalp. The motion caused his semi hard cock to sway back and forth. Ryan had to look away.

"Shower, please, soap off?"

Ryan hesitated at first, then decided André was secure enough that they could turn on the shower to rinse off. He pulled the circular curtain around the tub, reached in, adjusted the water, and turned on the spray.

"Ah, good," André's voice came from beyond the curtain, over the sound of the water. "See, shower okay, Ry."

After a few minutes of rinsing, André indicated he was finished. Ryan reached in again turned off the water and pulled the curtain back. Once more he tried to avoid staring at the display of aroused manhood right before his eyes.

He reached out to André, who took hold of his hands and began to step out of the tub. He had one foot out and was lifting the other leg over the side, when he slipped. He fell forward into Ryan's arms. The men stood, their arms wrapped around each other. Ryan could feel both of their hearts pounding; feel their hard cocks pressed against each other, lips barely an inch apart. Instinct took over. Whether it was Ryan or André who made the first move, Ryan didn't know, but in an instant, his secret was out in the open. They kissed, passionately, deeply, tongues seeking and being granted entry. He let his hands roam over André's body, down his back, engulfing the firm gleutial mounds. André ran his hands up and down Ryan's arms and back.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, André pulled back.

"No, no, sorry, Ry, no."

"What? André its okay, I wan—"

"No, no." André said firmly. He grabbed a towel and limped out of the room. Ryan followed, but André entered his bedroom and closed the door behind him.

Ryan stood in the hallway, dumbfounded. What had happened? Fate had taken over and did what Ryan had been afraid to do: let André know he wanted him. André's response had been full and strong, as strong as Ryan's. Then this.

The dogs, which had been lying on the floor in the hallway during the bath, stood next to the man, seemingly puzzled by their master's shutting them out. Not knowing what else to do, Ryan took the pack downstairs and out into the night for their walk.

The quiet, deserted and dark streets seemed to reflect the emptiness Ryan felt inside. It was clear to him now that he wanted to be with André. Not only to be his boyfriend but to be his partner, to live with him, to share a life with him. But that realization came with the retreat of the man from his life. The door had closed between them.

Returning to the house, Ryan locked up and went back to the second floor. André's door was still closed. Ryan went to his room and finished preparing for bed. He returned to the bathroom to brush his teeth. The tub was still full of water. He stared at it. Confused and sad thoughts whirled in his mind. *What could he have done wrong? Why was André so upset?*

Not finding any answers in the tepid, soapy water, he pulled the plug and watched as it gurgled its way down the drain, with Ryan feeling it was a metaphor of his life. He knelt and wiped out the tub, almost imagining he could still smell André in the room. He walked into the hall. The dogs were lying with their noses to André's door.

"All right," he said, "I know where you want to be tonight." *Me too.* The thought came automatically.

Gently he opened the door. André was lying on his side facing away from the door. If he was awake he made no sign. The dogs made their way into the room and arranged

themselves in their usual spots on the large bed. Smiling weakly, Ryan pulled the door partially shut.

He went to his room, got in bed and turned out the light. He lay on his back, in the pale glow of the street light from in front of the house that filtered through the curtain. He felt a tear roll from the corner of his eye down his cheek. God, he hated it when he cried. He bit his lower lip.

He didn't know how long he had been lying there or if he had started to doze when he had the feeling someone was in the room with him. Turning on his side, he came face to nose with Daisy. She stood at the side of his bed, resting her chin on the mattress. When she saw him looking at her, her tail went into high gear.

"Come to keep me company, girl?" he asked.

She wagged harder.

"Okay, come on up."

He moved over to make room and patted the bed. She gracefully jumped onto the bed, licked his face, then after turning in circles three or four times settled down against his chest. He lay down with one hand behind his head. She laid her head on his arm. He draped his other arm around her. She sighed deeply.

Grateful for the comfort and company, Ryan finally drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Ryan woke up when Daisy jumped off the bed. He sat up in time to see André making his way to the stairs with the other dogs. By the time Ryan was at the head of the steps,

André was nearly all the way down and navigating well. Ryan turned back and used the bathroom.

Ryan came downstairs. André was sitting on the couch, watching College Game Day wrap up. He looked up at Ryan as he came into the room, then back at the screen.

Ryan sat next to him on the sofa. He blankly watched the screen and listened to the arguments as to what the previous day's wins and losses did to the BCS standings, whatever that meant. Finally, when it became apparent André wasn't going to say anything, he began.

"André."

André turned to him. God, he was so handsome. Ryan felt a desperate love rise with in him. It couldn't end this way. Now that he was sure, now that he wasn't afraid anymore.

"André, I don't understand. Why did you pull away yesterday?"

The older man turned back to the TV.

Ryan tried again. "André, please."

André sighed and switched off the television. He turned to Ryan and shrugged.

"Are you afraid you did something wrong? That you offended me?"

"Yes, well, no. Just sorry."

"André, I'm gay. I wanted you to kiss me. I wanted you in my arms."

The older man smiled. "I know. I know long time. In hospital ... no no ... hospital."

"You've known all this time that I was gay?"

"Yes, I know."

"Then what is it? Was it me ... did I do something wrong?"

"Oh no, I ... I ... I ... love you Ry."

Hearing André find those words, Ryan's eyes filled with tears. They were mirrored in André's.

"Then, why?" Ryan asked. "Why don't you want to be with me?"

"I never before," André continued.

"You've never been with a man before? That doesn't make any difference to me."

"I know, but ... but...."

Ryan knew he was struggling to let him know what the real barrier was. He moved closer and put his hand on André's arm.

"Whatever it is, we can work through it. Just tell me."

"This." André pointed to his weaker arm. "And this." He pointed to his leg. "This too." He indicated his mouth. "You young, I ... old ... and..." He pointed to his arm, leg and mouth again.

"Is that all?" Ryan almost laughed with relief. "Oh God, André, those things don't matter to me. You're getting better every day, and even if you weren't I'd still love you."

There, he had said it. He had found the words, just as André had.

André looked deeply into Ryan's eyes as if trying to fathom the truth of his statement.

Ryan put his arms around him. With one hand he tilted André's face toward his and kissed him. André stiffened at first, but then relaxed into the kiss. For several minutes they

sat on the couch, hugging, just looking into one another's eyes.

"You sure, Ry? This no difference?" André said indicating once more his impaired physical condition.

"It makes no difference whatsoever. I love you for the man you are inside, not just for the fact that you are one sexy old man."

At first André looked startled, and then he smiled, then laughed.

They came together in a deep kiss once again, then André said,

"Ry, you show me? You show me how man love a man?"

"You bet I will," Ryan said, his eyes brimming over again. "When do you want to start?"

"Now," André replied.

Ryan hugged him, then said. "Come on. I'll race you upstairs."

The End

Almost

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## Post Script

Ryan paused in the glow of the Christmas tree that stood in the corner between the love seat and the couch. He had just brought the pack in from their final tour of the snowy back yard for the day. They stopped and stood next to him.

He knew André was upstairs waiting for him. The thought caused Ryan to feel excited. But despite the promise of what lay at the top of the stairs, he hesitated. It had always been hard for him to turn the lights out on the tree on Christmas Eve. That year was no exception. But it seemed even harder somehow. Perhaps it was because it was the first year he had had a tree for a long time. Maybe it was that this year he had reason to celebrate Christmas.

He sat down on the couch. Bob and Rosie decided they were done for the day and headed upstairs. Daisy, however, jumped up on the couch next to Ryan, sat down and leaned against him as if she too was admiring the tree, with its multicolored mini-lights, and ornaments in the shapes of dogs, bones, dog houses and dog toys. She seemed to have adopted him in the last few weeks. She seemed to consider herself his dog now. He appreciated that.

The next day the boys would come for Christmas dinner. Ryan smiled. It would be good to have his family home for the holiday. *My family*, he thought as he toyed with his Christmas gift: a gold ring which he wore proudly on his left hand. He was smiling.

They had spent the special night here by themselves. Ryan smiled again. They had eaten Christmas cookies, drunk egg nog and watched a bowl game on TV. He was beginning to appreciate the sport. He actually could tell the difference between a wide receiver and a safety, even though they both seemed to try to catch passes.

The man and the dog sat together in the warm light of the tree and shared a quiet moment.

"Ry? Ry you coming? I got something special for you for Christmas."

Ryan looked at Daisy. "Well, I wonder what that could be?" he teased, pressing his forehead against hers and roughing her ears.

"I better get up there and see what he has in mind."

They stood. He paused at the door and looked out. The colored lights on the house reflected off the snow, turning it various shades of red, yellow, blue and green. He decided to leave those lights on. Looking at the tree one last time, he switched off the lights.

As he mounted the steps he could feel himself responding to the invitation that had been offered. At the top of the stairs, he walked to the door of the bedroom they now shared and looked in. The dogs were on the king sized bed. Daisy looked up at him. He pointed to the bed. "Go on," he said. She obeyed, and jumped up with the other two.

Turning to what was once his room, he walked in. He and André now used the room for those times when they needed a dog free night.

"Took you long enough," André scolded.

Ryan could tell from the tone he wasn't serious. "Just wanted to hang on to the magic a little longer."

"Well, I got some magic for us right here," André said, raising the cover and inviting his partner to join him.

Ryan slipped off his tee shirt and shucked his sweat pants. He slid luxuriantly into the bed, rubbing his body along that of his lover. He felt the firm, muscular frame, now being fully restored as André had begun regular work-outs in the basement gym. He pressed himself against the thick rug of hair on André's chest and felt his erect, warm penis against his own throbbing member. He slipped one arm around his man and with the other stroked his head. Looking into his eyes in the diffused light that came through the curtained windows, he said, "Did I tell you today, I love you?"

"Yes you did," came the reply.

"How about, that you make me very happy?"

"Uh, yeah, a couple of times."

André was making undulating movements that was causing their erections to rub against each other. Ryan's breathing became irregular.

Lowering his register to a deep baritone, and speaking in a raspy voice, he said, "Now please."

André rose up, throwing off the covers. He rolled Ryan onto his back and lifted his legs to his shoulders. Ryan guided him. Pre-cum was more than adequate for the moment. With a deep sigh, André pressed against the entry to Ryan's body and slid past the ring to their complete union.

They lay there for a time, each speaking of the love that they felt for one another with their eyes. Then André began a

slow, but building rhythm. In time it brought them to the peak of passion and emotion, resulting in an intense climax for them both.

As they lay together, sharing the warm closeness that comes after moments of love, André looked deeply into Ryan's eyes and said, "Cherry Mishmash."

"Cherry Mishmash?" Ryan said with a warm laugh.

"Shit, no, damn, I mean Merry—"

Ryan stopped him with a finger to his lips. "No, Cherry Mishmash says it all to me. Without Cherry Mishmash we would never have met and there would never have been this Merry Christmas.

"Okay, then, Cherry Mishmash it is." André said, kissing Ryan on the nose.

"Cherry Mishmash," said Ryan.

Now...

Really...

The End.

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**About the author:**

Terry O'Reilly

Since retiring, Terry spends his time writing, working with animal rescue groups, walking his three dogs, pumping iron while listening to Harry Potter audio books and riding/showing his champion Quarter Horse. His interest in Native American culture stems from fact that in tracing his heritage he found that his great grandfather was an Illini.

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