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Making It Up

TOP SHELF

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Dr. Thomas Paulson stumbled into the apartment, tired as shit and worn almost to a nub, the only thing on his mind right then being a shower... and maybe some food. Possibly a beer, though that would likely have him passing out on the couch rather than in bed, which was where he belonged. And thank God it was only a twenty minute drive from the hospital in LA to his sweet little place.

Then he noticed the marked lack of silence, a small smile crossing his lips with the realization. Not small because the sounds were unwelcome, but more because that was all the energy he could muster.

Okay, he told himself, time to rework the plan, since Alan was obviously back from the location shoot in Arizona earlier than expected. Make it a shower, then food and maybe even a blow job. Which would still have him passing out, but in bed, most likely.

Yeah. That was a good plan. Better. Best, really, until he woke up in a few hours, anyway.

Christ, his residency was a bitch. Five hours to himself after nearly fifty at the hospital... and even so, he was for damned sure going to sacrifice at least a good half hour of that for sexual gratification. He'd barely even seen his lover in the last three months, what with Alan's work taking him out of town so often and Thomas' own responsibilities grinding him down to almost nothing.

He moved slowly across the living room, then leaned against the doorjamb between it and the kitchen, just admiring the lines of the man, the sweet curve of spine and long thighs under tight linen.

"Sit," his lover said, and clearly Thomas had been less than silent himself. Then Alan glanced at him and his pretty blue eyes widened. "Jesus Christ, Thomas, you're skin and bones! And some really nice muscles, but... God. Sit. You've got pancakes coming. You're going to eat them and drink some juice. Then I'm going to make you melt."

Damn, he was a lucky man.

"And we need to talk," he heard Alan murmur, and... maybe he wasn't so lucky after all, he thought. Wondered.

"An Emma Boudreaux left a message on our voice mail for you," Alan went on. "How many times have I told you not to give our number out to patients? Or their mothers, because she wants to talk to you about 'her boy Johnny.'"

Jesus. Just... fucking God. Johnny Boudreaux? JJ?

He hadn't heard that name in years. Hadn't even wanted to. Hadn't ever expected to hear from him again, after what he'd done to the guy. And he hadn't, Thomas reminded himself, because it was JJ's momma who'd called, not JJ himself.

"Did she say what she wanted?" he finally managed to ask, the words pushing from his lips slowly, reluctantly... almost fearfully. It had to be bad. Had to. No way Miz Emma would be calling him, otherwise.

He saw Alan shrug, but not all loose and easy like usual.

No... even that small motion was tight, tense. And now that Thomas thought about it, even Alan's words had been sort of clipped. Snippy, maybe. And there hadn't even been an offer of a kiss yet, which meant...

"She didn't just leave a message to call her, did she?" he asked slowly, resting his chin on his folded hands, elbows planted firmly on the table. "And Johnny's not a patient. He never was."

Another shrug, then Alan was turning to face him, his eyes frowning, sad, almost lost... but relieved, too, which told Thomas he'd passed some sort of test.

"I know that when some guy's mother is willing to record something to the effect of 'whatever happened, I know you still care about my boy, so call me back'..." Alan chuckled mirthlessly. "It's probably not about some kid who needed you to dig a jellybean out of his nose, yeah."

Thomas sighed and closed his eyes for a moment, bidding a silent farewell to the hoped-for hours of sleep he'd been lusting after.

"JJ," he finally said, opening his eyes to meet his lover's confused gaze, "Johnny, I mean. He really was a kid the last time I saw him, Alan. Hell, so was I. We were... young and stupid and crazy. In general, sure. But also about each other, okay? And it didn't work out. I made sure of it. I haven't talked to him since. And God knows I have no idea of why his mother would be calling me. I didn't even know she knew where I was." He frowned. "But whatever it is, it can't be good."

Oh... oh, shit. Suddenly, Thomas could think of only one reason for Emma Boudreaux to be calling him out of the blue, especially if she'd mentioned JJ. "God..." he whispered, and the fact that Alan's eyes were suddenly soft and sad and just plain misty didn't help, either, because obviously his lover had reached the same conclusion that Thomas had.

"He's dead, isn't he?" Thomas whispered, his usually hidden drawl coming right out again, like it always did when he was surprised... upset... shattered. "JJ's dead and his momma called to let me know."

Just like that, he had a lap full of solid make-up artist, slender arms wrapped strongly around his shoulders while Alan's head just rested there in the crook of his neck, black hair soft against Thomas' jaw.

"Sorry," he heard, his head spinning wildly, frighteningly. "She didn't say that, but... sorry about your friend," Alan whispered again. "I'm so sorry, Thomas."

Yeah... so was he, Thomas thought, all the things he should have said, should have done, should have admitted and accepted back then just about crippling him in the present.

He hadn't heard JJ's name except in passing, hadn't spoken to the guy in nearly a decade... but he'd never stopped thinking about JJ. He'd never stopped wondering what might have happened if he'd just given in to what he'd wanted and stayed. Stayed home and taken the looks, the comments, the jokes that would have come along with admitting his own bent to more than just himself. And admitting his feelings for JJ. To anyone.

He never had, of course. He'd never told JJ how much he'd cared for him then. He truly hadn't known, not until he'd left for college.

He couldn't blame himself for that, couldn't manage to hate himself for not telling JJ what he hadn't even recognized at first.

It was entirely his fault, though, that he hadn't said anything when he had realized it. That second summer, when they'd been so close, so right. When everything had felt like it was inevitable. When the feelings had been so scary, so fucking overwhelmingly frightening, that Thomas had looked at JJ and seen -- through the eyes of fear -- the end of his own hopes and dreams.

That was why he'd done what he'd done. Why he'd willfully and deliberately broken JJ's heart. And his own, though he hadn't known that for certain until just that moment.

"I love him," he whispered back, the words so soft they barely stirred Alan's hair. "I love him and I never told him, Alan. I let him think... God, all this time, I let him think it was just fun for me, even though I knew then -- knew -- it was so much more for him. It was more for me, too, but I was so fucking scared. I couldn't even... I didn't know how much more until..." Until now, though he didn't finish that out loud.

He felt Alan tense, but he forgot it moments later when Alan shifted on his lap.

"What happened, Thomas?" Alan murmured, fingers tangling lightly in the slightly too long hair at the nape of Thomas' neck. "Between you and your Johnny, I mean."

And, God, he didn't want to say it out loud. Didn't want Alan to know just what kind of an asshole he'd been when he was younger. But he figured he kind of owed it to the guy, what with JJ being such a huge part of what had made him... him.

Thomas sighed yet again, eyes closing as he remembered it all in excruciating detail.

"It's a long story," he finally said, "but I don't have to be back at the hospital for almost five hours... and he's not 'my Johnny.' I gave up the right to call him mine when I ripped out his heart and trampled on it... on purpose." He spoke on after a moment of sorrowful silence. "It all started ten years ago. It was the end of June and I'd just graduated a couple weeks or so earlier..."

He could see it all, right there behind his eyelids.

Man, he'd been so young. So... helpless.

He wasn't completely sure of what JJ had been feeling, but he had a pretty good idea. They'd told each other everything for a while there, after all... and Johnny Boudreaux had always sucked at poker. Hadn't been able to bluff, for anything.

God. JJ. Dead.

He couldn't believe it. Just... couldn't.

June, 1998
Oak Grove, Arkansas

"Whoooooo!" Tommy shouted along with his friends as he spun his shiny pickup truck around the bend in the dirt road, wheels just kicking up rocks and clots of earth to spray the underbrush beside the bumpy drive.

He looked back over his shoulder with a grin, noticing that not even Jimmy Talbot was holding on tight. Then again, sliding wheels or not, he wasn't doing more than thirty miles per hour. It just felt faster here than it ever did on the paved streets in town... what there was of town, anyway. All one and a half square miles.

He figured there had been a time when he couldn't imagine a world bigger than his hometown, but if there really had been, he for damned sure couldn't remember it. And he was definitely not going to miss it. Because just like Mike Roberts and probably a good seventy percent of last year's graduating class, Tommy was going to get the Hell out of Oak Grove. He had a partial scholarship and everything.

Dad was going to take care of the rest of his tuition and expenses, and Tommy thought that was just fine. It was about time the man ponied up, after the way he'd ditched them -- Tommy and Momma -- to run off with some random teacher from the high school. And it felt good to know that Momma could cut back on her shifts at the diner, now that she wouldn't have to worry about paying for Tommy's life. She'd paid enough, even if she'd never said so... and would likely kick his ass but good if she thought he was even thinking about it like that.

All that aside, life was pretty damned good. He was near-on a month out of high school, he was heading off to college pretty soon -- out of state, thank God, where maybe guys like him could be a little less worried about people knowing -- and he was loving the Hell out of his new truck, even if it really wasn't completely new, but three years old. The chrome was still shiny and there wasn't even a scratch on the paint. It was one more thing his dad had stepped up with, which was still a shock after the way the man had just disappeared almost twelve years earlier.

Hell, Tommy hadn't even heard from the guy until his eighteenth birthday three months before, which was when the truck had shown up in front of the trailer with a card that had simply read *Happy Birthday, son. Love, Daddy.*

He'd kind of expected Momma to have a conniption fit, but even though she hadn't looked thrilled, she'd just hugged him and told him to be careful.

Which wasn't exactly what he was doing right at the moment, but he wasn't planning on her ever finding out, so it was all good.

"Hey, guys!" He shouted over the whoops and hollers coming from the back, "What d'you think? DQ first, or straight to the fair?" Because, damn, he could go for a burger and fries. On the other hand, there'd be corn dogs and funnel cakes and lots of other stuff at the fairgrounds, and they could have DQ any time.

"Fair!" the guys yelled, even Jimmy, whose love of DQ was legendary.

Tommy laughed louder and turned the radio up until the knob wouldn't go any further. Fair, it was. And he still had the fifty bucks Momma gave him for his birthday, so he figured he was probably going to eat himself sick, then puke on the fast rides. He might even get himself a Bud or two, if the sheriff didn't have his deputies staking out the beer stands. They didn't usually mind the eighteen-and-over kids having a couple, but they'd know Tommy was driving. Tommy always drove, now that he had wheels.

Either way, though, it was going to be a damned good day. Food, friends, rides, maybe beer. What could be better?

God. Why on earth would his parents want to move to a no-horse podunk place like Oak Grove?

It was a question Johnny Boudreaux had asked himself at least a million times in the three days they'd been there.

Bad enough that the so-called town consisted of an ice cream shop, two gas stations, a diner, and a place with a sign saying it was a furniture store, though the front window was filled with the most random assortment of crap Johnny had ever seen, and only a quarter of it even vaguely resembled anything to park your butt on.

Oh, he was sure there were a few other things there, too, but he'd really stopped looking after that. He'd closed his eyes, actually, and hadn't opened them until they'd reached the craptastic accommodations offered by the *Oak Grove Clearing*, and wasn't that a stupid name for a motel?

Apparently it was the only place within twenty miles, though, because that was where they were still staying, even though Johnny was pretty sure his mother wasn't any happier with it than he was.

Christ, there wasn't even cable in their rooms. And forget about getting on the World Wide Web with the so-cool new laptop computer he'd spent every cent he'd saved over birthdays and holidays buying, too. Even if his ISP had a local access number for his dial-up modem, the phone was so old it was attached to the wall with one of those four-pronged do-hickeys his Grams had had until the day she'd died.

Jesus, he already hated the backwater little town. Hated the quiet in the day and the weird sounds at night. Hated the fucking local jocks and their redneck trucks, too, even if a few of them weren't so bad to look at when they stopped by the motel to use the pool, which apparently the manager didn't mind.

He wouldn't be doing anything but looking, of course, because that way led to broken bones and lynchings and crosses burning on the lawn, he was pretty sure. If he'd had a lawn, which he didn't

yet. And his looking was kind of restricted to glancing up every now and then when one or more of the hayseed bastards shouted for attention from their buddies.

So, yeah. He was in Hell. And his father seemed pretty fucking determined to keep him there. Something about the job offer being too good to pass up, but how good was it, really, if it meant they had to move to a place like this?

Okay, maybe his folks would be less ready to ruin his life if they knew Johnny's little secret. Big secret. Whatever. But they didn't, and he really wasn't quite ready to tell them yet. Not when he knew how disappointed they'd be, anyway. And, sure, they'd been cool to the gay guys down the street from their house in New Orleans, but Johnny just knew his mother, at least, wanted grandkids eventually. Not anytime soon, granted, but ten years down the road or so? Oh, yeah. So telling her that he was pretty sure he didn't swing toward the opposite sex was probably going to be a big letdown for her.

His father would probably disown him. For a while, anyway, and even though Johnny and his dad weren't really close, he didn't want either of them to have to go through that. Not when he was still living at home, which he would be for another two years, damn it.

They were trying really hard to get him to like this little slice of homophobic heartland. Johnny knew that much. He even kind of appreciated it. Fact was, though... a Dairy Queen and a county fair would never be able to measure up to nights and weekends spent wandering the French Quarter, peering through the doors of the loud, colorful gay clubs... or even following the tour guides and listening to their practiced tales of ghosts, murders, and mayhem in this house or that.

He missed his friends. Missed Janie poking him in the side whenever he said something she thought was "too gay," missed hunkering down on the couch with her and Rob while they watched old horror movies and pretended to be scared. Hell, he missed his entire life, and there was no possible way he could stay in Hicksville. Not for more than a week, anyway, and... sadly, he didn't think he was going to have a choice.

"Fuck," he grunted, levering himself up from the rickety deck chair by the pool when his father leaned on the car horn again. "I hate this place and everyone in it."

The only thing he didn't hate was that once his parents had seen what the other kids around there wore during the summer, they hadn't said a single thing about his slightly ragged shorts and T-shirt.

It was a small blessing, but Johnny figured he had to take what he could get. It looked like he was stuck with it, after all.

"I'm not going to have a good time, you know," he grumbled, sulking in the back seat as his father drove, carefully following the directions from the girl in the motel's office.

His mother laughed a little. "You'll learn to like it, honey," she said after a moment, sounding none too sure, herself. "There's something to be said for small town life. It's less hectic, for one thing."

Yeah... mind-numbingly boring, Johnny translated. "Whatever," he said, then pulled the worn paperback from the back pocket of his shorts. At least there had to be a bookstore somewhere, he told himself. So even if he really was stuck in Hell, he'd be able to escape into other worlds. Every town had a bookstore, even Oak Grove. He hoped.

They'd only been there for an hour, but Tommy had already lost the rest of the guys. Not by choice, but because they wanted different rides and the lines were longer or shorter. Then Bill wanted cotton candy to feed his constant sweet tooth. Josh wanted to check out the shooting gallery to win a stuffed whatever for his girl who'd be along later, and... Well. It was fine, though. It wasn't like he was alone or anything. Hell, he knew just about everybody there, though a few people had come from other towns. Maybe even as far away as Parsonsville, which was nearly a hundred miles off.

Tommy was still having a fine time. Better than fine, really, because he still had forty bucks left and he'd tried the three new rides more than once. Which was why he was back in the long-ass ticket line, actually. The new rides were damned good, even if he couldn't remember what they were called.

He knew they were fast, and that was what mattered. Speed. Wind screaming past his ears and making his eyes tear up. The sounds of metal and wood and chains blending together into a seamless cacophony of creaks and scrapes and grinding that was a blissful sort of music to his ears.

He stood there, just bouncing on the balls of his feet while he waited for the damned line to move. "Come on, come on," he muttered, rolling his shoulders to loosen up adrenaline-tightened muscles. "Come on..."

Johnny sighed, fifteen dollars clutched in his fist as he waited to buy tickets -- tickets, for God's sake -- that would allow him to join the hillbilly hoe-down going on around him. Like he wanted to be there in the first place, much less wanted to wait for the privilege.

Jesus, it was like a nightmare already, and he'd only just gotten there.

Swaggering guys with beer guts and big-haired women in polyester. Younger guys, without the guts, and big-haired younger women in denim. Guys around his own age -- some of whom he'd seen in cut-off jeans like his own, at the pool -- and their girlfriends with their smaller hair. But Johnny could see the desire in them for Dolly Parton-esqe hair-dos. Could see how badly they wanted to be just like their mothers, sisters, aunts, whatever.

Okay, so he was being unfair, and he knew it. He just... wanted to be home, damn it. And the truth was... if his folks had brought him here to vacation for a week or two, he probably would have been having a great time. He would possibly have made some friends already and gone fishing or whatever at least once. That idea definitely held some appeal.

It was the concept of actually living there that was putting him off. Even after his mother's carefully quick words while Dad had been in the port-a-john hadn't fully reconciled him to the situation.

"It's his heart, Johnny," Mom had said. "Doctor Sumiash said he needs to slow down or he'll have another heart attack, and this time it'll probably kill him. So managing the feed company is almost perfect, and I know you don't want to move, but I -- we -- don't see any way around it. We can't afford the pay cut he'd have to take back home if he went to part time, and that's what he'd have to do. He'll be making less here, but the cost of living..." and then Dad had come back and he'd dragged Mom off to some pie contest or something, and here he was. Waiting for tickets. To get on rides that would probably be boring as all Hell.

So, yeah. It sucked. And Johnny was stuck. Deeply and helplessly... stuck.

Stuck and likely to get himself beat up if he didn't stop staring at the bouncing ass in front of him in line, too. Which wasn't to say that the guy was an ass, but that he was bouncing and had a nice... well, ass. And he did. Round. Firm. Not too bulge-y, but not flat and blah like some guys' asses were.

Johnny liked to think of himself as an ass connoisseur. He'd rarely touched one on purpose, other than his own, but he'd for damned sure looked at an awful lot of them. Clothed, of course, except for on the computer and a couple hot spots in the French Quarter, but even so, the guy in front of him had a damned fine ass. In Johnny's top five, even. Above Mitch Jeroux and Jake Linscomb, but not quite as high up as Rob's. Not that he'd ever tell Rob that, but still.

The guy was pretty much tied with the dude who stripped at that place down on Bourbon Street, and that was saying something, because that guy? Made his living from his ass... and other parts. In more ways than just by dancing, Johnny had heard, but he'd never quite gotten up the nerve to find out. And now he never would, damn it.

He sighed again, forcing his eyes closed, just so he could turn his head and open them to something that wasn't the lure of straight farmboy butt.

Of course, that was when he was suddenly hit and as he stumbled, then went down, landing with an "ooof" in the dirt, his one thought was "Great. I got caught, and here comes the hanging... and now I get to die a virgin. Perfect."

"Fuck!" Tommy yelled, almost stumbling again when he turned, he was trying to move so fast.

He took one grab at the guy he'd just about flattened, only to miss. Of course. Because when it really mattered, Tommy was the clumsiest thing going, and he knew it. Everyone else knew it, too, which was why Coach never put him in when it was a make-or-break play. Hell, it was a good thing his scholarship was academic. He'd have been shit out of luck if it had been for sports.

None of which had anything to do with the guy he'd just knocked over.

"Shit," he muttered, ignoring the way Molly Kincaid was laughing at him. She usually did, which was fine since they'd been friends forever. They'd even tried dating for a few weeks back in freshman year, but she'd dumped him for Travis Kilenny, which was just as well since Tommy kind of knew it wasn't going to be anything, anyway.

He still let her -- and everyone else -- think she'd broken his heart. It made it easier when he turned down dates with his friends' sisters and such.

"Hey. Hey, buddy. You okay?" he asked, worried because the guy's eyes were closed. Jesus, what if he'd really hurt the kid? Then they opened and Tommy found himself staring into the widest blue eyes he'd ever seen. "Uh... hey." He smiled. "Didn't mean to get all bull in the china shop, here. Tell me I didn't break anythin'?"

The guy blinked, then blinked again. "Um, I don't think so. Broke anything. Didn't. I... Shit. If you did, you'd have to buy it." And Lord, Lord. The kid was bright red, probably from realizing how those words had sounded, but damned if it wasn't cute.

"I'm fine," the guy managed, sounding just a little bit out of breath. "Swear."

It was only when those so-blue eyes pulled away from his own that Tommy realized he'd been staring, and fuck. He didn't know what the guy must be thinking after that. Of course, this kid with the black hair and bright eyes had been doing a bit of staring, too, Tommy told himself, though he couldn't be sure if it was shock at being knocked down, or interest.

He kind of wanted it to be interest, he realized with a small bit of surprise. He'd never seen the guy before, but... well, that was a damned shame because Tommy was pretty sure he'd be spanking the monkey to the memory for months.

"Good," he answered with another, broader smile, "then you won't mind if we get you up and stop making a scene? Because Molly just might wet herself if we don't." He winked, then blushed at the loud laugh the guy let out.

Oh, he liked that sound. Wanted to hear it again, even.

"I'm Tommy," he said, even as he grabbed the guy's hand and pulled him to his feet.

"Johnny. John," the kid replied, still blushing a little. "Sorry about that. I... I'm usually less... distracted." And just like that, the blush was deeper, though Tommy couldn't figure out why.

Tommy grinned down a couple inches into those amazing eyes. Damn, that blush was cute... and he did not just think that. Except he had. "Well, Johnny-John. Nice to meet you. I'm guessin' from the accent you're from somewhere that's not here, right?"

Jesus. Just Jesus. Just like that, they were having an actual conversation. It was... cool, Tommy thought with a smile.

The rides. The food. The games. All of it good.

The company? Even better, because Tommy had stuck with him for the last two hours and if Johnny hadn't already had a little crush on the guy from just staring at Tommy's ass, the time they'd spent together would have done it. Not that the rest of the... package... hurt.

Nice eyes, deep and brown and just sparkling in the fading sunlight. Tanned skin, easy smile... and God, those small blond highlights that were obviously not thanks to a skilled hairdresser. Jesus, he'd bet the rest of the body was just as awesome, but he'd already been caught staring once, and the little glances from the corner of his eye weren't really giving him the full picture.

Unfortunately, his parents were waiting for him right up ahead by the ticket booth, and that sort of spelled the end of the night for him. And Tommy had said he'd driven a bunch of his friends there, too, so chances were they would have had to say goodbye soon anyway.

Still, meeting Tommy had been the first bright spot since he'd been forced to come to Oak Grove, and maybe -- just maybe -- it wouldn't be so bad, after all. Johnny kind of thought the guy might possibly swing as off-center as he did, himself. Unless he was totally misreading the small, almost shy touches to his lower back and arms when they'd waited to get on the rides.

"Tommy Paulson," he heard his new friend saying, the words pulling him out of his thoughts and into the real world.

"Yeah. Yeah, sorry. Um, we sort of ran into each other on the ticket line. Mom, Dad, meet Tommy. Tommy, my parents. Alex and Emma Boudreaux."

He didn't miss the way his folks were grinning. He also didn't miss Tommy's soft, simple laugh.

"When your boy, here, says 'ran into each other,' he really means I rolled right over him like a bumblin' oaf. Don't seem to have hurt him any, though, which is good. Momma'd likely have my right nu... uh, nostril if I had, ma'am. Sir." Tommy nodded seriously, still grinning at Johnny's folks.

Then his mother giggled, actually giggled, and Johnny wanted to dig a hole and crawl right in. "I'm guessing a young man like you will probably have use for his... nostrils. It would be a shame to be stuck with only half of a working... nose."

Even better, Johnny thought, trying not to groan out loud. *Please, Mom, expose my new friend to your warped sense of humor. Because that won't have him running far and fast.* Except Tommy seemed to like it, which was... weird. But good.

"Yes, ma'am," Tommy said after a moment, his grin going just a bit wider, "I do believe I'll have plans for my nose, soon enough." Then the guy looked around and frowned. "Been nice meetin' you folks, but I have a feelin' my friends are waitin' on me somewhere." Well, of course they were, Johnny thought with a sigh. He'd known that.

"If you don't have anythin' better to do, thought I might swing by the motel tomorrow," Tommy added, looking at him now. "Maybe we could swim or somethin'. Then I can show you around town, if you want. Introduce you to some of our local legends and shi... uh, stuff."

Johnny blinked, then nodded quickly, before Tommy could change his mind. Did he want to see the guy in whatever he wore to swim, then spend the rest of the day riding around with him? Hell, yes! He'd probably be hard as a rock the entire time, too, because the only thing keeping people from knowing he was right then was the fact that his T-shirt was long enough and loose enough to cover him. And, okay, it was a sort of torment, but if he was right about Tommy, then maybe the torture wouldn't last too long.

"Cool," he said, and he was pretty sure he sounded just that. Cool. But not cold. "Cool," he said again, and the way Tommy's eyes lit up was ... hopeful. "Guess I'll see you then."

He barely remembered to take his book out of the car when they got back to the motel. Hell, he barely remembered to say goodnight to his parents when he disappeared into his room.

He remembered to undress before he got in the shower, though... and he definitely remembered Tommy's name and face and ass when he came hard under the gentle spray of hot water.

Tommy was nearly vibrating. Hell, he'd been getting more and more anxious with every mile marker that told him he was nearing the motel.

He was already wearing his oldest, most worn pair of cut-offs, the denim so soft and thin that Tommy knew -- beyond a shadow of a doubt -- they were obscene when wet. And they were going to be wet.

Pool. Swimming. That was the plan. The spoken plan, anyway. Not the unspoken plan he thought Johnny-John would hopefully be on board with.

And okay, maybe he was getting a little bit ahead of himself with all the planning, but... he'd spent the entire night after dropping his friends off just lying on the couch that doubled as his bed and thinking about the guy he'd met that day.

God, he was... well, Tommy didn't know exactly how to classify JJ, as he'd taken to calling him in his head. Stunning, maybe. Definitely hot, though he supposed JJ wasn't necessarily what would be called handsome.

No, the guy was just too... unusual looking for handsome to be right. Too close to pretty, but with a decidedly masculine cast to those features that just confused the Hell out of Tommy.

Whatever it was, though, Tommy figured he was kind of hooked. He'd even pretended to be asleep until an hour after Momma'd gotten home, just so he could be sure she was sleeping -- and unlikely to come wandering into the small living room of the trailer -- before taking himself in hand.

He might never have really touched another guy, not with any sort of intent... but, God, he wanted to, and he for damned sure wanted it to be JJ.

It sort of surprised him, how much he wanted the guy. Because he'd jerked off before, of course, but always to some nebulous image that combined the best features of some of his friends with those of various sports figures he admired. This was different.

Jesus, he needed to just turn in to the parking lot and dive straight from his truck into the pool. He needed the shock of cold water, if only to make his cock behave. And he didn't even know if he was right about JJ, for fuck's sake. Sure, he thought the guy had been checking him out at the fair, but... JJ was from New Orleans. And city folk were just plain different. Maybe the guy was just friendly. Maybe JJ always looked at new people like he wanted to kiss them hard... if that was even what that look had meant.

Either way, though, Tommy reasoned, it wouldn't do to get out of the truck sporting a huge boner.

Even if JJ really was interested, he didn't want the guy to think this was just some weird variation on a booty call, like Tommy'd heard about on MTV. He actually liked the guy, after all. Wanted to get to know him. Spend some time. And if they ended up at least partly naked at some point and Tommy felt someone else's hand on him for the first time? Well, that would be just... great.

"Christ," he muttered, barely able to hear his own voice under the song playing on the radio, "I really am gay, ain't I?" He chuckled. Well, yeah. But then again, he'd known that, considering he'd been whacking off to mental pictures of other guys for three years, at least.

That he wanted to get to know his first real attraction wasn't that surprising, considering. Hell, he figured he'd have wanted the same if JJ had been a girl, assuming his own inclinations ran that way.

The really freaky thing was that he wasn't freaked. Yet.

Then he actually pulled in to the lot of the small motel, and JJ was sitting there by the pool, nose buried in a book, and Tommy moaned.

Jesus. If just seeing the guy in those shorts and that loose T-shirt, right there in the sun, black hair shining with small touches of red, had Tommy so damned excited, he was definitely in trouble.

He turned off the truck, moaning again when JJ looked up, as though the sudden lack of rumbling from the engine was a bid for attention.

Yeah... he was in trouble, all right. And for some reason, Tommy was glad of it.

He'd been completely absorbed in his book. So much so that he'd nearly forgotten he was waiting for his guest to arrive.

Then he'd heard the sound -- or lack of sound -- when a loud, rumbling engine turned off and he'd looked up.

Johnny tried to ignore the sudden pounding of his heart when Tommy climbed from the cab of the big, shiny truck, but he figured it was hopeless after less than a second. The guy was all... long and strong and just so fucking perfect.

The odd thing about it was that Johnny had never really thought he had a "type." A specific physical sort that just did it for him.

He'd dated back home, sort of, and he'd never noticed any specific similarities between the guys. Some were tall, some short. Some dark, some pale. Some older, some younger... though younger was rare, what with kids his own age not usually being sure of their own sexuality, most times.

Still, there was just something about Tommy, and it wasn't the cut-off shorts the guy was wearing, either, because... well, yeah. Those were good, even with the towel Tommy was holding in front of him. But it for damned sure wasn't all of it.

"Uh, hi," Johnny said, offering a smile as he folded the edge of the page down to mark his place, the words he'd just read already forgotten.

"Hey," he heard, and as much as he hated it, he didn't get the chance to see how well Tommy filled out those shorts, because he suddenly had a face full of towel.

He'd barely managed to pull the fabric from his eyes when he was splashed with copious drops of water, Tommy's "whoo-hooo!" as he jumped into the pool explaining it all.

Actually, it explained a lot of things, Johnny figured. Like why someone like Tommy would want to hang out with him... except that didn't make sense.

The other kids in town just swung by the motel to swim without worrying if they were welcome. So that meant Tommy could do that, too, if he wanted. But the guy had specifically said he was coming and they'd do something after and that sort of sounded like a date.

Rather, it would have sounded like a date if they'd been in New Orleans. In Oak Grove? Well, Johnny had no idea. Hell, for all he knew, Tommy thought Johnny was straight, too.

His mind was racing so fast, so crazily, that Johnny didn't even notice that Tommy had swum a few short laps then folded his arms over the edge of the pool right in front of Johnny's chair.

"Huh?" he asked, jumping just a bit at the sound of the guy's throat being cleared in an obvious bid for his attention.

"I said," Tommy repeated, "the pool's nice. So's the creek, but it's a lot farther away. You ever been skinny dippin' by moonlight, Johnny-John? 'Cause if you haven't, we could do that later. Tonight, maybe."

Damn. If Tommy wasn't gay, too, Johnny figured he might just have to turn in his gaydar for an overhaul. There was heat in those deep brown eyes, after all. Or at least what Johnny read as heat. Interest. Want. And even if he had gone swimming naked before, he wasn't going to say so and miss the chance.

Johnny shrugged. "Figure it's sort of like swimming here. Only darker, right? Less people around?" And, yeah... the look Tommy was giving him kind of made it clear that the guy was just as interested in seeing Johnny all naked and wet as Johnny was in watching slick drops of water sliding slowly over that smooth skin he could sort of see through the water.

Tommy's gaze was promising, Johnny told himself. Promising and unbelievably challenging.

"Bet you'll back out," Tommy said with a grin. "When we're out there by the creek and you have to drop trou, JJ. Bet you won't do it."

Damn. JJ? He kind of liked that. Like... Tommy'd given him a new name that was just for Tommy to use. Still, the rest of the words were pretty much a dare.

Johnny snorted. "Try stopping me. Unlike some people, I've got nothing to be ashamed of." And he figured that was one challenge answered... and one ante just plain upped.

Jesus, he was jittery. And maybe kind of nervous, too, Tommy admitted to himself.

He'd spent the day with JJ. All of it, from the moment he'd gotten to the motel until... well, he was still showing the guy around, which was a little bit surprising, what with Oak Grove having so damned little to see.

Not that JJ seemed to be minding at all, Tommy told himself with a small grin. Hell, the guy seemed to be entirely fascinated by everything Tommy pointed out.

Of course, he was pretty sure that JJ wasn't actually looking at the town, not with the way he could feel those big blue eyes on him almost every moment.

Unfortunately, the sun was starting to set, and while that didn't spell an end to his time with JJ, it did have Tommy feeling more and more anxious. Skinny dipping in the creek had sounded like a great idea when he'd opened his big mouth and let the words spill out earlier, but... for fuck's sake, he didn't even really know what to do beyond that. Or even if there was going to be a beyond.

Sure, JJ had been staring at him all day long, but the guy hadn't made any sort of a move. Neither had Tommy, but he for damned sure wanted to at least touch JJ. Maybe even kiss him, like he'd seen those guys doing on Showtime the last time he'd been over to Molly's house. Or maybe not. That was TV; who knew what guys did in real life?

He for damned sure wanted to see the guy naked, though. That much, he was entirely certain about. He'd never seen another guy naked before. Not when he could actually look and not get his ass kicked, anyway, which was why he was still so damned curious, even with group showering after gym class and practices.

He darted one swift gaze toward the passenger seat, nearly moaning out loud when he caught JJ looking right at him. Like the kid had been expecting the glance.

"Uh... you hungry, JJ? Momma's working tonight... and it's Saturday, which means meatloaf's the special. You haven't lived 'til you've tried Momma's meatloaf." He grinned.

And, okay, it was just her recipe. She didn't actually make it herself. But it was still Momma's meatloaf.

They could go there and sit and eat... talk some more about New Orleans, maybe, because Tommy was just about sure he'd never heard anyone talk about a city the way JJ went on about his home.

Former home, Tommy reminded himself, because Mister Boudreaux was going to be the new manager at the Lockheed Feed processing plant fifteen miles out of town. The whole family was moving to Oak Grove, lock, stock and barrel.

He wasn't sure of why, especially when it obviously had JJ less than happy, but parents usually did whatever they had to, and Tommy thought maybe JJ seemed a little less depressed than the kid had been the night before.

He jumped a bit, caught up in his thoughts, when JJ answered.

"I could eat," JJ said, and damned if there wasn't a tone to that voice that was just purely suggestive, somehow.

And suddenly, Tommy was worried about that, too.

JJ was a year younger, but somehow Tommy all of a sudden had the feeling that even so, JJ might possibly be way more experienced than he was, himself. That wasn't necessarily a bad thing, of course, because then at least one of them would have some sort of clue about what they were doing, but at the same time, it was kind of...

Well, Hell. He didn't want to come off like some scared kid, did he?

But he was, and he was just realizing it.

He was scared, for fuck's sake! Scared that he wouldn't know what to do, or that he'd do it wrong. Scared that JJ's joking words earlier might be right and that maybe he had something to be embarrassed about. Scared that maybe he wasn't even reading the situation right, too.

Could be JJ was staring because he'd never spent any time with a real-life redneck kid from the middle of nowhere and was waiting to see if Tommy did something bizarre, like introducing the guy to his girlfriend-slash-sister, or whatever it was city folk thought his kind of people did.

"You date much?" he finally asked after taking a deep breath and steeling himself to just... well, not just saying it, but more like prying. He'd wanted to do it all day, but he'd been raised to respect people's privacy. His momma had always told him it was rude to fish for information that wasn't freely offered. In this case, though, Tommy figured he needed to know before he went and made an ass of himself. More of an ass.

"Back there in New Orleans, I mean. You got someone waitin'?" And yeah, that was sort of subtle, but also sort of blunt, Tommy decided.

He grinned at the soft whimper he barely heard over the radio. "Got to be hard, I guess. You know... to be all involved with somebody and then have to up and leave. Wouldn't know, myself, 'cause I haven't really dated anyone since Molly and that was... God. Years ago." Tommy chuckled.

"And a bad idea," he added simply when he heard JJ take a breath that was more startled than anything else. "A really, really bad idea. So, do you?"

"Huh?"

Oh. Oh, damn. JJ sounded fucking adorable when he was all confused.

"Do you have someone waitin' at home," Tommy repeated patiently. "Or do you like to play the field? I'm bettin' you don't have many free nights, either way. Not with as good as you look..." That was about as close as he was going to get to asking flat-out, too.

The silence would have been unbearable if it hadn't been for the radio. Even so, Tommy found that he was clutching the steering wheel like a lifeline.

After a solid minute of tension and still more silence, he pulled his truck off to the side of Maple Street, then swung it around behind Old Man Walters' place and cut the engine.

He didn't know where he found the courage. Didn't know whether he'd ever find it again, either, so he just turned and looked at JJ, taking in the stunned, frightened blue eyes in a split second, as well as the way the guy was all hunched in on himself... like JJ was afraid of him, all of a sudden.

"I just want to be sure I'm not steppin' on any toes," Tommy just about whispered into the quiet, courage clearly not having anything to do with volume. "Don't want to start anythin' here that's gonna have either one of us feelin' guilty later, you know?"

Because that was another thing his momma had taught him. Never step in where someone else's shoes already were. Never be like his daddy or that teacher he'd run off with. Never break up something good out of plain old lust. Because lust faded, but being that sort of betrayer didn't. It sullied you for life.

And wasn't that look of still stunned but not scared anymore heat a good look on JJ, Tommy noticed with a grin, all thoughts of his daddy and such fleeing in less than a second. JJ's words helped with that, too.

The kid was blushing, but that didn't stop him from speaking, his so-blue eyes still wide and locked on Tommy's own.

"I haven't dated for the last few months. Dad's had some, uh... health problems. I..." JJ frowned, and Tommy wanted to just wipe the look from his face. "Are you... I mean, it kind of sounds like you sort of want..."

"You? Yeah." Tommy offered when the guy's voice faded. "Shit. This is... weird, okay? Because I know I'm not into girls but I've never... I mean..." And God help him, he just couldn't control his mouth because it was going on, telling JJ things he'd never planned on telling anyone, or at least not someone he'd known for maybe a day.

The guy looked kind of spooked, too, which pretty much clued Tommy in to the fact that he'd been wrong. JJ was straight. That didn't stop Tommy's mouth, though, damn it.

"I never wanted someone I just met. Not like... for real, okay? But then I knocked you over last night and you're so damned... I mean, look, JJ, it's cool. I get it that you don't swing like I do and that's fine, but if you could maybe just not tell anyone I got all... Fuck. See, thing is, nobody

knows, and I kind of want to keep it that way, and I'm sorry. I just... I really like you. And, yeah, I pretty much want you, but that doesn't mean we can't be friends, right?" Jesus, he hadn't said that many words all at once before in his life.

He swallowed hard, dragging his eyes away from what had to be horrified fascination on JJ's face, and... yeah, college couldn't happen soon enough. Maybe then he could forget about how he'd just totally humiliated himself. To a guy who was going to be living in Oak Grove and would probably tell everyone by accident, even if not through malice.

"Shit," Tommy sighed. "Can I maybe bribe you not to tell? I got a few hundred bucks saved up for when I go to school and..."

Okay.

Okay, wow.

Tommy'd just said... and he looked so...

And God, maybe this was the opening window while the door of New Orleans was firmly closing on his ass, Johnny thought.

He'd spent the entire day trying to behave himself -- trying to not touch Tommy, even when the guy's friendly nature seemed to be leaving an opening for Johnny to brush against him or rub shoulders or... well.

Hell, he'd also spent the day waffling between thinking Tommy was flirting and thinking he, himself, was imagining things. There was the heat in the guy's eyes, yeah... but there was also the careful distance Tommy had kept between them. No more than a few inches when they'd been walking around town, but very obviously there anyway.

There were the small confidences, spoken in soft, intimate tones so nobody else would hear, but there were also simple comments that had seemed more friendly than flirty, and Johnny had finally decided that Tommy was just messing around, so he'd forced himself to push aside whatever hopes he'd been nurturing.

Then all the questions about home and dating... and Tommy saying what he had about stepping on toes and guilt. And now...? Well, now Johnny didn't know what to think, because Tommy's words had come out in such a rush, he hadn't really had time to process them. Aside from the fact that Tommy was clearly begging Johnny not to out him, anyway... and was offering money or whatever to keep him quiet.

Johnny frowned just a little, then shrugged to himself. He didn't need money, really. He was going to be living in Oak Grove, Arkansas. It wasn't like there was much he'd want to buy.

On the other hand, Tommy had clearly missed something. Like the fact that Johnny was just as gay -- and just as interested. And he wanted his night of naked swimming, damn it. With Tommy.

That didn't mean he couldn't push a few buttons, though, because... he'd actually seen what Tommy had to offer when the guy had gotten out of the pool at the motel earlier. Those cut-offs were indecent, much to Johnny's delight.

He figured he could play games. Could let Tommy go on thinking he'd messed things up. For a few more hours, anyway, before coming clean, so to speak. He could even let the guy think he was going to be exposed -- in the non-naked sense -- to his friends and everyone else in the tiny town. It might even be fun to let him think that, but... it would be mean. Cruel. Heartless, even. And Johnny couldn't do that. Not when his own heart was pounding so hard in his chest that he thought the next Boudreaux to have a coronary might be him, rather than his father.

"Okay," he answered, making his face as serious as he could manage, "you can bribe me, I guess. To keep your big gay secret, I mean. But I don't want money."

He was laughing on the inside, even as Tommy turned worried eyes to him again with a nod.

"Wh... what do you want, then?" Tommy nearly whispered, looking maybe a quarter as relieved as Johnny thought he should. "I don't have much, but... if I can get it, I will."

God, he was going to burn in Hell for even playing around as much as he'd just done. Johnny just knew it. And it was wrong to screw with Tommy this way, anyway. His mother would skin him alive if she knew. For that, and the gay thing, too, most likely.

He sighed and shook his head, pushing aside the impulse to tease even a little bit more.

Johnny lifted his closer hand and slid it across the bench seat of the truck, letting his fingers just barely stroke the side of Tommy's leg. "A kiss," he answered, meeting those dull, defeated brown eyes with a small, apologetic smile. "I want a kiss, Tommy. But only if you want to, okay?" And that was true. He didn't want the guy to even look at him unless it was what Tommy wanted. He wasn't into blackmail, after all. And he for damned sure did want Tommy, even if he'd never really done it before.

He'd done his research at some of the adult shops in the French Quarter. Knew what went where and how. And he wanted that. With Tommy, sudden as it was. Even before he'd been sure of the guy's orientation, he'd wanted that. Now that he knew, though... he wanted it even more.

Oh, not right that minute, but... eventually. Yeah, at some point, he wanted Tommy to fuck him. Wanted to fuck Tommy. Wanted to know the guy as intimately as two guys could ever know each other. But first... he wanted a kiss, damn it. Hopefully the first of many.

"So, do you? Want to?" Johnny murmured, sliding closer along the seat as his hand curved over Tommy's thigh, fingers rubbing lightly against denim.

Fuck. Fucking Hell. Jesus fucking Hell!

Tommy had been so sure. So sure he'd gone and fucked up and ruined whatever he'd been doing with JJ, but... "A kiss," the guy had just said.

A kiss.

And only if Tommy wanted to.

Hah! Wanted to was an understatement, especially with JJ's hand all hot and moving on his leg, for fuck's sake.

Jesus, it felt like his cock was going to explode from just that, and not necessarily in the good way.

"Uh... uh, yeah," Tommy tried to say, but what came out of his mouth was more of a whine that took on three parts.

He knew he was starting to blush, but then he didn't care because that long, lean body was leaning toward him and JJ was right there, mouth less than an inch from his own, and... and oh, God. JJ's lips were just as soft as they looked.

Softer than soft, even, but firm at the same time, and just so God damned mobile against his.

His first kiss, if he didn't count the fumbling attempts with Molly, and he didn't. This counted, though. This first touch of his mouth to JJ's. This bizarre and unexpected moment behind Old Man Walters' house, bathed in the near-rainbow of colors put up by the sunset.

His hands moved, somehow finding and grasping at JJ's too-big T-shirt, and Tommy wasn't sure of when JJ had crawled into his lap, but he was for damned sure not complaining.

He was complaining even less when JJ's strong, lean body pressed down on him, toned thighs atop his own while JJ's knees pushed against the outsides of Tommy's legs.

God, he just needed to pull the kid down and they'd be pretty much cock to cock, and that might kill him.

He moaned loudly, fingers sliding up under the back of JJ's shirt as though they knew what they were doing. Then the lips on his own opened, and Tommy was entirely lost.

He felt slick-wet-strong pushing into his mouth and his own tongue answered, pulling a long, deep moan from JJ's lips that fed straight into his mouth. He swallowed it, feeding a matching sound of need back.

His cock was throbbing, aching, pulsing in time with the nearly desperate thrusts of his tongue, and JJ was rocking on him, the tight little ass that Tommy had tried his damndest not to stare at just sliding back and forth on his lap. His own hands were grasping great swaths of smooth, silken skin, and Tommy was pretty sure he could die happy, right then.

Then JJ's hot, wicked mouth pulled away, and Tommy groaned in disappointment before he saw JJ's eyes and recognized the need-want-coming-so-hot, and that was it.

His hips arched, pushing up from the seat of his truck and jamming his hard shaft repeatedly against the slightly yielding flesh above him, and just like that...

"G-God! JJ! C-coming!" he gasped.

He barely noticed the answering nod, JJ's fingers suddenly harder on his arms as the guy shook and shuddered, rocked and writhed on him, a sharp cry leaving those now deeply red lips.

Fuck.

Just... fuck.

He'd never come so hard in his life, and he knew it.

Not even the time he'd jerked off while thinking about the way Jimmy's hand had accidentally brushed his ass in the showers that time.

And they hadn't even been naked, him and JJ.

Tommy closed his eyes, trying to let his heart go back to beating like it usually did, and not like he was a jackrabbit being chased by hounds.

His hands moved slowly up and down JJ's back, even while he admitted that he was even more scared now than he'd been before their... kiss.

He was eighteen. This was supposed to be all about sex, not... whatever the Hell had just happened.

Really good sex, his mind supplied. And damned amazing for a first effort, too.

Okay. He was thinking rationally again. Good.

Sex.

Lust.

A fucking orgasm like none he'd ever known before.

With JJ, who was clearly magical because Tommy couldn't imagine anyone being more fucking perfect right then.

JJ. Who was currently still sitting on Tommy's swiftly dampening lap and looking at him like he was a god.

"Um. Okay," Tommy finally managed to say, once his voice was working, "I guess that was more than just a kiss, huh?"

JJ's laughter eased things. Made everything less... immediate. Less freaksome.

"Didn't you promise to feed me?" JJ asked a minute later, when he was back on the passenger side of the truck. "I think you said something about meatloaf. And for some reason, I'm really hungry. I think I need to go by the motel first, though. Clean pants would be good." JJ winked at him, just like nothing big or important had happened, and that only eased Tommy more.

Yeah... yeah. Clean clothes. The diner. Food. Momma.

Then the creek, and maybe they could do that again, only without all the fabric.

It was a plan, Tommy figured, and a good one.

Hell, he had two more months before he'd need to leave for school. Who knew how many other firsts he and JJ could work their way through?

Well, Tommy didn't, but he was for damned sure going to find out... and he had a feeling JJ wouldn't mind, either.

August, 2008
Vista del Sol, California

"We were pretty much inseparable that first summer," Thomas said, eyes still closed. "Oh, there was a week or so when he and his folks took off to close up their old house and such, but other than that? It was the Tommy and Johnny show, you know? And, God, it was so good. Still scary, but... we were kids, Alan. Sort of finding our way with a whole lot of enthusiasm and guesswork. And hiding, of course, because Oak Grove? Not really the best place to be gay."

Alan chuckled softly, gazing at his lover. Former lover might be the more appropriate term, he figured. Because there was just no way he could compete with the memories that were making Thomas smile like that. Which sort of explained why they'd never gotten past just liking each other a whole lot, in and out of bed. Or loving, but not... well, not in the same way.

And that was fine, Alan told himself. He'd never really expected things to become anything more, anyway. Thomas was his best friend, yes. And the sex was always incredible... assuming the guy'd had at least a few hours of sleep. But Alan had known in the first six months of their relationship that there was something holding Thomas back, and now... Well, now he sort of thought it might have been this JJ whom Thomas was clearly still in love with.

"I think it's great, Thomas," he said after a moment. "It's incredibly cool that you had someone to try things out with. It must have been way less traumatic than, say... letting yourself be fucked dry because you just didn't know any better and were so desperate to know someone wanted you, you'd have done pretty much anything they asked." Alan blushed when that got him a sympathetic smile. "But you already know that story."

Thomas sighed and reached out, one hand gripping Alan's on top of the table. "I do," he agreed, "and I'm still willing to beat the merry fuck out of the bastard, if you'd just give me a name. No first time should be like that. Even when it's not romantic and sweet, a first time should at least be..." He frowned. "Well, it shouldn't involve bleeding, anyway."

Alan shook his head, still touched by knowing Thomas really would kick the shit out of the guy who'd done it, even all these years later. "True... and at least your first time was with someone you loved. No matter what happened later, at least you'll always know... What?" He bit his lip, staring at Thomas while the man shook his head.

"I never had sex with JJ," Thomas said slowly, staring at the tiles on the table in front of him. "I mean, I did, but... not full-on penetrative sex, you know? I..." He shook his head again and released one long, slow breath. "We wanted to. Of course we did. We were teenagers. But we'd never done it before, either one of us, and even if JJ sort of knew what to do, we were... I guess we were scared. And it was so good just to touch, too, you know?"

Thomas laughed softly, the sound less amused than rueful. "We learned each other so well that summer. Hands, mouths, tongues. Hell, there was a spot just beneath JJ's left ankle bone that made him shiver when I licked it. He could make me come just by biting my hip. It was... Fuck,

it was good, and neither one of us wanted to mess things up. We thought about it a lot. Talked about doing it, even, but... we didn't." He swallowed hard. "My first time -- first time for real, actual cock-in-my-ass sex -- was a year later. That second summer."

"Jesus," Alan whispered, because Thomas had said "never." He'd never had sex with JJ. Never really. And that meant... "You fucked someone else? God, Thomas! What were you thinking?"

This time Thomas' laugh was bitter. "I was thinking JJ would catch me at it and cut me loose. I was thinking there were worse people to fuck than my college roommate, who was so experienced, it'd have to be okay. And I was thinking... I was thinking that I was too young to be so damned caught up in one person who was so far away; that it was weird and just plain stupid to spend months away at school and only ever feel my own hand on my cock because I was being faithful to some guy I only saw on holidays."

"Uh-huh. And who, exactly, helped you think that? I'll bet you a million bucks it was that roommate of yours." Alan almost laughed at the surprised look Thomas gave him then, but he was just too damned angry. "Please. Any guy who'd go home with you and be willing to fuck you just to get your boyfriend to dump you? Obviously after your ass. Or your cock. Or both."

"I was young," Thomas muttered, blushing deeply.

"And stupid," Alan agreed.

Thomas sighed again. "A naïve hick. True."

"Anyway," Thomas went on after a minute or three of silence, "I was about a month into that second summer break and we were getting closer and closer to not stopping with just blow jobs and hands and rimming, and I knew that once we'd really done it -- fucked, made love, whatever -- I wouldn't be able to walk away. I mean, I didn't know it in words, really; it was just a feeling. But now, looking back? Yeah. And Eric... well, I thought he was my friend, Alan. I really thought he was trying to look out for me. To keep me from throwing my life away by dropping out of pre-med just to be closer to JJ. Which was a real possibility, since I was already so fucking unhinged by missing him and then being with him again on breaks."

Alan snorted. "With friends like that..."

Another sigh. "I know. I know."

"Okay, just checking. And?"

"And Eric called, just to see how I was doing, you know? I didn't think there was anything wrong with telling him what was going on. He was gay, too, so I figured he'd understand." Thomas swallowed hard. "That's when he told me all about my brilliant future as the token faggot of Oak Grove, because wouldn't JJ be going off to college soon enough, too? And wouldn't that leave me all on my own in a small town where everybody would have way too much fun pointing and laughing?"

"Christ. What an asshole." A fucking manipulative asshole, at that.

Thomas nodded slowly. "So we set things up so JJ would catch us at it. And he did. Hell, he walked in to Momma's trailer, expecting to watch a movie and make out on the couch, like we usually did whenever I was home and Momma was working late. Expecting to spend the night pushing each other, nearly daring each other to just do it, finally. Instead, he got to see me bent over the arm of the sofa while Eric fucked me. And just to make it all even more special for JJ, Eric kept grunting and moaning, saying how much he'd missed my ass since I'd gone home. How tight I always was around him."

"Fuck." Alan whistled, once he realized Thomas was finished talking. "You're really lucky your JJ was from out of town. I'm guessing any guy born and raised in Oak Grove probably would have shot you for that. And that fucking bastard Eric, too." And damned if Alan didn't agree with what Thomas had said earlier. The younger version of Thomas had definitely torn out poor JJ's heart and stomped all over it. On purpose.

Of course, Alan also figured Thomas had paid for it. Was still paying. And with Johnny Boudreaux dead, there was very little chance that Thomas would ever find his way to forgiving himself. If he hadn't managed it in ten years, then... yeah.

"He couldn't see much after the first minute, I think. He was crying," Thomas whispered. "When JJ ran out of the trailer, he was crying. I heard him. And Eric just kept going, even though I told him to stop. Except then he was saying how much he'd wanted me all year, how badly he'd wanted to be the first one to fuck my 'cherry ass'... and I was so damned confused, Alan. Because he made it good. Made me come so hard, I nearly passed out."

Thomas' eyes squeezed shut, and he shook his head again. "I never saw JJ again after that. I was there for another month, and even with as small as Oak Grove is, I never saw so much as his shadow. And Eric stayed. He fucking outted me to the whole damned town, too, but he always said that was an accident. We... we were a couple by the time we went back to school. Right up until I caught him fucking one of the new freshmen. In our room. On my bed, not his."

Alan groaned. "Sounds like a real prince. Hey, any idea of where he is now? Because I'd be more than happy to kick his ass for you. Just like you keep offering to do to that guy who was my first. Because, honestly, Thomas? It sounds like this Eric person fucked you harder and made you bleed even more than Ste... uh, Mister Nameless did to me." Hell, Thomas was still bleeding, even if he didn't know it.

"No," Thomas answered with a small, sad-looking smile. "Eric got what he deserved, I guess. Last I heard, he'd been expelled from the master's program at NYU. Apparently he decided to screw around with the wrong guy. I guess the lesson to be learned from that is... don't give the Dean of Students' son -- whether he's out or not -- an STD, even one that can be cured with antibiotics. Especially when the two of you are supposed to be exclusive and tested negative for everything just a few months earlier. After that little episode, well... I can't say for sure that he

was blackballed in academia, but as far as I know, Eric never got accepted into another post-grad program."

Good, Alan thought, because it was plain old stupid and dangerous to expose yourself to unsafe sex. Exposing a long term or even just regular partner, too, was nothing but... arrogant and fucking reckless, not to mention irresponsible.

"So," Alan said gently, not really changing the subject but bringing the whole conversation back, full circle, to its start, "are you planning to call JJ's mom? Or... I could do it, if you want. I... this has to be hard for you."

Thomas shuddered, fingers gripping Alan's more tightly. "I... would you mind? I just... I don't think I can talk to her right now. Not after all this time. And with JJ being... Fuck. I can't say it, Alan. Not again." If Thomas did, Alan figured, the man would probably start crying like a baby. And he had to be back at the hospital in... Hell, two hours. They'd think he was drunk or stoned if he went back with his eyes swollen and bloodshot.

So Alan nodded and returned the pressure of Thomas' hand. "Go take a shower. I'll make up some fresh coffee. You have clean scrubs in the top drawer, by the way. It might be a good idea to wear them when you go back to work, okay?" He smiled and pressed a light kiss to Thomas' dry, sad lips before releasing the man's trembling fingers. "I'll set the alarm for an hour, Thomas. You need at least a few minutes of rest before you head back to the ER. Everything else, we can talk about later."

"Thanks," Thomas whispered, obviously tired and aching as he rose from his chair. "And Alan?" he added, pausing in the kitchen doorway to look back, "I do love you. You know that, right?"

Alan nodded, holding back his sigh until he heard the shower start running. "You love me," he murmured, "but you're not in love with me, Thomas. Which is fair because I feel exactly the same way about you."

It was true, too.

And maybe he could have deluded himself for a while longer, Alan admitted, if he hadn't found out about JJ and everything else that had happened, but the truth was... Thomas was a good man, no matter what he'd done when he was younger. He deserved to be happy and in love again, but he never would be unless Alan did the right thing and somehow found a way to downgrade "boyfriends" to "best friends who don't fuck."

It was a piss-poor time for it, Alan knew, what with JJ being suddenly dead and everything, but... it had to be done. And now that he knew it, he didn't want to put it off for too long. It wouldn't be fair to either himself or Thomas to wait.

"If 't were done, 't were best done quickly," Alan muttered, but first he had to call Emma Boudreaux and find out what had happened. As soon as Thomas went to sleep.

Thomas woke with a start, his entire body clenching when he saw the bright, glowing numbers on the clock by the bed.

"Shit!" he nearly screamed, "Alan! Fuck, Alan, I thought you were going to set the alarm!"

He lunged from the bed, calves tangled in the sheets, and it was only landing hard on the floor that forced the breath from him and stopped his voice.

Thomas could tell that Alan was obviously trying not to laugh when he stepped into the bedroom and saw Thomas there, sleep-rumpled and naked and nearly angry enough to spit tacks. It was... annoying, Thomas thought, but that was Alan, after all, and at least the man was trying.

"I did," Alan said, "and then I turned it off. You're not going back to the hospital today. Not for at least a few more days, either.

"I spoke with Mrs. Boudreaux," Alan added, "and then I called the hospital. You're on emergency leave for the next two weeks. Family thing. And stop glaring. You're going back to Arkansas on the redeye flight to Little Rock. There's an SUV reserved for you with One-Stop Rentals. Oh, and I talked to your mom. The place above the diner is vacant right now, since someone named Cooter...? Shooter? Whatever. Since some guy with a weird redneck name moved out to live with his girlfriend last week. Or I assume it's his girlfriend. Unless it's his sister. Jackie, in any case. I think."

Alan grinned then. "I already packed for you, so if you'll just get yourself up off the floor and put on some clothes? We can stop for coffee and maybe a sandwich on the way to the plane. I have a few things to finish up in postproduction, so I won't be able to make it out there for a few days. Now, get moving. We need to be out the door in twenty minutes if you want food before the airport."

Thomas found himself staring at an empty doorway a few seconds later, his mind spinning. He'd only been asleep for four hours, but even so, it almost scared him how much Alan had gotten done.

Still, he remembered with a fond smile, that ability to multitask and just plain get things done was what had attracted him to Alan in the first place.

The guy had breezed into the ER less than a month after Thomas had started his residency, looking for a coworker who'd wound up on the wrong end of a curling iron.

It had taken less than half an hour for Alan to cut through the red tape, get the studio to authorize the medical expenses -- even with the poor girl's insurance being expired -- and get her into an examining room.

Granted, it had been a slow day, but even so, Alan had managed it without making even the sourest of the nurses on duty scowl.

He'd also managed to somehow scope Thomas out, find out he was gay, and invite him to have drinks whenever their schedules might mesh -- and in less than five minutes.

There was something to be said for sheer determination. Especially when it was being applied to what would likely have been more than difficult for Thomas to accomplish, himself.

And just like that, he remembered what he hadn't really forgotten.

JJ was dead.

And Thomas was going back to Oak Grove to mourn.

"Hell," he whispered, then got up after untangling the sheets from around his legs.

The hospital wasn't going to be happy about him taking the time off, and he knew it. He just... didn't much care, Thomas realized with a large degree of shock.

Yes, he loved what he did. Loved knowing that the seemingly endless hours he spent in the ER or time that he had spent as a student in the lab or even on blood work helped to save lives.

He loved knowing that some day soon he'd be able to go into private practice, secure in the knowledge that he'd paid his dues; that he was qualified not only academically, but through experience, to handle whatever might happen unexpectedly.

But right at the moment, he cared more about the fact that... JJ was gone and Thomas needed to go home. To wander the places they'd last been together. To remember the good times and say his goodbyes and maybe even beg forgiveness of the man's spirit. Casket. Something.

He would cry when he was there; he knew it. Hell, he was already tearing up a little.

"God... how can he be dead?" Thomas asked himself, even as he followed Alan's directions and got himself dressed and more or less presentable. It should have been impossible, and yet...

Oak Grove, Arkansas
August, 2008

Jesus. The town was bigger than Thomas remembered, but it was still pretty damned small, compared to even just his neighborhood in LA, wasn't it?

Well, yeah. In fact, Thomas couldn't quite figure out why it even still existed, considering the fact that in the nearly ten years he'd been gone, the highway had bypassed Oak Grove, not even laying an exit closer than half an hour away.

Which was probably why the place still had that same small town feel, unlike Elk Hollow, which was called Elkton now, since they'd apparently gotten the bid for access.

He was glad, in any case, because there would have been something... jarring, he figured, about coming home for the first time in ages and finding it to be some long, dirty stretch of strip malls, fast food joints, and dank motels that made the old Clearing look like the Four Seasons.

Still, Oak Grove really had changed some.

The cinema had expanded, with two theaters now. The diner had been upgraded, which he'd known because Momma had told him so a good four years earlier, though she hadn't mentioned the extent of the renovations. To the outside, at least, because he hadn't been inside yet.

Adobo Hardware looked bright and shiny and not at all like the run-down storefront it had been the last time Thomas had visited, and the old furniture store that Mrs. Jones had made into more of a catch-all thrift shop than anything else was still there, but he could tell it had become more rarified and possibly antique-y just by glancing at the front window.

Of course, that might have something to do with the construction he'd seen a few miles out, though he wasn't entirely sure of what was going on with that. It had looked like houses, but... not the kind of big, rambling affairs out-of-towners might want to buy. Also not like any sort of low-income housing, which actually made sense since there wasn't really any sort of industry in or around Oak Grove that would draw new people in need of work and lodgings. In fact, aside from the feed plant, there really wasn't much industry at all.

"God," Thomas whispered to himself, the years of being cosmopolitan -- and stressed by school and then work -- fading away. "I've missed this. Missed home."

He wondered for a moment whether he would have stayed away so long if it hadn't been for fear of remembering JJ and all the things they'd done and hadn't done, but it was irrelevant, he realized. He wouldn't have been able to appreciate the stunning simplicity and rightness of his hometown if he hadn't been gone for as long as he had. And if his absence really was due to JJ, then... that was one more thing to thank the guy for when Thomas stood beside the casket.

Hell, he'd thank the guy's spirit for that anyway, and for the memories. It couldn't hurt either of them anymore.

He pulled the rented SUV over, parking easily at the curb in front of Oak Grove Pharmacy and Tackle, staring down the main strip with a small smile on his face.

He remembered the beginning of that second summer with JJ, when he'd strolled into the drugstore trying to act so calm and cool. He'd been there to buy condoms, readier than he'd ever been to take things to the next level with his boyfriend. On a theoretical level, anyway. Physically ready, too, but damn, Tommy had been nervous about that. And the buying rubbers. Nervous all over.

Jake Thornton had been on the register that day, he recalled, because his dad, Will Thornton, owned the store and was trying to ease him into taking over. Jake had given Thomas such an envious look when he'd set the box on the counter, Thomas had barely managed to pay and leave without stumbling or stammering.

Then again, Thomas was pretty sure Jake had assumed he was planning on having sex with a female.

He sighed softly, the memories just swamping his mind now that he was stopped and not paying attention to driving.

Yeah, it was good to be home. Better than he'd ever imagined, really, even though he'd missed Momma more than any nearing-thirty and almost fully-fledged doctor should.

His eyes closed for a moment, and Thomas took a deep breath, pulling in the scent and taste of home.

Dust, yes. The small tinge of someone burning trash, maybe a few blocks away.

Charring meat, most likely from the diner, especially since it was still warm out and Dan liked to use the grill out back until almost December.

He could feel his mouth watering from that alone, but then there was the almost fruity flavor in the air -- most likely from the Oak Grove Tannery, which had nothing to do with tanning hides, unless they were the hides of the residents, Thomas told himself with a grin. Cocoa butter and sun lamps. Tanned hides, indeed.

Home had changed. But for the better, as far as he was concerned. With the notable exception of there being no JJ Boudreaux to make it, well... To make it exactly what Thomas had run away from, if he were being honest.

On second thought, he told himself, acknowledging the full truth, "home" was just another town.

A town that held his dearest, most cherished memories, but... he'd ignored all of that, hadn't he? He'd deliberately made himself a stranger. And it was only now -- when there was nothing left in Oak Grove other than his momma that could make him want to stay -- that he was realizing what he'd tossed aside.

Yes, he'd managed to make a successful life for himself, even if he was working crazy hours and not getting anything like enough sleep.

Yes, he'd gotten lucky with grants and partial scholarships, and Dad had been really good about helping out.

And yes. He was fucking miserable. Had been ever since that night he'd told Alan about.

Even with a guy like Alan in his life, in his bed, Thomas was miserable.

He loved JJ. Always had; probably always would. And he'd left. Given that up. Given up... everything that could have made him ecstatic.

Thomas allowed himself a brief moment of wondering "what if."

What if he'd just ignored his own worries and let himself make love with JJ?

What if he'd never listened to Eric?

What if he'd left school and moved home again? Would it really have been so bad?

Okay, so maybe he would have been the laughingstock of Oak Grove for a while. But he would have had JJ. He wouldn't be a doctor, most likely, but there were loads of other things Thomas could have done. He'd never been stupid, after all... except for when he'd hurt the only person he'd ever really loved, aside from his momma... and Alan, though he loved them very differently from the way he finally understood he loved JJ.

And JJ would have been leaving, anyway, just like Eric had said, but still...

Yeah. Thomas had made some huge mistakes, and he knew it. Too late, but he knew. Hindsight was always a stone bitch.

"Shit," he muttered, opening his eyes again, only to find them wider than wide a second later because the woman who was walking out of the drug store looked familiar. Like... "Jesus fuck," he grunted, a smile stretching his lips all of a sudden as he hit the automatic window control to open the window further and leaned out. "Molly Kincaid? Is that really you?"

Damn, she looked good. Softer, somehow. Rounder. Curvier. And there was such a smile parting her lips that Thomas found his own grin growing even more.

"Jesus, girl!" he laughed, pushing himself from the rental and moving swiftly to pull her into a strong hug. "You look great! I didn't even know you were still here!"

He let himself hope that they might find some time to sit down at the Starbucks he'd noticed earlier, but then there was a much smaller body barreling into them and a young, reedy voice piping up.

"Momma," Thomas heard, even as he moved back to avoid the fingers poking at his side, "who's that man and why's he huggin' you?" And damn. Molly had a kid?

It would explain the ways she'd changed, he realized. He'd heard that having kids could make a woman less... sharp, physically. And she'd been kind of serious with Bobby Bodeen when everything with JJ had hit the fan, so...

Molly laughed, pulling his attention back to her. "Tommy," she said with a slightly sheepish smile that he just didn't understand, "I guess you should meet Jason. Jayce, this is Tommy. He's an old friend of mine. He was real tight with your daddy, too, a while ago."

That was kind of bizarre, Thomas thought, because he and Bobby had never been close. Hell, they'd barely tolerated each other. Of course, that had been when Bobby had known things Thomas hadn't, but it was still true.

He was getting ready to say just that when he looked down and found himself caught in very young but very bright blue eyes under a wild thatch of deeply black hair.

The boy's skin was pale, even with summer being just past, and while Thomas could see a good bit of Molly in the child's cheekbones and chin, the rest of him just screamed "JJ..." God, he thought he might faint, right then and there. No matter how girly that seemed.

Alan almost felt guilty for lying to Thomas. Almost. But while he didn't actually have anything to finish up in post-production on his latest job -- which Thomas would have known if he'd ever actually paid any attention to the ins and outs of Alan's work -- he sort of wanted to get the lay of Oak Grove before Thomas started coloring everything with his own unique opinions.

God help him, but Thomas always had opinions. About everything. And had no hesitation whatsoever about sharing them with Alan. At length. Exhaustively. Usually until Alan had to just agree to disagree when he thought the guy was full of shit, which was more often than not.

Thomas wasn't nasty about it, of course. Just... so damned sure, sometimes Alan wondered if he was disagreeing just to be stubborn or if he really did think Thomas was wrong.

Either way, though, after his rather extended chat with Emma Boudreaux, Alan had felt the need to examine things in Oak Grove without what he was sure would be constant commentary from Thomas.

That was why he'd lied and booked himself on the same flight he'd put Thomas on, though Thomas was way in the back, flying coach while Alan flew first class. Alan made more money, after all, and could spend it however he chose. And he hated flying, so the complimentary champagne had been sort of a necessity.

Now, though... well, he was in Oak Grove, and just from looking around as he drove slowly up Main Street in his rented BMW, tinted windows blocking out the bright sun and curious gazes, he couldn't see why Thomas had ever left.

Okay, it was a small town, and sort of out in the middle of nowhere, but it was just so damned quaint. Peaceful. Hell, just looking out through the window, he saw people walking around and actually smiling at each other. Not "I'm cruising you, smile back if you're interested" grins, but those "hey, good to see you, glad you're doing well" sorts of looks. It was... charming.

It took him a while to notice that there was a Starbucks on the main strip, and he doubted there would be a second one anywhere else, considering the size of the town, but that was fine. As was the clear lack of drive-throughs, bums, and hustlers.

Yeah... if Alan were the sort of film industry guy who scouted locations and was looking for a gleaming slice of small-town America, he'd be creaming his jeans right then, and he knew it.

Oh, Oak Grove would never do for a period piece. It was far too modern. But there were glimpses, here, there, and everywhere, of what had once been. It was... seamless. And definitely a wet dream for producers, if any of them ever found it. Which they wouldn't, Alan promised himself. Or not because of him, anyway.

He took the main drag slowly through town and out the other side, glancing carefully at the directions he'd gotten from one of the map sites on the Internet, and finally he found what he was looking for.

It was an old motel, but had clearly been renovated some time in the last few years because the paint was relatively fresh and the sign out front proudly announced *NEW Central Air! FREE Cable! HI-SPEED Internet Access!* And the pool literally shimmered, sun bouncing lightly from the rippling blue water as an older couple sat snuggled together on the steps in the shallow end, feet lazily kicking up small splashes as they talked to each other, exchanging frequent small, light kisses.

Alan smiled and parked his car in front of the little office, something about the image puzzling him, though he couldn't figure out what just then.

"Hi! You must be Mister Freemont?" a chipper voice said before Alan's eyes could adjust to the softer light inside. "I love your car; it's real pretty! How does it handle?"

Alan blinked, trying to make the transition from bright sunshine to dimmer indoors go faster as he returned the smile in the girl's voice. "It handles just like fine German engineering should," he replied, his smile growing larger when he could finally really see the girl. "Sadly, it's a rental."

She was short. Cute. Wild head of curly red hair that was attempting to break free from the restraint of a simple blue headband. And God, Alan knew actresses and models back in LA who would kill for that smooth skin, not to mention the girl's big, bright green eyes. Although "girl" might be the wrong word, because while this... young woman... wasn't particularly old, she wasn't exactly in her teens. The lush curves of her body -- so unlike the women he knew in Los Angeles -- and the tiny lines at the corners of her eyes when she smiled told him that much.

She was still chattering away, though, and he felt his good mood growing even more. There was just something about anyone who clearly took such joy in their life that was... he didn't know what, but he liked it.

"Yes," he broke in when she paused for breath, "I'm Alan Freemont. Call me Alan, okay? And I didn't catch your name, cutie."

She laughed, those green-green eyes just sparkling, shimmering like the water outside, but not blue. "Janie," she said with a laugh, holding out a hand. "Janie Sylvester. Hubby and I run this place. You'll probably see him around. Big old cabbage head on top of a skinny little body. He looks sort of like a toilet brush if you see him in silhouette." She winked.

Alan couldn't help it, he burst out laughing. "Oh, I'm not buying that for a minute, Janie. A heartbreaker like you? I have a feeling any guy who managed to catch you must be a shining example of manliness. And believe me, I'd know." And then he caught himself. Fuck. He'd pretty much just told this young girl that he spent his free time checking out other men. "Um, I'm from LA, so I know what women go for."

Janie snorted and put her hand over his on the counter with another wink. "Well, that's a shame. I was really hoping you were gay. It's been ages since I've had someone to help me shop the 'net, what with bossman being so busy these days. Hey, you spend much time in Louisiana? You look really familiar."

Alan snorted. "No, I'm a Cali boy, all the way. And can we say stereotype, little miss? Not every gay man is a shopping diva, you know! Some of us... I mean them... I mean. Oh, Hell." He bit his lip until he realized Janie was grinning even wider. "Okay, fine! I'm gay! But that doesn't mean I'm all into fashion and style and..."

He just knew the girl was arching her brow at his Armani Exchange outfit, rather than his words. "Uh-huh," she said, "so, what do you do for a living, Alan? Out there in LA?"

"Tell me you're not pestering the paying customers again," Alan heard, and he literally swallowed a sigh of relief. Then he turned around and gaped. The man was definitely tall... but the only thing that made him look skinny was the giant afro he sported with obvious pride. Aside from that, the man could have modeled for GQ, he was so stunning.

"I, um... you're..."

The guy chuckled and slipped behind the counter, one arm sliding around Janie's shoulders while the girl giggled loudly. "I'm the toilet brush," he said, his eyes rolling in a way that was so affectionately resigned, Alan couldn't help laughing himself. "And do I know you? You look like..." He shook his head.

"Rob Sylvester," the guy went on, free hand shaking Alan's. "And don't worry, okay? The Oak Grove Clearing is a gay-friendly establishment." He cocked his head, like he was thinking. "Actually, most of the town is, these days. I'd stay away from the old Buck's Lodge, though. Even if you're not gay. Harlan Kincaid and his buddies took it over when the actual lodge brothers moved to one of the newer buildings in town, and Harlan and his ilk... they're a tough bunch. Not dangerous!" Rob went on hastily, clearly not wanting to scare Alan off. "They're just kind of freaking out right now, is all. It's a hard time for them, what with everything that's happening next week. It's especially hard for Harlan, and..." He grunted, then blushed enough that it showed, even with his dark skin. Then he stopped talking.

"I already have all your information from when you made your reservation this morning, so you can just head on over to room 214, Alan. Enjoy your stay, and if there's anything I can get you, just press six on the phone, okay?" Janie pulled her elbow from Rob's side with an innocent smile as she handed over the key.

Okay... and there was obviously more going on in Oak Grove than he'd thought, Alan told himself. Fortunately, he had a feeling that Emma Boudreaux should be able to clear things up for him just fine. And she would, he was sure, because she'd invited him to dinner when they'd spoken, once she'd realized he was planning on being in town before nightfall.

Fortunately, he had time to unpack and maybe even take a swim before he'd need to call her for directions. He was pretty good at finding places back in Los Angeles, but that was different. Out here, as he'd learned on his way from Little Rock, one wrong turn could take a guy miles away from any sort of humans, and Alan would be damned if he was going to get lost again. The cows hadn't really been helpful in getting him back on track.

He got settled quickly, mostly because he hadn't brought much, and once he'd hung his shirts, dinner jacket, and single suit up in the bathroom and started the hot water running to steam out the travel creases, he looked at his watch.

Yet another grin crossed his lips and he delved deep in his bag for the swim trunks he'd packed after he'd realized the motel had a pool.

He had at least forty-five minutes before he'd need to start getting dressed for dinner with Emma and Alex Boudreaux, and he planned to make use of them.

It was only when he'd changed and headed outside after grabbing one of the towels from the bathroom that he saw the couple still in the pool -- though now they were leaning back on the

steps and smiling into each others' eyes -- and realized what it was about them that had seemed so strange when he'd first seen them. And it wasn't even that it was so odd, really, because he saw it every day, back home. He just hadn't expected it in Arkansas.

They were older, as he'd noticed before. Possibly in their early- to mid-fifties or so. And they were obviously very much in love, judging by the way their eyes met. They seemed to be constantly aware of exactly where they were in relation to each other at all times, but in a way that implied years spent together, rather than any sort of worry.

They were clearly a part of each other, and presumably becoming more so with every breath they took, with every kiss they shared.

It was heartwarming, but that wasn't what had Alan staring open-mouthed at them.

It was that right there -- in the middle of "God's Country" -- the so-in-love couple he was staring at were both men.

"I guess Rob wasn't kidding," he murmured to himself before dropping his towel on one of the canvas and chrome chaise lounges and diving into the crystal blue water, suddenly hopeful.

"I... how... what..." Thomas knew he was stammering, possibly even blinking like he'd been whacked in the head with a board, but he kind of felt like he had. He couldn't even pretend there was any way Molly's kid wasn't JJ's, but that was just... "Impossible. I mean, I... I thought JJ was... but I guess not, and now... God, Molly, how the Hell...?"

The woman's laugh would probably have offended him if he'd been any less stunned. As it was, though, he barely even marked it.

Molly's eyes -- dark hazel and so alive -- sparkled teasingly and she spoke slowly, just grinning away. "Your momma said you're a doctor now, Tommy. You sure you don't know where babies come from?"

And okay, she had a point. Still, it just seemed so... bizarre.

Almost as bizarre as the fact that Molly and her boy didn't seem at all sad, with JJ being dead and gone.

Jesus, Thomas could barely think coherently, much less speak, but he for damned sure gave it a try anyway. "No, I mean, J... Johnny was... well, I thought he was..."

Molly's eyes widened with what looked like sudden understanding. "Oh! Oh, you're talking about him being gay! Okay!" She blushed a deep, dark red, then dug a few folded bills from the pocket of her jeans. "Here, Jayce," she said, smiling down at her son, "go see if you can beat Billy's score at 'High Noon,' okay? If you don't see me in an hour, I'll be at the diner."

The kid's eyes narrowed suspiciously, but Thomas noticed that he still took the money. "Fine, Momma. But no kissin'!" And with that, the kid took off down the street like someone had lit a fire under him, leaving Thomas to stare and wonder what in the Hell was going on in his hometown.

"The coffee at the diner is better than at that Starbucks," Molly said, as though she was telling him a secret. "Besides, I'm guessing you haven't been to see your momma yet. She didn't say you were coming to visit..."

"It was kind of a last minute thing... you know, because Mrs. Boudreaux called me, and..." And damn, he was confused. "Momma didn't know I was coming out here until late last night."

Molly nodded. "That would explain it. I've been running around all day with Jayce, trying to get everything together for school. I'm sure she would have said something if I'd stopped in earlier. So, how've you been, Tommy? You look... good. Sad, but good."

Thomas sighed. "I... yeah. I've been okay. Kind of tired, mostly. The life of a resident isn't so glamorous, no matter what all those medical dramas make it look like. As for the sad," he went on, falling in step beside her as they started down the street toward the diner and his momma, "it makes sense, doesn't it? What with JJ being... well." God, he still didn't want to say it.

The woman sighed, one hand on his arm pulling Thomas to a stop beside her. "Look, Tommy," she said, her eyes meeting his with a stare that matched the serious tone of her voice. "I know something happened between you two, okay? I even know some of what it was, because Johnny gets kind of chatty and depressed when he's been drinking. But you left. You left and me and Johnny have a child together and nobody ever thought you'd be coming back. Now, if you're here for Johnny, that's all well and good. You want to try to fix his broken heart? I'll call off the wedding in a heartbeat. But don't you dare come rolling up into town acting all sad because I'm marrying your old boyfriend if you're not planning on sticking around and seeing it through. You do that, and I'll make you wish you were dead. Got it?"

He actually swayed, his knees were suddenly so weak. He swayed, and if it hadn't been for Molly's hand tightening around his bicep, he was sure he would have fallen.

"I... married? But he... he's not... not dead... JJ's not...?"

"Oh, Hell. Why would you think he was dead?" he heard Molly say, but his head was swimming and he wasn't sure whether the sudden hope was matched or exceeded by the overwhelming sense of relief just singing through his veins.

"He's alive..." And, yeah, Thomas was pretty sure he'd never gone from shattered to ecstatic so quickly in his life. Not even when he'd thought he'd failed his finals the second year of med school but had ended up being in the top ten of his class.

"Jesus. I guess we really do need to talk. Even more than I thought. Come on, Tommy. Let's get some coffee. Then you can tell me why on earth you thought Johnny was dead, of all things."

Thomas let Molly lead him down the street, his mind still whirring away.

JJ wasn't dead. JJ was, in fact, alive. And well enough that he was planning on getting married. To Molly, of all people. And they had a son together, which was just... impossible, except it obviously wasn't. So maybe JJ wasn't as gay as Thomas had thought, and... Thomas couldn't be sure, but he thought Molly had said something about him fixing things, and if they could be fixed, then didn't that imply that JJ really was gay and might possibly still love him? But if that were true, then why would Molly be marrying JJ, and how did they have a kid together, and...

It was all too fucking confusing. Especially when he didn't seem able to think straight.

Thomas tried to chuckle, but it came out as more of a barking sound. "I somehow doubt coffee's going to help. God, Molly. I'm... shit, I'm so... so damned lost."

The woman looked closely at him, then laughed quietly. "You know, I think you're right. Coffee might not be enough. And I could use a glass of wine, anyway. The Spot, it is. Just let me call Jayce, so he knows where to find me."

He thought he was blinking again, but he couldn't really be sure. It was entirely possible that he was having a stroke, and that was why his vision was flashing between black and Molly. "Uh, your son has a cell phone? Isn't he kind of... young for that?"

Molly snorted. "He's eight years old, Tommy, and he's way more responsible than any of us were at his age. Plus, between my place, Johnny's, and Emma's? It just makes it easier if he has his own number. Now, if you're done parenting for me...?"

Thomas frowned but nodded, leaning against the bricks in front of the movie theater as he did the math in his head, and... if Jason was eight, then that meant JJ and Molly had been having sex that second summer. When he'd hurt JJ so badly.

God. He'd never even suspected.

Fuck. That just... sucked.

He'd been calling himself JB for a good six years, though some people -- mostly family and really close friends -- still called him Johnny, and he didn't mind that. Still, he'd taken to thinking of himself as JB. Not JJ. Never JJ. Not for pretty much a decade.

In his most honest moments -- late at night, when the wind rustled in the leaves outside his bedroom window and he could hear the small, liquid splashes of the waterfall dribbling into the pool below -- he knew he missed that. Missed being JJ. Missed hearing the name he'd considered

an endearment being spoken in the voice he'd last heard begging for *more, harder, please, Eric, please.*

He didn't allow himself those honest moments often. He couldn't take the pain of them.

In his less veracious moments, he told himself -- and anyone else who would listen -- that he was grateful to Tommy. That he wouldn't be where he was if the *rat bastard piece of shit* guy hadn't done what he'd done. He supposed that might even be true, in a way.

He definitely never would have started drowning his sorrows with Molly Kincaid if Tommy hadn't fucked him over. He also never would have ended up having sex with her the one time they'd been so many sheets to the wind that neither of them remembered it, either. He'd never planned to have sex with anyone but Tommy, actually, from the moment he'd met the guy, more or less. But he had.

He didn't blame Molly. Never had. She'd been just as torn up inside that August, after all, what with Bobby breaking up with her and running off to join the Army.

So they'd both been broken-hearted, and somehow they'd gravitated toward each other, becoming fast friends because misery surely did love company. He supposed it made an odd sort of sense that they'd ended up getting drunk down by the creek, sharing stories of when they'd been happy with the men they loved. And at some point, they'd been so drunk that they'd ended up naked.

They'd woken up that way, too, JB remembered with a tiny grimace, and considering his sexuality, they'd assumed that they'd merely gone skinny dipping. No harm, no foul, they'd decided, even if they'd seen each others'... bits and bobs, so to speak.

Six weeks later, Molly had taken a test, and life had changed immeasurably for the both of them.

Still, looking back on it all, it wasn't really the worst thing that could have happened. He had his boy, and Jayce was damned smart. Good looking, too, if JB did say so himself. Hell, the kid was going to break hearts, some day... in the good way, he hoped.

His own plans had changed, too, when Molly decided she wanted to not only have the baby, but keep it... and those changes had led directly to the life he was living.

He liked his life. Loved it, in fact. So he supposed, in a way, Tommy-fucking-Paulson had done him a favor.

That didn't mean he didn't hate the guy, though. And love him, still.

Luckily, the jackass hadn't been back in years and showed no signs of ever returning.

Most days, JB told himself he was glad of it. But in those rare, totally honest moments, he knew he still missed Tommy... almost like Bobby Bodeen surely still missed the leg that had stayed behind in Iraq, when the rest of the man had come home a hero.

"Christ," he grumbled to himself as he saved the program he'd been polishing up, "why am I even thinking about this?" Well, maybe because he still hadn't managed to let it go. Hadn't managed to move on.

Even though he was getting married in less than a week, he still made himself crazy with the past. He couldn't seem to help it, though. Just like he couldn't believe he was actually going to marry Molly Kincaid. She was his best friend, sure, and they did have a kid together, but...

"No 'but,'" he reminded himself out loud. "Bobby's been back for two years. If he was going to step up and try to get her back, he'd have done it by now. She still loves him, I still love... Well, there's nobody I'm interested in who I can have. It'll be good for Jason to have parents who are actually married. And okay, we'll never have sex, but isn't that kind of what being married means?" He chuckled at that, finally finding some amusement in the whole situation.

The phone rang, and JB rolled his eyes at the number being displayed, even as he answered. "Yeah, Jim. No... it's done. Yes, really." He grinned. "I'll FedEx it in a day or so, okay? Yes. Yes, I'm serious. Oh, you know. Lots of explosions, glitter... yeah, just like 'Queen of DeNile'... only better." He laughed and shook his head, even though he knew his agent couldn't see him. "I guarantee you, Jim. The test-groups are going to love it. Make sure the company signs off on my fifteen percent of total gross, though. Because if they won't, there are plenty of others who will. No, I know. I know you will. Your ten percent of my fifteen is going to make you an even more heinously wealthy bastard than you already are. You're coming to the wedding, right?"

Yeah... the schmoozing came easily to him, these days. But he really did want Jim to come. He wanted the guy to actually meet his childhood friends Janie and Rob, since Jim had been so instrumental in getting them out of New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina. He'd been the one who'd sent the chartered helicopter into an area no one wanted to enter on purpose, and JB knew exactly how much it had cost, too. Still, it was worth it. Even Jim thought so. JB could tell.

For a soul-sucking creature of darkness -- well, okay, an agent -- Jim was really a good sort.

They talked for a few more minutes, then JB noticed the time in the lower corner of his monitor. "Oh, fuck," he yelped. "Sorry. Gotta go, man. If I don't haul ass -- right now -- I'll be late for dinner with the folks. They have some sort of guest in town who I supposedly have to meet. Later, Jim. And fax me the contracts, yeah?"

JB hung up and rushed through the computer shutdown, then left his desk, moving faster than he really wanted to.

He darted up the stairs and changed shirts quickly, taking a swift look at himself in the mirror, then running his fingers through his bleached hair, trying to make it just a little less wild.

He made a mental note to trim his goatee later, made sure the long sleeves of his T-shirt covered the ink that crawled over both arms, then nodded and stepped into his engineer boots.

"Hope you're not expecting me to impress your guest, Mom and Dad," he muttered as he left the house, keys jingling in one hand, "because this is as cleaned up as I get."

Except for at the wedding, he reminded himself while he climbed into his chrome-trimmed pickup truck. He was going to give Molly a day to remember, after all. To thank her for standing by him for the last nine years, even when her father had wanted her to abort *that damned evil faggot's devil-baby*.

JB's eyes narrowed to mere slits as that lovely memory reared its ugly head, but, as always, he was soothed by the recollection of Molly's response to the bastard who'd sired her.

She'd stood there, straight and tall, her dark hazel eyes just blazing, one hand resting protectively over her abdomen, and JB had never seen anyone look as disgusted and disappointed as she'd looked in her father right then.

"If you can't find any love in your miserable, shriveled up, homophobic heart for your grandchild," Molly had said sadly, "then you never loved me. At all. Or Momma, either. And Johnny might not be the same kind of man you are, but believe me, Daddy, that's something I thank God for every day. At least my baby won't have bruises all over it because it cried or spit up or said something Johnny didn't think was 'right.' And I'm pretty sure Johnny will never beat me until I decide I really am 'in the mood' at night, either."

God, he still hated Harlan Kincaid for the things he'd done to Molly and her mother. Hated him even more for the fact that the man had just looked at Molly and JB like they were something lower than what he'd scrape off his shoe after a stroll through a pasture. Then the man had turned and walked away.

To the best of JB's knowledge, Harlan Kincaid had never spoken to Molly again, and that was good. He figured he would be in prison right now if the man had. Mostly because JB would have killed the fucker.

He was halfway to his parents' place when he realized he'd forgotten the bottle of wine he'd meant to take, but he wasn't willing to be even later.

He'd bring it next time, he promised himself, though it really was bad form to show up without something, especially when his folks had a guest.

He'd just have to deal, though... and his folks would understand. They knew how he got caught up in his work, after all.

Yeah.

Alan was still grinning when he left his room, all dressed and primped to meet Emma Boudreaux. He'd had a bad moment when he'd realized that he hadn't brought the woman's phone

number with him from LA, then again when he hadn't been able to get an outside line to call information, since he'd also forgotten to bring his phone charger and his mobile was on its last legs. But... Janie and her stunning hunk of a husband had been so nice, he was sure they'd let him use the phone in the office.

Or he was until he saw them in the parking lot, getting in to an obviously old but well-maintained Toyota.

"Hey," he called out, breaking into a trot even though it would likely make him sweat in his slacks and jacket ensemble. "Janie! Rob!"

He almost felt badly for delaying them, but then they turned matching smiles on him and he suddenly felt better. "Sorry," he said, returning the grins with one of his own. "I'm supposed to be going somewhere for dinner and I forgot the number. Do you mind... I mean, could I use the office phone? Or a phone book," he added, in a sudden moment of *duh*. "If it wouldn't hold you up too much, I mean."

Janie and Rob exchanged one glance, then they both smiled again, which Alan found just... charming.

Rob nodded, then handed a cell phone to his wife. "Would you let Momma Boudreaux know we're going to be a few minutes late, midge? I'll get our boy here sorted out."

And again with the *duh*, Alan told himself. Because... small town. Of course the Sylvesters knew the Boudreaux family. Even if there was more than one, which might be possible, except... no. Thomas had said JJ'd moved to Oak Grove from... somewhere.

"Um, sorry. Would that be Emma Boudreaux? Because that's who I'm supposed to be meeting for dinner. Maybe I could just follow you?"

He knew he was in trouble when Janie's eyes lit up like big, emerald spotlights.

"Oh," the girl answered with a grin, "maybe we should save gas and ride together. You know, in that fine rental of yours, Alan. Can I drive?"

He almost said yes, but then he saw Rob shaking his head wildly, the man's deep brown eyes looking almost frightened.

"Um... no. Sorry. I. The. It's only insured for me!" And Rob's subtle thumbs-up congratulated him on the nice save, even though it was the truth.

Janie pouted, even as they all got into the BMW and started out, Alan carefully following Rob's directions.

"You wouldn't know where I could pick up a phone charger, would you?" Alan remembered to ask as he took a sharp curve carefully. "I'm crippled without my cell."

"I'll check the box when we get back," Rob offered. "People are always leaving that kind of thing behind. We probably have one that'll work." Thank God, Alan thought, because he was going to have to call Thomas damned soon.

"Hi, I'm Alan. We spoke on the phone last night."

Well, sure. Emma Boudreaux remembered that very well. They spoken at length, in fact, about her boy and Alan's friend Thomas. Or Tommy, as she remembered him. So, yes. She'd been expecting Alan.

What she hadn't expected was... black hair. Blue eyes. Pale skin, considering the young man was from California. She hadn't been expecting the tall, lanky body that reminded her so much of her own son as little as five years earlier. Before the tattoos and piercings and the many, many changes in hair color.

"I... please, come in," she said, manners winning out over shock after a moment. "And Rob! Janie! Hello, dears!" She moved around the disturbingly familiar-looking young man to hug her quasi-children. "Alex is in the living room; he'd love to see you. It's been weeks!"

She smiled as the two headed off, then returned her attention to Alan, leading him into the kitchen. "So you're Tommy's... special friend, then?" And that was about as subtle as she could be right then. She was still a little bit flummoxed by the resemblance to her own child.

The young man gave her what seemed to be an appraising glance, but then he grinned, a soft, low laugh leaving his lips that made Emma smile, too.

"If by 'special' you mean are we involved, then... no. Not anymore. Of course, I haven't quite told Thomas that yet, but..." Alan shrugged, and Emma was surprised to notice that he didn't seem to be terribly upset.

"Look," the man went on, "I'm not entirely sure of what's going on here, Mrs. Boudreaux, since your son is getting married. But Thomas..." He sighed. "Thomas is in love with JJ. I'm about ninety-nine percent sure that he always was. And as much as I love the guy -- meaning Thomas, not your son -- we make better friends than anything else. Especially when I know he's already committed, whether he knows it or not. Oh, by the way? He thinks JJ's dead."

She knew she was blinking hard, but she couldn't seem to help it. Tommy thought Johnny was gone? For good? But her boy was still so young! How could Tommy even think something like that? It was just... wrong! Wrong and cruel and just evil-minded!

But then she heard Alan going on, and after a minute or so, she had to admit he was right.

So was Tommy, even if his assumption was so far off base as to be entirely outside of the park, and that was as far as she could go with sports analogies.

She could still see why he would have thought what he had, when she certainly hadn't sought him out for nearly a decade. It was only when Johnny and Molly had entered into their hare-brained scheme of getting married that she'd even considered getting in touch with the man who'd broken her boy's poor heart, in the hopes that he'd swoop in and make everything better. It had taken her months to believe Johnny and Molly really meant to do it, though.

She loved her grandson more than just about anything, Emma admitted silently, and she was pleased as punch that he existed. But her boy Johnny was gay. Always had been, and always would be, regardless of the fact that he'd managed to get Molly pregnant. And if he actually married the girl, Emma was afraid that Johnny would be dooming the both of them to a life of misery and bitterness that would likely spill over onto Jayce, too.

That was why she'd finally called. To see whether Tommy still loved her son the way her boy still loved *him*, even if Johnny didn't ever say so.

A mother always knew, Emma told herself again. Just like she'd known Johnny didn't like girls in a romantic way.

Oh, she'd never been entirely happy about that, but not because it was wrong or sick or twisted like Harlan Kincaid insisted.

It was because she loved her son. She didn't want his life to be any more difficult than it had to be. And being a gay man in Oak Grove, Arkansas? Well, she'd known that wouldn't be anything like easy for him.

Of course, things were different now. Johnny had made things different, just by being himself and doing everything he could for the town he'd once hated but had come to love.

"Let me show you something," Emma said, once Alan had a glass of good white wine in his hand. "You tell me if I'm wrong, Alan. Or crazy."

She waited until the young man nodded, then she led him quickly to the foyer again and to the foot of the stairs. She turned on the light there before pointing to the framed photographs in a staggered diagonal path up the wall. "Those are my Johnny, one a year from birth until he was sixteen. Look at them, Alan. Then tell me what we're supposed to do about this whole situation. Because I'm sure you're a nice young man, but... I'm sorry to say that just seeing you convinces me that Tommy does still love my boy. And I'm happy to say that I'm glad you've realized it already."

Jesus. Just... fucking God.

Looking at the pictures was almost like looking at his own mom's family album.

There were some differences, sure, but not many.

JJ was thinner than Alan had been as a child, and their noses were just a bit different. Alan's swept up at the tip, where JJ's was straight, at least according to the pictures.

Alan's brows were thinner, more arched, his cheekbones less defined. His hairline had a bit more of a widow's peak. His skin was maybe a shade or so darker.

Other than that, though, it was like looking into some bizarre, age-reversing mirror... and suddenly Alan knew why Thomas hadn't been so hard to get, back when they'd first met.

Hell, he remembered how shocked Charlie had been when he'd told him he actually had a date with the hot Doctor Paulson. In fact, the male nurse at the hospital had been completely baffled as to why the young doctor would go out with Alan when Thomas had turned down at least two dozen offers from all sorts of men -- and women -- in the previous week alone.

Now it made sense, though.

Oh, he knew Thomas hadn't been pretending he was JJ. But Alan was pretty sure he never would have gotten even his foot in the door, so to speak, if it hadn't been for the coincidental resemblance. He was also fairly certain that Thomas hadn't noticed it on a conscious level, because there had never been even one moment during which Thomas had expected him to act like someone other than himself. That Alan knew of, anyway.

"You're not wrong, Mrs. Boudreaux," he finally said, "and you're not crazy. God, I look more like your son than I do like my own brother."

"Janie and Rob said the same thing when they called earlier," the woman said with a small smile. "Not that it was you, of course, but that there was someone at the motel who reminded them of my Johnny as a boy. I would almost wonder if we were somehow related, except Alex and I are both only children. And please, call me Emma."

Alan smiled. "All right, Emma. So help me out, here. Thomas loves JJ. We know that much. And you say JJ still loves Thomas. So why in the Hell -- pardon my language, ma'am -- but why in the Hell is your son getting married? To a woman, I mean."

Emma frowned, her brow furrowing in that attractive way some older women had, and Alan found himself smiling. It had been ages since he'd seen a woman over the age of twenty-five who actually had creases in her forehead and didn't try to make them invisible with Botox or some other "miracle procedure." It was refreshing. And he kind of thought Hollywood would be a better place if the people there -- men and women, both -- would just embrace the wisdom that life brought to them and their features. If they reveled in it and stopped trying to fight the hands of time.

And, damn, what was Oak Grove doing to him? The minute any of that actually happened, he'd be out of a job, and he knew it.

"That, my dear Alan, is a very long story," Emma Boudreaux said, leaning closer. "It all started with..."

The sound of a car horn broke through her quiet words, blaring loud and clear.

Alan sighed as the woman turned away with a simple "And it'll have to wait. That's Johnny now."

Damn. The way the woman lit up at just knowing her boy was outside had Alan wanting to excuse himself so he could call his own mother. Maybe he'd even drive up to Eureka for a day or two when he got back to California. She'd been wanting to see him for the last year or so, and he'd always been too busy. But he could make time, damn it. It wasn't as though he'd suddenly be unemployable if he left LA for a week. Which he'd just done, actually, and with no concerns.

Yeah, Alan promised himself. He'd take a week and go see Mom. It wasn't like Jared would be there, anyway. His brother hadn't bothered to even call their mother in two years. Not since he'd married that psycho-bitch heiress, in point of fact.

He moved down the stairs and stood a few feet behind Mrs. Boudreaux, his mind still not used to calling her Emma, even if his mouth was. Alan fixed a smile on his face as he waited for the black-haired and blue-eyed boy from the photos to appear.

He was still waiting a few moments later when a tall, slender bleached-blond with a black goatee and some serious ink peeking from under the cuffs of his T-shirt swept in and dragged Mrs. Boudreaux into a huge hug that literally lifted the woman off her feet.

Then Mister Tasty set the woman down and arched one incredibly sexy pierced brow at him. Alan saw a large silver ball on the guy's tongue when that lush, pink mouth opened to lick at full lips, and he nearly groaned.

He could feel the weight of the guy's eyes sweeping over him like Mrs. Boudreaux wasn't even there, and he shivered just a bit before pulling his own gaze away from the guy's lips. He was not there to perv on some dude. He was there to talk to JJ's mom and figure out how to get Thomas and his one true love back together, damn it.

That didn't mean he couldn't look, though. So he did. Enough so that he obviously missed Johnny Boudreaux's entrance, but he couldn't quite manage to be upset over that.

His eyes returned to that long, lean body, raking it slowly once Emma Boudreaux excused herself to join the others -- and her boy, Alan was sure -- in the living room.

"I'm Alan," he said abruptly, but he was feeling abrupt. Like he needed to make himself known before something happened to ruin the bizarrely sudden moment of heated, shared attraction.

"JB," the guy said, moving closer. "You a Boudreaux?"

Alan snorted. "Not likely, or I would have been to Oak Grove before now. Would have seen you before."

The guy chuckled, and it was a deep, dark sound that nearly vibrated in Alan's own chest, JB was so close, all of a sudden. "True enough. But Mom seems to like you, anyway, which means... Alan, huh?" Then those blue eyes widened for such a short moment, Alan almost thought he'd imagined it. "You're Alan Freemont. Tommy's lover. Shit. You're... not what I expected."

That was when all the facts came together.

Blue eyes. Black goatee. Not to mention "Mom," and the fact that the stunning young man who was making Alan shiver was even there at the Boudreaux house.

"Oh, fuck," Alan groaned, silently bidding a fond farewell to any thoughts of maybe getting together with the guy once he'd actually told Thomas they were through. "You're JJ. Johnny. Whatever."

The man -- JB -- nodded slowly, and Alan almost thought he saw a matching disappointment on his face. Then it was gone, and the guy sighed.

"Might as well come on in with the others," JB said softly. "And maybe you'll tell me what the fuck you're doing here. Because I for damned sure didn't invite either you or Tommy to the wedding."

Alan groaned again. "Later, okay? I doubt that's a conversation we should be having in front of Emma. And Janie. And Rob. And your dad, who I haven't even met yet."

If he'd had to categorize the look on JJ's face right then, Alan figured he would have checked the columns for annoyed, amused, and maybe even accepting.

"Fine," the guy answered, moving toward the open doorway Janie was trying to peek through, "but 'later' is going to be pretty damned soon. Count on it."

Alan shook his head, not disagreeing, just expressing his understanding of the inevitability of it all.

"Yeah," he said quietly, voice low enough that the curious redhead wouldn't overhear. "Let's just get through this, okay? Then I'll drop the Sylvesters back at the motel and we can go somewhere. I'll tell you whatever I can." And he would, too, because... if there was any chance for his ex to find happiness with JJ, then Alan wanted it to happen.

That way, he wouldn't feel so guilty when he moved on and found some ecstasy of his own. Or so he kept telling himself.

Thomas could feel his own brain just whirring and spinning away, even though he'd been all settled in the small apartment over the diner for hours. His momma's diner, now, not Dan's at all.

Everything Molly had told him was flying around in his head; the few stories his momma had shared when he'd finally met up with her for some badly needed coffee -- along with the looks she'd kept giving him, like she was glad he was finally willing to listen to what had been going on with JJ, but was also kind of disappointed in him for taking so long about it -- had all become one giant, swirling mass of confusion in his mind.

Of course, that explained why he was still tossing and turning on the surprisingly comfortable double bed, even though it was well past midnight. Even the opportunity to catch up on some of the sleep he'd missed for the two years of his residency had been taken from him. By his own stubbornness and -- yes, he could admit it now -- blatant stupidity, finally recognized.

He tried to excuse himself with the reminder that he'd been young and scared, but... Alan was right, Thomas figured. He'd been an idiot and had chosen the safest path all those years ago. The path that required the least risk on his own part, and damned be to anyone who might have tried to tell him that then.

Of course, nobody had, but that didn't matter. Thomas knew he never would have listened to them.

He wondered whether he would have made different choices if he'd known just how much things were going to change in Oak Grove between his fateful decision and the present. He kind of thought he would have, but... that was from his current age. He'd been an entirely different person at nineteen, and while the boy he'd been was definitely a part of what had formed him, Thomas couldn't say for sure whether his younger self would have been willing to stick it out, even with knowing.

Not that it mattered, he told himself blearily, shifting on the bed, then plowing his fist into the pillow in an effort to force it into a shape that would invite slumber.

God, he needed to talk to Alan. His lover always managed to set him straight, so to speak.

Then again, if he called Alan and actually got something other than the guy's voice mail, Thomas would have to explain about JJ being alive... and about his own feelings, even if he wasn't sure of what they were yet. Which would probably piss Alan off, no end.

It was one thing, he figured, for your boyfriend to say "I love him" when the "him" in question was dead. It was likely to be another when the "him" was not only alive, but apparently -- according to Molly -- single. Aside from the woman that same "him" was planning to marry in a week or so... who was the same woman encouraging a reunion and... God.

So, yeah. Thomas' brain was just running in circles, darting here and there like a baffled hound dog confronted by a meadow full of too many rabbit smells to pick just one out.

Thomas groaned and opened one undoubtedly bloodshot eye to glare accusingly at the bright glow of digital numbers in the otherwise darkened room. As though it was the clock's fault that he was still tossing and turning, rather than the fault of the oddly quiet town outside the window... or the fact that he was clearly playing an enormous -- and thoroughly pointless -- game of "what if" with himself.

Still, it was only nearing one a.m. in California. Alan would definitely still be awake. And probably out with some of their friends, Thomas admitted, because even on the rare occasion that Thomas was home at night, he was usually sleeping. Alan's hours were different, and that meant the guy could actually go out.

Hell, it still amazed Thomas that Alan hadn't decided he was too much effort, considering the bizarre schedule residents kept. That they'd managed to date enough to decide to live together ranked right up there with walking on water, as far as miracles went. And now... well, now Thomas was actually wondering whether it would be smart to throw that away just because Molly thought JJ might still care for him. And whether the smart thing was the right thing, because it wasn't always, and Thomas knew it.

"God... I'm in Hell," he grumbled, closing his eyes again and trying to push the confused babbling of his own brain aside for the moment.

He needed to sleep. He knew that much. And if he could just manage even a few hours of shuteye, maybe things would be clearer when he woke.

He hoped so, anyway, because right at the moment, everything was murky, at best.

He finally nodded off, still thinking about Alan and how lucky he was to have the guy in his life at all... and how stupid he'd been to let JJ go the way he had.

Alan was sure of three things when he woke up the next morning on Johnny Boudreaux's couch.

Number one: JJ really did still love Thomas. Or Tommy, rather, because that was who the guy remembered.

Number two: The bleached blond man who would have seemed like a reprobate, had it not been for his stunning smile and open nature, was possibly too good for Alan's ex.

And number three, which was the hardest one of all for Alan to handle. Number three was... JB Boudreaux really was going to marry Molly Kincaid in less than a week, and -- from what the guy had said during their lengthy and incredibly drunken night of random, rambling conversation -- that would be extremely unfair to everyone involved. By which Alan meant Johnny, Molly,

Thomas, Jason, and even that Bobby Bodeen JJ had spoken of. Not to mention Alan himself, because damn it, he'd be the one to have to pick up the pieces. Of Thomas, at least.

Okay, maybe he was sure of more than just three things, because once he tried to move, he discovered number four -- never drink whiskey with a guy who's been broken-hearted for almost a decade in Arkansas, where drinking was apparently some sort of state sport.

Number five -- jackets and dress slacks weren't really designed for being slept in. Not even just the pants, which looked like they'd been packed into a ball for a year, they were so wrinkled. Also uncomfortable.

And number six, of course, which was... it wasn't wise to pass out on someone's couch in a house the size of JB's unless there was a map to the nearest bathroom handy.

"Fuck. Ow," Alan moaned, his head throbbing so hard when he forced himself to sit up that he thought it might be preparing to jump ship, regardless of being attached to the rest of him.

The loud laugh that came from across the living room made him whimper.

JB couldn't help laughing again, even though he could tell it was hurting the poor guy's head. He'd felt a little bit shaky when he'd woken up a few hours earlier, himself, but nothing like Alan seemed to be.

He wondered for a moment whether that should worry him. He'd probably drunk twice as much booze as the guy had, after all, but then again, JB was used to it. More used to it than Alan obviously was, anyway, which let him push the question of quantity aside. As usual.

"Sorry, man," he said, dropping his voice to a low murmur as he approached the couch. "I just always thought you LA guys knew how to party. At least, that's what they tell us poor redneck types on the TV." He winked, then sat down carefully next to Alan on the sofa. "Hey, you okay?" He chuckled at the red-eyed glare the words got him. "Aside from the hangover, I mean."

Damn, it looked like even shrugging hurt, judging from the grimace that crossed Alan's face.

"Tell you what," JB offered quickly. "There's a full bath down that hall." He pointed, making it clear that he meant the hallway just past the two steps up from the sunken living room. "Why don't you go have a shower? I'll bring you some clothes. I think my things should fit you. Unless you really want to put your suit back on, after." And, God, that grateful look just made JB feel like a hero. Which was kind of funny, since he was at least partially responsible for the state the poor guy was in in the first place.

"There's ibuprofen on the counter. Along with vitamin C and some B-12. Think you can make it, or do you need help?" Because he seriously wouldn't mind helping Alan get there. Wouldn't mind helping him get naked and wet, either, which was kind of disturbing.

Hell, half the reason he was getting married was that nobody had interested him even remotely since Tommy, and yet... here he was, less than a week from the fated day, and he kind of thought he might want this Alan guy. Tommy's ex.

Jesus, how fucked up and twisted did that make him? The first guy he'd really thought about wanting since Tommy not only looked enough like JB that they could be related, but also used to sleep with JB's ex. It was like some crazy gay soap opera, except... it really wasn't.

JB nodded silently, wondering at the conflicting sensations of relief and disappointment created by Alan's muttered, "I'm good. Thanks." And he didn't watch Alan's slow, slightly shaky steps -- or the guy's ass -- as Alan made his way in the direction JB had pointed out. He didn't.

Except he did, and JB was still calling himself all kinds of insane while he grabbed a glass of orange juice from the kitchen and headed directly to his bedroom, where he spent entirely too much time looking through his closet for things that would look good on Alan's similarly lanky form.

JB knocked on the partially open bathroom door a few minutes later, then entered at Alan's grunt, assuming the guy had meant it as "come in." A fleeting smile crossed his lips when he saw the opened bottles of pills on the granite beside the raised basin of the sink, then he set the small pile of folded sweats and T-shirt on the closed top of the commode.

He put the glass of juice down and pulled an unopened toothbrush from the medicine cabinet -- a child's size because Jayce was always forgetting to bring his on the nights he stayed with JB -- and turned toward the glass doors of the shower, about to speak when Alan grunted again, the sound longer, lower... more of a moan.

And Jesus, he'd really misunderstood, JB told himself, pretty sure he was blushing brightly, because even with the steam and streaks of water running down the inside of the glass, it was clear what Alan was doing, and... "Uh-hmmm..." God help him, he'd just cleared his throat! Now Alan would know he was out there watching, getting all pervy and weird while the guy was just working off the excess booze in a way that... well, it obviously worked for Alan.

It sort of worked for JB, too, because he was for damned sure hard, going from nothing to pounding nails in less than five seconds.

"I, uh... there's clothes out here and I left a toothbrush for you; sorry, it's small and I'll just uh... there's juice! Bye!" Jesus, he sounded like a scared... something. And he was for damned sure going to run, too.

God, what was wrong with him? It wasn't as though he had no idea of what guys did when they were alone in the shower. Hell, JB did it himself, just about every day. But the idea of Alan jerking off -- in his house -- was somehow more arousing than JB had ever thought such a thing could be. And why in the Hell was he hard because of Alan, again?

JB wasn't sure. Well, honestly, he had no idea, sureness be damned. Not an inkling.

He only hoped it was because there was something about Alan. Other than the fact that the guy had lived with Tommy. Because if that was the attraction? Then JB knew he was hopelessly sick.

He spared one swift glance back at the shower on his way out the door, only to stop, stunned, at seeing the door standing open while a gloriously, shockingly naked and hard Alan stared at him, a burning heat right there in those so-familiar blue eyes. He saw their like in the mirror each day, though not as dark. Or as bloodshot. Or as honest.

"I'm having trouble reaching my back," was what Alan said, those still-reddened eyes just locked on his like there was nothing else worth looking at. "I wouldn't ask, but you did offer to help... earlier."

Jesus... just Jesus, JB thought, swallowing hard even as he discarded the million and one reasons this was a bad idea.

He was still tossing excuses aside when he finished undressing and slipped through the open shower door, closing it behind him and losing himself in a world of steam and touch and skin and lips.

He'd worry about what he was doing later, JB figured... and probably go to confession before the wedding, too, even though he wasn't Catholic. For the moment, though... oh, he was going to just enjoy this. Enjoy being touched by someone who seemed to want him for the first time since... God, just since.

It was about sex, Alan told himself. Just sex. Relief and release. Not love or caring or even some weird sort of friendship, though he was pretty sure he wouldn't mind calling JB Boudreaux his friend. He did like the guy, after all.

Alan liked the look of him just as much, though, even if the fact that they were so similar -- aside from bleached hair, tattoos and piercings, anyway -- had Alan feeling daring and a little bit dirty. In the good way.

He was still kind of hung over, of course, and maybe that was why he wasn't a good bit more disturbed by the fact that he had Thomas' lost love's pierced cock in his hand. He hoped so, anyway, because while Alan had never denied that he was pretty much led around by his dick, he'd never really considered himself to be amoral.

Sure, Thomas and JB weren't together anymore. Hadn't been for years. And, yes, Alan was no longer involved with Thomas sexually... sort of, since he hadn't quite told Thomas that yet, but between their schedules they hadn't done more than kiss in months.

But still, the thought crossed his mind, maybe it wasn't such a good idea to be leaning back against the slick tiles, his own hand around JB's long, thick shaft while the younger man's fingers slid roughly over Alan's skin.

"M-maybe we shouldn't..." he began, JB's snort stopping his words in an instant.

"You started this, Alan," JB reminded him, those long digits moving to Alan's balls, playing over the thin, soft skin there. "Besides, I think I need this just as much as you obviously do."

Then that hot, wet hand wrapped around his cock and Alan stopped thinking anything at all, aside from "Harder... yeah, yeah, just like that, JB... fuck!"

His own grip on JB's pretty cock tightened, wrist twisting slightly to wring small, desperate cries from the guy's lips, and Alan figured they were both pretty damned on edge because it seemed like only seconds had passed before he felt that shivery coiling in the pit of his stomach, spine just arching away from the tiles at his back, pushing his throbbing cock harder into the tight tunnel of JB's fist.

He noticed on some deep level that wasn't absorbed with his own orgasm that JB's hips were rocking, thrusting that hot column of flesh through Alan's fingers, but that was fine. And when he dug his thumbnail into the thick vein just beneath the bulbous head of JB's cock, right there where the hefty ring entered flesh, and the guy shouted, that was all it took to throw him from his personal cliff to fly high and fall fast.

His head was still pounding a minute or so later, but this time it was from the blood still pumping wildly through his heart, rather than the stupid amounts of booze the night before. His hand was still on JB's cock, too, fingers squeezing lightly and releasing repeatedly while the guy stared at him with wide, sated eyes, and shit! He'd really just done that. He'd just given Thomas'... whatever JB was... a hand job. In the shower. While they were both naked. And damned if he didn't want to do it again.

Hell, Alan wanted to do more than just jerk the guy off, if he were being honest with himself. He had a list, he realized, which had sprung into his mind without any conscious choice or design on his part.

But, deliberate or not, Alan couldn't ignore the fact that he was already thinking about what he and JB could try next... and he didn't even know if the guy was interested, though the way JB's hand had released Alan's shaft to trail slow, soft fingers over his belly seemed to imply that maybe he was.

Jesus. Thomas was going to kill him. And possibly not in the euphemistic sense that actually meant he'd be angry. Hell, if Thomas ever found out what Alan had done with JB, Alan would be lucky if that death was swift and painless. And Thomas was a doctor. He likely knew at least a thousand way of killing a guy painfully while making it look natural.

Okay, he didn't really think Thomas would literally kill him, but... Alan figured the guy would be so disappointed in him, Alan would truly wish he were dead.

"Christ," he muttered, still breathing hard.

"You okay?" JB's voice was shaky too, which at least told Alan that he wasn't the only one who was a little... freaked, now that the immediate need had passed.

He shook his head slowly, forcing his hand to release JB's still-hot flesh. "I... yes and no," Alan admitted. "I think... shit, JB. We probably need to talk about this."

JB sighed, somehow looking younger than just their sudden awkwardness could account for. "I was afraid you were going to say that. I guess... meet me in the kitchen, okay? I'll make breakfast and we'll... talk."

God. What a way to follow up coming all over each other. Alan groaned. Still, maybe if they talked, they'd at least be on the same page, because honestly? He had no idea of what was going on, if he ever had.

"Well, hey there, baby! About time you hauled your lazy rear out of bed; it's after ten! Now sit down and let me get you some steak and eggs. And I know. Extra butter and cheese on your grits." Genna Paulson gave her boy a quick wink, then hollered back into the kitchen. "Joe, my boy's finally up! You heat up some of those grits, y'hear? And he'll have the number six, medium rare, with three eggs, over easy!"

She actually laughed when Tommy groaned. She'd talked to Alan more in the last year than she'd talked to her own boy. She knew he didn't eat like that in Los Angeles, but he was too damned skinny. That hospital was wearing him down to a nub, barely giving him any time to sleep, much less eat well. He must have lost twenty pounds he actually needed since she'd last visited him, nearly eighteen months earlier.

"Got it comin', Gen," Joe called back, his bayou drawl slow and easy and just as attractive as the man himself. Oh, if she were only five years younger... but she wasn't. Heck, she'd passed forty-five almost three years earlier, and that was far too old to be thinking about getting herself involved with a man seven years her junior. Didn't stop a gal from looking, though, she thought with a sly grin.

"Jesus, Momma! Are you trying to kill me? The cholesterol alone..." And that was her boy. Worried about a little fat and whatever when anyone could tell just by looking at him that he'd likely die of a broken heart long before a plate of meat and eggs could do him much damage.

"You shut your mouth, boy," she ordered with a smile as she slid onto the vinyl-covered bench across from him in the booth. "You didn't eat a darn thing yesterday that I know of. And that so-called burger you had at the Spot doesn't count. That's not even four ounces of meat before they

cook it. If you want to call it meat. Or cooking." She shuddered dramatically. "You're too darn close to skin and bones, Tom-tom, and unlike when I visit you in that cesspool you're calling home these days? I can definitely make sure you eat right while you're here."

Oh, it did her heart good to see him blush like he had when he was a child. "Yes, ma'am," he muttered, and Genna actually thought she saw a small bit of relief in his eyes before he dropped his gaze to the spotless Formica table top.

It didn't help her smile at all that her boy seemed so... she didn't know what. Lost, maybe.

"Joe!" she hollered out, "What's taking so long? I got a young doctor out here, ready to gnaw his own arm off!"

She gave Joe a big smile as he came strolling out of the kitchen, plate in hand. "I can't pull steak an' eggs out of my a... behind, Gen," Joe said, giving her a wink that just made his eyes sparkle, though Genna liked to think they shone more when he was looking at her than anyone else. Even though she wasn't interested, she reminded herself yet again.

She heaved a very fake sigh and pouted. "Well, that's a darn shame. Just think of how much we'd save if you could."

"Momma!" Tommy looked truly scandalized, which just made her laugh out loud, rather than purely on the inside.

"Oh, loosen up, Tom-tom," she teased. "Joe and I are old friends. Ain't that right, Joe? Speaking of, where are my manners? Joe, this is my boy Tommy. Tom-tom, this is Joe Coubillon. He's new here since... well, since you've been away."

It actually surprised her that the two men -- one of whom was her child -- were appraising each other so closely; mostly because she couldn't figure out why. Still, when they finally nodded and shook hands, she figured it didn't much matter.

And her boy was home, even if it was only for a little while. That was what really counted. He was home, he was finally willing to hear about Johnny Boudreaux, and even if Genna hadn't really understood about Tommy and Johnny wanting each other when they'd been younger, well... there was no denying that her boy was gay. With a capital G.

She couldn't truly say that she was happy about it. Not even after nigh-on a decade to get used to the idea. Not when she remembered all her own dreams for her son's future.

She'd always planned on being right there, in the front row, when Tommy said "I do" to some pretty young girl in a long white dress.

She'd looked forward to that first dance, and to smiling while crying, and to thanking friends and family for their congratulations.

She'd imagined that Tommy and his bride would settle down nearby. He'd do... something that made him and his wife comfortable, financially, and the nameless, faceless girl would work for a while, too, possibly as a school teacher.

Then they'd start a family of their own, and Genna's days would be occupied with helping her daughter-in-law with the kids.

Yes... it had been a good dream. A dream that could have -- should have -- become reality, if only her boy hadn't turned out to be wired differently from most of the other boys in town.

Differently wired. Differently. Not wrongly, and it had taken her years to work that part out for herself, but she had. She figured he came by it honestly, anyway, considering.

It had still been a shock to find out for sure, of course, but while she had spent quite a while questioning her son's morals, she'd never loved him any less.

So, no. She still wasn't happy that she wouldn't be having any grand-babies, but... if her boy could truly find his own happiness with a man he loved, then that would be good enough. And considering the state of so many marriages, maybe he'd be better off, in the end.

"Hmmm?" she answered, blinking out of her thoughts to find Tommy staring at her, looking so concerned she couldn't help smiling. "No... no, I'm fine, baby. Just thinking about weddings and such."

The growl the words got her wiped the smile from her face and Genna was afraid Tommy'd somehow read her thoughts, but then he spoke and she rolled her eyes internally. Not everything was about her, she reminded herself. Sometimes things were just about... life.

"... stupidest thing I ever heard of," Tommy was saying, gesturing widely with his fork. "I mean, come on, Momma! Sure, they have a kid, and God help me, they must have been... drunker than a couple of skunks on Saint Patrick's Day for that to happen, but getting married? To each other? And Jason's eight! Years, not months! Everybody already knows he's not a preemie, so what's the point? I can't believe Mister Alex and Miz Emma are going to let him go through with it! And what about Molly's momma and daddy? What the Hell are they thinking, letting her do something that's going to make her so damned miserable?"

Genna frowned deeply, and she knew it. She just couldn't help it. "Don't you dare, Thomas Anthony Paulson. Don't you dare even mention that man in my diner. Harl... Molly's daddy is Officially Unwelcome here. As far as I'm concerned, Molly don't even have a daddy. Just her poor momma, may God protect that sweet, helpless woman."

Tommy frowned at her, and Genna figured he'd maybe been distracted from his own anger by the fury in her voice.

"I... what happened, Momma? To Miz Belle? I didn't notice it before, but Molly didn't mention her even once yesterday, and Molly and Miz Belle were always thick as thieves..." And he

looked sort of worried, which was a little bit comforting. At least living in Los Angeles hadn't sucked Tommy's soul out completely.

She leaned closer, letting one hand rest over her boy's on top of the table. "You can't ever tell Molly I told you this, son. Heck, I've never told anyone; not even the sheriff. But... when Harlan Kincaid found out Molly was pregnant, he went a little bit crazy. Then he went fully insane when she told him who the boy was."

She sighed. "Belle... well, Belle always wanted to be a grandmomma; she didn't much care if Molly's baby's daddy was Johnny Boudreaux or Justin Walters or the Devil himself."

Genna chuckled quietly and without humor. "Well, maybe not that last. Still, you remember how she was, Tommy. Always making lemonade from life's lemons. There was a time when Harlan lost his job from drinking too hard and Belle just put on her happy face and said she'd been wanting more practice with mending. You were only seven or eight -- around Jayce's age -- so you probably don't remember, but there was an entire year when every fancy dress and suit for dances at the high school was made on Belle's old Singer machine because we all loved her so much. She never would accept charity, but paying work? That was something different."

Tommy really didn't remember. Genna could tell. Then again, he'd been such a young boy, he wouldn't have any reason to.

"That man she called husband finally got hired again, though, and she gave it up. Mostly because it was too hard to sew a straight seam with her eyes swollen shut, I think."

And that obviously didn't sit well with her boy, which was a comfort. At least she knew she'd raised him right.

"So, Belle wasn't all that upset when her daughter was all of a sudden knocked up, even by Johnny Boudreaux. She made the mistake of saying so where Harlan could hear. 'A beautiful little boy or girl,' was what she said, and 'Oh, I hope it has Johnny's pretty blue eyes.'"

Genna shook her head. "And he does, but Belle never knew. Still doesn't. Because that bastard's reaction was..." She shivered, even in the comfortable temperature of the diner. "It was horrible, Tom-tom. I don't think I've ever seen anyone so..."

"Jesus, Momma, what happened? I mean, Molly seems different, but I figured it was just from being a mother and... God. Tell me, Momma. Please." And Tommy was whispering, which somehow seemed right. It wasn't the sort of thing to be spoken of in a less than hushed voice.

"I was going up the steps to their place," Genna whispered back, afraid to even blink out of fear that she'd see it all again in her mind's eye. "I wanted to talk to Belle about maybe buying some of her berry pies to sell here. The door was open but the screen door was keeping the mosquitoes out. Harl... *he* always hated bugs in the house." She shivered again. "I heard her talking, then he let out this... God, it was like an angry bear was in there with them. He flung himself out of that raggedy old recliner Belle hated so much and then he was on her. He... his fists... and then he

had her by her hair -- that long, beautiful hair I used to envy so much -- and he was... God, Tommy, there was blood on the floor and he just..."

She let herself blink, just the once to clear her eyes. "So I ran. I didn't have a cell phone then, so I ran over to that pay telephone that used to be in front of the movie theater. I called the sheriff's office and said there was trouble at the Kincaid place. That I thought someone was hurt."

"God..." Tommy breathed, sounding just as horrified as Genna was from the memory.

"I did my best to disguise my voice, but I guess it wasn't enough. Andy Simpson and the Howell boys showed up here the next day, asking questions. Finally I told them I'd been walking by and heard sounds that made it seem like someone was hurt, and that was why I called. But I didn't see anything. Didn't know anything. I don't think they believed me, but..." She shrugged, still angry at herself, even after as many years as had passed. "I couldn't tell them, Tommy. Xavier Argenti is married to Harlan's sister. If I'd said a word..."

She could see the moment when her son understood what she was saying. If she'd borne witness against Harlan Kincaid, the bastard's brother-in-law would have had him out on bail in less than a day. Xavier was the best defense attorney in the South, after all. And once Harlan was out of jail, as the only witness, Genna's life wouldn't have been worth squat.

"Jesus, Momma," Tommy said again, and God. Her boy looked... she didn't know what. Some strange mixture of angry and sad. Worried and glad she was okay. Betrayed and... something that seemed an awful lot like disappointed.

"I would have told you," she murmured, patting his hand, "but you were so very insistent that I never say anything about Johnny, and I couldn't bring it up without him being involved. Besides, baby, you were caught up in school and that... boy, Eric." She'd never liked Eric, even though the young man had stayed with Tommy for nearly a month in the trailer. He'd always seemed... well, like the sort of man her Grams had called a "good time Charlie."

"It ended up not mattering, anyway," she finished. "Bearing witness, I mean, not what happened to poor Belle. He... that bastard fractured her skull in four places. Her poor brain bled and bled, and they finally had to drill holes to let out some of the pressure. By then, it was too late. She lived... but she never came back." Genna sniffled softly. "Permanent brain damage, they said. She can sit up by herself, and she still has that sunny smile I remember so well, but Belle's not really in there anymore. And I can't say that's a bad thing. I... God, it would be awful if she was trapped inside, without being able to move or speak or... well. You're a doctor, Tommy. You know."

And he did. She could see that just from the sick expression on his face, as well as the half-eaten plate of food he covered carefully with his napkin.

"Jesus."

Genna nodded. "So, maybe... well, maybe this marriage won't be as miserable for Molly as you think. At least Johnny will always treat her right. He's not the kind of man who'd beat a woman, anyway."

She could see him thinking about that, then sighed with relief when he finally nodded.

"So what happened to Miz Belle?" Tommy asked a moment later, his hand gripping hers, suddenly, fingers twined with her own. "After, I mean." He swallowed hard.

"There was no money," Genna said softly, squeezing his hand. "Not at first. So she ended up in one of the state homes. It was all the Medicaid would pay for. Johnny had her moved to Autumn Breezes outside Little Rock about four years ago, though. They take good care of poor Belle and the three of them visit once a month." She thought for a moment. "I don't think Jayce likes going there much, but he knows Belle is his grandma. Knows she would have loved him if she hadn't... had her 'accident.' So she's not good, Tommy. But things could be a whole lot worse."

"Jesus," Tommy said again, and, as that pretty much summed it up, Genna couldn't do anything but nod and hold her boy's hand even tighter.

Thomas wasn't sure he'd ever be able to look at Molly the same way again, not with knowing what he did about her momma and daddy. And that was bad, simply because the last thing Molly would ever expect to see coming from him was sympathy, and Thomas for damned sure knew it.

He also sort of understood why she was willing to go through with the sham of a marriage to JJ. Considering what she must have seen in her own home while growing up, the idea of binding herself to a guy who not only wasn't violent but would never ask anything of her had to seem like sheer Heaven. And according to her own words the night before, she wasn't interested in anybody who'd have her. By which Thomas thought she meant Bobby Bodeen, even though Bobby seemed to specifically not want her. He was almost entirely sure the girl was still pining away for her "lost love," maybe even waiting for the guy to come back to her. Which was kind of nuts, since he'd been back from the war for going on two years.

Or most of him was back, Thomas reminded himself. Momma had told him about the guy losing his leg, and that had to be a Hell of a thing to deal with, especially for Bobby. He'd been the star fullback on their high school team, after all.

Come to think about it, nobody had even mentioned what Bobby had been doing since he'd been shipped home with an honorable discharge and a good number of medals to his name.

Thomas wondered whether Bobby's amputation had even healed right, because if it hadn't, that would explain why the huge amounts of gossip he'd already been treated to in passing didn't actually mention the guy much at all. Aside from "heard young Bobby's made another scene," of course, which wasn't unusual as far as Thomas could recall. Bobby'd always been getting into one scrape or another when they were kids.

Still, this was Bobby Bodeen's home town and he'd come back alive and a hero, so Thomas understood why the gossip was somewhat lacking. People respected the guy, which was almost funny, considering how many times Thomas had seen him on his knees, tears and snot streaming from him while he hurled during various keggers, back in the day.

Bobby had been the one to tell Thomas the deep, dark family secret the rest of the town had kept quiet about, though, and while he'd hated him for it back then, well... Thomas had actually gotten over it.

He was still kind of resentful that his momma had never told him the truth, but, then again, he sort of figured it would have been entirely too painful for her to tell him that his daddy had left them not just for a high school teacher, but a male one, at that.

Looking back, Thomas figured he actually owed Bobby for telling him.

After all, if he'd never learned that his own daddy was gay, there was a good chance that Thomas would have ended up repeating the sins of the father, out of fear of being discovered, and that was something he'd never wanted to do.

Hell, if Bobby Bodeen had never spilled the Paulson family secret to him that summer after high school graduation, no matter how much he'd wanted JJ, he would never have made a move. Thomas figured he never would have moved beyond fantasizing about guys, in fact. And he would have ended up marrying some poor girl, then spent his life in denial, being miserable and making life a living Hell for her and any kids they were unfortunate enough to have, all the while ignoring his own fantasies and desires.

Yeah, it had taken him a while, but Thomas finally understood just why his daddy had left. And why the man hadn't been more present in his life between the ages of six and eighteen. He'd been trying to make things easier for Thomas. His daddy had pretty much said so, that first time they'd talked, and while Thomas hadn't believed it right off, he'd eventually come around.

He really had a decent relationship with his father now, after all the missed years, and that was yet another thing he figured he owed Bobby Bodeen for.

That being the case, he was for damned sure going to track Bobby down and thank him. And if things went well and Thomas brought up Molly? Well, who could blame him? Not Bobby, surely, when they were likely to talk about the old days, anyway, and... they'd both dated Molly. Only sort of on Thomas' side, but still.

Okay, Thomas told himself. He had a plan. Now he just had to find Bobby and get him talking.

As it turned out, that was easy enough, because, just like Jake Thornton at the pharmacy told him when he asked, Bobby Bodeen was belly-up to the bar -- or barstool-up to the bar, rather -- at the Bucket o' Suds.

He was also at least halfway to listing right off of his seat and it was only two p.m.

"Jesus," Thomas muttered to himself, even though he supposed he couldn't really blame the guy. It couldn't be easy to fight for your country and then have everything change as a result of it.

"Well, I'll be damned," Thomas said loudly as he stepped closer and leaned his elbows on the scarred wood next to the other man, "Bobby Bodeen. Been years, man. How's it going?"

He wasn't surprised by the initial hostility in the guy's eyes. Hell, Bobby probably got sick and tired of people trying to talk to him when he was getting his drink on. What did surprise him -- almost to the point of shock -- was the sudden shift from anger to relief... and welcome, when Bobby saw that it was him.

The guy lifted his half-empty beer mug and drained it in one long draught before offering him an almost sheepish grin. "Tommy Paulson. Yeah. Been a while. What brings you back to the... what was it? Oh, right. The *ass end of nowhere*."

Thomas blushed just a little at the look old Mike behind the bar gave him. "Hey, I was young. And, you know... I needed to be somewhere less, um..." He felt himself getting even redder. There was just no good way to say "somewhere less homophobic, where I could hold another guy's hand without getting my ass kicked," was there?

"This was a great place to grow up," he said quickly, "but I wasn't likely to become a doctor here, right? Maybe a mechanic, but not a doctor."

Mike turned away with a slow nod, and Thomas breathed a sigh of relief. The last thing he needed -- the very last thing -- was for it to get around town that he thought Oak Grove was the boondocks. Even if it sort of was, regardless of all the changes. It was the *good* sort of boondocks. Maybe.

Bobby snorted, and Thomas gave him a lopsided grin. Okay, so whatever else he could say about Bobby Bodeen from back when, the guy had obviously gotten a lot smarter.

"You here to get a good look at the cripple?" Snarky and self-pitying as Bobby's tone was, Thomas immediately took back his thought of a moment earlier. If anything, Bobby had become an even bigger moron than the puke-monster he remembered the guy as being.

He kind of wanted to smack him, actually, but Thomas forced himself to chuckle instead, giving Mike a nod when the guy held up an empty mug. "Unless Miz Stacey's bringing her boy in sometime soon, I doubt I'd have any luck if I were."

And let Bobby chew on that one, because Stacey Carter's boy Jonathan was thirty-seven and he'd been a quadriplegic ever since he'd been thrown from a farm horse at the age of fourteen. By comparison, Thomas figured Bobby should be feeling pretty damned good. He still had the use of at least ninety-five percent of his body because, as Thomas could tell now that he was seeing the guy, Bobby had only lost the bottom two-thirds of his left calf.

Okay. Maybe "only" was kind of... insensitive, but, Jesus.

The funny thing was that Bobby's beer-soaked eyes met his for a long moment; then the look in them got warmer. More... well, not happier, but less resigned.

"I lost my leg, man," Bobby said slowly, quietly. "Jonathan still has his whole body."

And while that entire statement had Thomas wanting to beat the crap out of Bobby, there was something about the way the guy said it that made it seem almost like a test, so he cocked his head and nodded.

"He does. Not that he can feel it. Or use it. Or even bring himself down to the Bucket for a brew or six." Thomas nodded his thanks to Mike when the grey-haired man set a filled mug in front of him, creamy foam sliding down the side in a slow avalanche. "At least you can wipe your own ass, Bobby. There's a whole lot to be said for that."

Just like that, he was laughing. With Bobby Bodeen. Like they were old friends. And sure, it felt a little bit wrong to be laughing because Bobby wasn't as messed up as Jonathan Carter, but it also felt good to hear Bobby laughing without the tinge of bitterness that Thomas hadn't even noticed in the guy's voice until it was gone.

A few laughs and more than a few beers later, Bobby slowly pushed himself upright against the bar. "Fun as this is, Tommy," he said, and damned if the guy didn't sound just about stone cold sober, Thomas realized, "are you plannin' on tellin' me why you're really here? B'cause I don't see you wanderin' into the Bucket by accident."

Damn. Caught out. By Bobby Bodeen, of all people.

Of course, Thomas was feeling kind of loose and mellow, so he shrugged and told the truth. Most of it, anyway, letting the beer speak through him.

"Honestly?" he answered, shifting his foot on the rung of the barstool he'd perched on after the first ten minutes or so, "I'm wondering what the fuck is wrong with you, Bobby-boy. Because if you think I can't tell how much you still love Molly, you're a fucking jackass. So why in the Hell are you sitting here drinking when she's getting ready to marry my boy?" He blinked. "I mean JJ. Johnny. JB. Whatever."

The truly amazing thing about the whole ten minutes that followed, as far as Thomas was concerned, was that even with as much as Bobby cussed him out and called him names, the guy never once called him a faggot, or queer, or... well, any number of epithets Thomas would have expected, considering the things Bobby had called him in the past.

And the guy was kind of right, Thomas admitted silently. He really was an interfering bastard. And a fucking prick who didn't know when to keep his damned nose out of other people's business... among other things.

Still, once Bobby wound down, Thomas found that they'd relocated to one of the small booths at the back of the bar, a pot of coffee and two cups on the table.

They stared at each other for a few minutes, sipping their coffee slowly, then Bobby sighed. "It's a long story, but the short version is... she loves him. She must. Why else was she willin' to have his kid when she didn't want to have mine?"

And Lord. Thomas was obviously out of the loop because it sounded like Bobby was saying Molly had... but she wouldn't. There was no way. Hell, her momma and that old bastard Harlan would never have allowed it.

"Huh?" was his brilliant comment, and he chose to blame it on the beer. "Huh?"

It was a very quiet phone call, on both ends. Just two people comparing notes, as it were, with no intention of ever letting anyone else know what they were up to.

It would either work out, they figured, or it wouldn't... and either way, they'd sworn to take their part in things to their graves, held secret and sacrosanct.

Family was family, after all, and while neither of them had really planned on becoming that to each other, well, they couldn't deny that they understood each other, regardless of the fact that their lives had been very different.

Had been. But weren't any longer.

In fact, they figured they were just about even, considering all the changes that had come about in Oak Grove over the last decade or so. And that was a good thing, because whether things worked out between their boys or not, the fact that they were even conspiring in the way they were made them sisters, of a sort.

Sisters in deceit, perhaps, but still sisters.

"Okay. Okay, Emma," Genna Paulson finally agreed. "I'll handle young Bobby. I can't see as it's gonna do much good, but you know I'll give it my best try."

Emma Boudreaux heaved a huge sigh of relief, one she knew Genna could hear, even while hoping Alex was paying enough attention to whatever he was watching on the idiot-box that he wouldn't notice.

"Good," she murmured back. "And I'll get to work on Johnny. Because you're right, Genna. Molly may not be my daughter for real, but I don't want her to go through what you did. I... even if he and Tommy can't make things right between them, this wedding would be a mistake." She sighed into the phone again. "I only hope I can make Johnny see it."

She heard Genna swallow, probably taking a sip of coffee.

"You will," the woman answered, and she sounded so sure, Emma couldn't help but believe her. "That Bobby Bodeen's gonna be the hard sell. Boy thinks his whole life's gone straight to you-know-where, just because he has to use a crutch to get around these days." She snorted and Emma smiled.

They talked for a few more minutes, firming up their plans before finally ending the call.

"Should I be worried?" Alex said from so close behind her, Emma jumped a good six inches. "Because I'm almost sure I just heard you conspiring with Genna Paulson to put an end to this ridiculous idea of a marriage between our son and Molly."

Emma blinked, once her heart stopped racing. "Ridiculous, Alex? But you said..."

She was sure he'd been in favor of the whole thing from the start; that was the only reason she hadn't shared her serious misgivings about the entire scenario with him to begin with. It was why she'd finally taken matters into her own hands and called Tommy out there in Los Angeles.

Of course, she hadn't even considered talking to Genna about her concerns beforehand. They were friendly, certainly. It was hard not to be friendly with just about everyone in their small town. But they hadn't been... friends. And with both Molly and Johnny having dated Genna's boy Tommy, it just hadn't seemed like a good idea until she'd picked up the phone earlier and found herself ringing the diner.

And her own husband was against the marriage, too, which was shocking, but...

"I said I wanted Johnny to be happy, Em," he reminded her, one arm wrapping around her shoulders while he pressed a soft kiss to her lightly rouged cheek. "And he seemed to be, in the beginning. After the first month or so of planning this obscenely huge event, though, I noticed that he was only happy about it when Molly smiled at some grand new idea of his."

Alex shook his head and Emma realized he was right.

"Johnny loves her," he went on. "No mistake about that. And he loves Jason. But the kind of love he has for Molly?" He shook his head. "Best friend. Sister, maybe. But lover? Wife?"

Alex echoed her earlier sigh and Emma blushed, looking down.

"Those two will make each other crazy with never being able to have or give each other what they really need," Alex finished.

"And why are you only telling me this now, Alexander Remington Boudreaux?" Emma snapped, forcing herself to look up again and meet his eyes. "Why not a month ago? Or even last week? Why did you wait until the wedding is only... God, six days away?"

Her husband blushed, as well, but held her gaze, his own steady. Serious. "Because," he answered calmly, "I drove past Johnny's place this morning to see if he wanted to grab some breakfast in town. And that Alan Freemont's car was parked out front."

Emma knew she was blinking but she didn't care.

Johnny... and Alan?

No. It couldn't be. Except... she remembered the way they'd been looking at each other the night before. She'd simply assumed that it had been because of Tommy. But if Alan was at her son's house that morning, then...

It was too much for her to think about, and she said as much, only to find herself shocked at her husband's laugh.

"Look on the bright side, Em," Alex ordered, hugging her tight. "At least now we can be sure we raised a man, not a monk. It would be nice if he and Molly could be happy together and give us a couple more grandkids, but that's not going to happen. And I'll be damned if I'll let the two of them screw Jason up. Because they will, if they go through with this whole crazy thing."

When Alex was right, he was right, Emma knew, and since she agreed completely, she didn't even bother trying to argue.

"But... Alan?" she heard herself saying, her brow furrowing when she felt Alex shrug against her.

"Whoever," Alex said simply. "It doesn't much matter, I'm thinking. This isn't about Johnny and Tommy for me. It's about our son and what's going to be best for him. I don't know Alan well enough to say whether it's him. Or Tommy either, for that matter. Hell, Emma, that boy left here years ago. Maybe he's changed."

He shrugged again. "But Johnny hasn't. He's still a damned good kid. Just look at what he's done in the last five years, alone. He's my son, and I love him. We have a grandson, and Jason's everything I ever could have hoped for. I'm thinking we need to just count our blessings and do whatever we can to help our boy. And stopping this travesty of a marriage is right up there at the top of the list."

Emma nodded slowly. They could deal with whatever it was Johnny thought he was doing with Tommy's ex-boyfriend later. And with Alex on board, maybe it would be easier than she'd feared.

She'd have to let Genna know... but not right then.

Right then, she had every intention of thanking her husband in his favorite way.

"You're right," she agreed easily, pulling back just enough to smile at him. "And unless you're watching some playoff-series-cup whatever, maybe you'd like me to show you just how right you are, dear. Upstairs?"

She would take the sudden widening of his eyes, followed by his immediate retreat into the foyer, as a yes. Of course, his soft cry of "I love being right" eliminated every doubt she'd never had.

By the time they got settled in the kitchen, both of them in sweats, it was after twelve. Alan had foregone the T-shirt, operating on the theory that since JB had already seen him naked -- and had jerked him off, for fuck's sake! -- it didn't matter.

Alan sort of felt like a slacker, but then again, he was between jobs and on vacation, in a way, even if his original plan had gotten sort of... derailed. If he could call coming in the shower with Thomas' ex -- the same one he'd come to Oak Grove to reunite Thomas with -- a mere "derailment."

It was wrong. He knew it was wrong. There was just no way he should be in JB's house, all shower-damp and wearing the guy's pants -- and thinking about touching even more of JB's hot, smooth, ink-covered skin -- while his own best friend was still in love with the guy and probably knew JB wasn't dead by then. And yet, there he was.

Jesus. He really was going to burn in Hell. Especially since he knew that, while he saw his and Thomas' relationship -- the sexual side of it, anyway -- as finished, he hadn't quite gotten around to telling Thomas yet. It had sort of slipped his mind, but also sort of... not.

Hell, he'd been hoping to push his ex and JB together before dropping that little bit of information. Thomas would probably have been too well and truly distracted by his first love to be anything but grateful when Alan broke things off officially. Of course, now...

Yeah, Alan was pretty sure there was a really hot spot waiting for him in the nether-hells, somewhere.

He frowned down at the alarmingly full plate JB set in front of him, his mind boggling at the concept of actually eating eggs and ham and bacon... hash browns and toast... some sort of creamy yellow stuff and what looked like baked beans.

"Okay... if you really don't want to talk," Alan muttered, eyes still wide, "just say so, JB. There's no need to try killing me with a sudden heart attack."

JB laughed, and it was one of the best sounds Alan had ever heard. Just as good as one of Thomas' rare, real laughs, and that was saying a lot.

He looked from the corner of his eye, swallowing hard at the odd mix of amusement, shame, and barely hidden desire on JB's face. "It looks good," he added, "but there's just so much of it!"

Another laugh answered him, this time softer. A little bit unsure sounding.

"I guess I was trying to buy some time," JB answered quietly, his long fingers twisting around each other on the table "Because, seriously, Alan? I have this weird feeling that when you said we should talk, you meant we should talk about Tommy. And I really don't want to, okay? That's all... history. Over."

The guy sighed and shook his head when Alan looked up at him.

"I'm not saying we don't have to. Just that I don't want to, if you see the difference."

Yeah, he saw. Boy, did he ever. But that didn't change anything, though Alan admitted silently that his reasons for wanting to talk about Thomas might have changed -- a little -- since he'd first gotten to the small town.

Jesus, he actually liked JB. Liked him enough that he wished he'd never heard about JB's history with Thomas. Enough that Alan might have considered... but no. They'd just met and it would be stupid to reorder his life -- or even think about doing so -- based upon less than twenty-four hours and a hand job. Naked hand job. Whatever.

"I don't think it's so over for Thomas," Alan finally said, nodding to himself when JB's eyes narrowed slightly, so slightly he wouldn't have noticed if he hadn't been watching as closely as he was. "Look, he told me what happened, okay? Not because he was proud or anything," he clarified, "but because he... well, he thought you were dead. So did I. I mean, why else would your mom call him out of nowhere, right? But then I found out you weren't. Um, Thomas didn't know then, but I'm sure he does by now."

Okay, JB was clearly the master of mixed emotions because Alan could see anger, worry, fear, amusement, and even a little bit of smugness warring on his face.

"And you're here... why?"

Yeah, that was a damned good question, Alan realized. He just didn't have a good answer, or even one that would make a whole lot of sense, considering.

He tried anyway, though.

"Because he's my best friend," Alan said slowly. "Because when he told me how he feels about you, then I found out you were not only alive but well? I wanted to fix everything. He's a good guy, JB. And he's never been happy. Not since he left you, okay? I just didn't know it until I saw the way he looked when he was telling me about you guys."

He figured he would have taken offense at the loud snort JB let out then, but the guy had reason.

"I know how it sounds. I do. Hell, there's no reason for you to believe me; especially with what he did at the end. He had no business cheating on you. I get it."

JB snorted again, his eyes narrowing even more. "It wasn't about him having sex with what's-his-name. We were kids, Alan. Not even twenty yet. And he was away at school most of the time. I expected him to have sex, but I thought we had something special, too. I thought... God knows why, but I actually believed he cared enough about me to tell me, okay? But he didn't. He was off in the dorms, fucking his God damned roommate for who knows how long, and he never had the fucking decency to say so. Then he brought that bastard here. Into the little bit of time that was supposed to be just ours."

JB shook his head. "I loved him, too, Alan," he admitted with a resigned tone that was worrisome. "I doubt I'll ever love anyone else the way I loved him. But it was never about cheating. And if Tommy really thinks it was, then... I guess he never knew me at all. It was about lying. That's what broke my... That's what hurt. The lies."

Alan was blinking. He knew it. "So you don't love him anymore." Because regardless of JB's words, he couldn't quite believe that. Not when the pain was still there in the guy's eyes, still fresh and raw.

"I still love who he was," JB answered after a few moments, a wistful, aching smile twisting his lips. "But that was nearly ten years ago. I have no idea of who Tommy is, these days. So, no. I don't love him now. How could I?"

Ah, Hell.

"Oh," was all Alan said. There really wasn't anywhere else to go with the whole topic, was there? Because JB had a point, and unfortunately it was a good one.

He looked down at his plate, eyeing the congealing mass of scrambled eggs and cooling... everything... with a decided lack of interest, even as he poked at the toast with his fork.

"So..." he heard and he glanced up again to find JB watching him.

"Hmm?"

JB shrugged then smiled a bit, those blue eyes meeting Alan's own with a slow, growing heat. "I was wondering if all the Tommy talk killed the mood, or if you think it's something we could get back. I'd like to touch you some more. And you've got really good hands, Alan. I like your hands."

Christ. Just... Jesus fucking Christ. Would there ever come a day when he wasn't ruled by his cock?

Alan kind of doubted it... and sort of wished for it, at the same time.

But if JB really didn't still want Thomas, then... wait.

He replayed the night before swiftly, from the moment he'd first seen JB, right up through drinking and passing out on the couch, and... oh.

He nearly laughed, but somehow managed not to.

Maybe his cock wasn't as in control as he'd thought, and that was...

Well, in this case, it was likely to be a good thing. Possibly a very good thing.

God help him, JB thought. He'd just propositioned Alan.

He'd just propositioned Alan and he had no idea of why he was surprised at himself for doing it. Or why he felt guilty.

Everything he'd said was entirely true, damn it. He really didn't know Tommy anymore. Didn't know why his heart had started pounding a mile a minute with the knowledge that the guy wasn't happy. Hell, he didn't even know why he was thinking about it when Alan was right there, looking so damned... bothered.

He kind of thought it was sweet, though, that Tommy's ex would be so worried for the guy, because Alan was a nice man. JB could tell. Nice. Genuine. Real. Surprisingly so, considering the man was from LA.

And he clearly loved Tommy, though not the way JB did.

Had.

The way he *had*, JB reminded himself.

Christ, it was all too damned complicated for so early in the day.

At least he wasn't feeling all flustered and ashamed anymore. He laughed softly to himself. Not since he'd stepped into the shower with Alan earlier, anyway. He actually felt kind of... confident, now that he knew Alan was at least attracted to him.

"So what do you say?" he pressed, one hand sliding over the top of the table to touch his fingertips to Alan's wrist. "We're both single, and we seem to have some chemistry. I wanted you the minute I saw you." The silence was unnerving. "Uh, Alan?"

Jesus, the guy's eyes looked almost disgusted, but somehow JB could tell it wasn't with him. "Alan?" he tried again, fingers wrapping around the guy's hand and squeezing.

Alan squeezed back, which was a relief, though JB did his best not to show it. Of course, then Alan opened his mouth, and the last thing JB was, all of a sudden, was relieved.

"God," Alan said after a moment, and JB couldn't help noticing the laughter in those blue eyes, "you're really not even a little bit shy, are you?"

He shrugged, trying hard not to blush, though he could feel the blood rising to his cheeks. "Shy's never really worked for me, man. I mean..." JB sighed.

A nod answered the words, even as Alan's grip on his hand relaxed a little. "Oh, trust me, honey, I know exactly what you mean. Now, I don't want you to take this the wrong way, because I think we both know how hot you are. We've been sparking off since the minute we met. But here's the thing."

And oh, Hell, JB knew the word "but" was never good when it came on the heels of something like that.

"I told you my name. My first name, JB. And just like that, you knew I was Alan Freemont, and Thomas' lover. Then later, you asked me about make-up and whether I liked working on studio pictures or indie films better. You even named a few."

Shit. Oh shit, oh shit... he had. He hadn't even thought about it, but he'd done exactly what Alan said, and...

"It doesn't mean..." He trailed off into nothing at the skeptical gaze Alan was suddenly giving him. "I was just interested! There's talk about making my first game into a movie and I wanted to know what you..." And there went his voice again while Alan just looked at him like the guy felt sorry for him or something.

Then his hand was empty and Alan was standing up, still giving him that damned sympathetic look, the guy's head shaking so slow and easy, JB wondered what he was missing that Alan wasn't.

"Oh, honey. You have to be just the saddest thing I've ever seen. But you'll figure it out eventually. And when you do, I'm pretty sure you'll kick yourself for a while, then do the right thing." A small, regretful smile tilted at those pretty lips. "Unfortunately, I'm not the right thing, so there will be no doing of me."

"I..." Okay, and when had he lost track of what was going on? Because JB could swear he'd just gone from maybe getting laid to being brushed off in like... five seconds. "Alan, what..."

Alan laughed. He actually fucking laughed! Then he turned away and disappeared into the living room, shaking his head all the while.

When he came back a few minutes later with shoes on and his rumpled clothes from the night before, JB still didn't have a clue as to what had just happened. And he still wanted Alan, damn it.

"Look, I... you don't have to go," he tried, the notion of being not only in the dark but entirely alone somehow weighing on him, which was stupid. He'd spent years pretty much alone, aside from his folks and Molly and Jayce and... well, the whole damned town, with a few definite exceptions.

Okay. Maybe not so good with the alone thing, JB realized, but... "We could just hang out, you know? Watch movies or something..."

Maybe take another shower, a part of his mind supplied, which sounded like a damned good idea, actually.

Yeah... him, Alan, skin, hot water, and soapy lather... that wouldn't be bad at all. Dear God, he was tired of his own hand, and he hadn't even realized it until earlier that morning, when he was being touched and stroked so fucking nicely.

Alan must have been able to read some of that on his face, JB decided, because the guy was laughing again, only this time there was something almost rueful to the sound.

"Oh, no," Alan announced, holding the bundle of mangled fabric tighter against his side. "You are just too much of a temptation, JB. We'd start out watching TV, but we'd end up naked. Probably with that pretty cock of yours splitting me wide. And all the while I'd know... well, what I know. So thanks, but... I think I'll pass."

Christ. God save him. If this was what trying to date was like, he was glad he'd never bothered.

"Fine," JB finally muttered. "Go. Thanks for the hand job. Nice meeting you."

Whatever he might have been expecting in response to that, it wasn't yet another laugh, but that was what he got.

He also got a quick, simple kiss, right there on his lips. No tongue, though, damn it.

Alan was grinning like a loon, JB saw when he opened his eyes.

"Oh, honey," the man chortled, eyes just dancing under those sculpted dark brows, "I've honestly never heard those exact words anywhere outside of a club. And you're welcome, though I suppose I should thank you, too. How about dinner tonight?"

Jesus. Alan was way too all over the map. But in a good way, as contradictory as that seemed to JB.

"Uh... dinner?" Fuck, he hated that "aren't you cute" smile Alan was giving him. Like the guy was somehow indulging a child or something.

"Yes... dinner. It's the last meal of the day. You know, other than those nights when you're just too drunk to drive home from the club and end up in the Valley at some horrendous little dive whose only claim to fame is that they're open and the cook wears a hair net."

And JB found himself laughing, too, which he suddenly realized had probably been the point in the first place. "Oh, dinner! Yeah, we could have dinner. Um, I guess you should call me or something?"

It took only moments to exchange numbers, and that had JB feeling even better. Even if there wasn't going to be any sex -- which he didn't figure was certain yet -- he still liked Alan. It would be cool to have dinner out with someone he hadn't known for ages.

One more soft, dry kiss at the door and JB found himself smiling as Alan's BMW moved slowly down the drive.

Hell, he'd work on the guy at dinner. Make him see that since neither of them were still with Tommy, there was no reason they shouldn't have themselves a little bit of naughty, naked fun.

Anyone who could pull him from a building funk as quickly as Alan had done just had to be well worth pursuing.

He'd never really chased after anyone before, but JB was for damned sure going to give it a shot.

"You never told me," Thomas accused, and while he could tell Molly didn't have any idea of what he was talking about, that didn't stop him from glaring through the tiny bit of buzz he still felt.

"Tommy," she said, sounding just a bit exasperated, "look. I have to pick Jayce up at..."

"Hah. That kid is like the town mascot. There's not a single person in all of Oak Grove who'd let him get so much as bruised, and you know it." And considering everything Thomas had learned about the many improvements to the town, he understood why.

People were people, after all, and they'd have protected the boy even if he was a bully. But Jason was a good kid, from what Thomas had seen, and that had to make it that much easier for the townsfolk to watch over the son of their savior. By which he meant JJ. JB. The Boudreaux boy. Whatever. JJ.

Yeah, Johnny had hit it big with his first video game, and instead of just sitting back and gloating, he'd invested in the town. In the businesses, and, in some cases, just in the people. And it had paid off.

Molly sighed, then flipped her hair. "Fine. So what is it that I didn't tell you, Tommy? What matters so much that you're all... weird and psycho? I would have told you about Jayce but you didn't want anything to do with us 'backwater hillbilly types' when you went away the last time, remember?"

God, he was blushing at hearing his words thrown back at him, but he'd be damned if he was going to let his own personal embarrassment keep him from finding out whether Bobby's words were true.

"You never told me that Bobby wanted to marry you, Molly. Before he went off to join up." And Jesus, it really was true because Molly was suddenly a shade of red that made his own blush seem like nothing at all. "God, Molly! Why?"

Molly's wide eyes narrowed slightly and her jaw firmed. "That's none of your business, Tommy Paulson. I had my reasons. And it doesn't matter now, anyway. So, was that all? Can I go get my son now?"

Okay, this was a Molly he'd never seen before. Stoic and strangely defensive. Suddenly sad but somehow stronger than he'd known her to be. Crap.

Thomas sighed, then shook his head, changing his tone on a dime. "Sorry. Sorry, Molly. I was just... surprised, is all. And I guess I don't understand, okay? But I want to. I want to understand how it is that you turned Bobby down, then turned around and had a kid with JJ." That was the truth, too, though Thomas was fairly sure Bobby Bodeen wanted to know the answer to that one even more than he did, himself.

Maybe he hadn't changed his tone enough, Thomas thought when Molly pulled out her cell phone and quickly hit a few buttons, because she was obviously ignoring him. Then he heard her words when her call was apparently answered.

"Hi, Trisha, it's me. No... no, nothing's wrong. I just ran into an old friend who's visiting." She let out one wry little chuckle. "Yeah, that'd be the one. So could you keep Jayce for another little while for me, hon? I'll owe you one." Molly smiled and nodded her head, as though the woman she was speaking to could see her. "Okay, two. Thanks, you're the best."

Tommy waited while she chatted for a few more minutes, then blinked as she grabbed his arm and nearly dragged him down the street.

"Move it, Paulson," Molly ordered, and God help him if he wasn't just obeying without even a token protest. The girl really was stronger than she looked.

"So what do we do, honey?" Janie asked, bold as bold could be, but that was one of the things Rob loved about his wife. She wasn't the dainty sort. "Because you know we have to do something. Otherwise, we really *will* be standing there watching Johnny marry Molly."

Lord, Lord. She just couldn't seem to get it through her head that it wasn't up to them. It was up to Johnny and Molly, and while Rob privately thought they were nuts, they were also grown-ups. If they wanted to get married for whatever reason, then who was he to tell them not to? Still, try telling Janie that and he'd get yet another earful of how friends don't let friends marry friends when one of them is gay... or some variation on the theme.

Rob just shook his head. "You know where I stand on this one, Janie-girl. I don't want to fight about it again. Besides, you probably know why they're doing it better than I ever will. You spend enough time with Molly. I'm staying out of it, midge." Because in this case, discretion was definitely the better part of valor, even if that made no sense even to him.

But Janie was making a disgusted noise, and that was... new. "Molly doesn't even know why she's doing it, honey. Not really. She just knows that Johnny asked and she couldn't think of a reason to say no. Not with that Bobby Bodeen being such a stubborn jackass, anyway. Everyone can see how much those two still care about each other, but he's just got to be all 'she turned me down once, so I don't care.'"

She rolled her eyes in the mirror, meeting his in the reflection. "Typical man. Just because she didn't want to marry him when she was nineteen and he dragged all over the country. She wasn't ready to leave her momma yet, but he was just so sure she'd jump at the chance to be an Army wife. Tell me how that meant she didn't love him."

Good God. Was he really going to weigh in on this when he already knew it would go badly for him? Well, yeah, Rob admitted sadly. Yeah, he was.

"Do you think the fact that he went off to the military and she slept with Johnny might have something to do with it, doll? Because, speaking as a man, if I'd left New Orleans and heard a couple months later that you were knocked up by some other guy?" He frowned and shook his head. "Even if Bobby thought Molly still loved him when he left, once he heard about that... well, let's just say that to a guy? It doesn't scream love and devotion. Then he comes back, and even though it's obvious that Molly and Johnny aren't together, not really... well, she wouldn't have him when he was whole. Why would she want him when he's not?"

The surprising thing was that Janie didn't look mad. In fact, she looked... sort of confused. "Wait a minute," she said, pausing mid-stroke, the brush still hanging from her hair, and yeah, she was definitely confused, though Rob didn't know why. It seemed pretty clear to him. "Do men really think like that? I mean... seriously? Just 'I lost part of my leg while fighting for my country, so that makes me less of a man'? Because that's kind of... stupid, honey. Molly doesn't care that he's... God, she only cares that he doesn't love her enough to even look at her!"

That made no damned sense at all, and Rob was thankful -- not for the first time -- that he'd known Janie was the one for him from the time they'd been kids. He sort of understood her, most days, and even when he didn't, he for damned sure loved her. Still...

"Janie-girl. What do you see when I look at you?"

She smiled and turned away from the mirror, dragging the brush from where it had been stuck in her hair. "I see everything, Rob," she answered simply. "That you love me. Need me. That I'm everything you want. And it goes both ways. You know that, right?"

Rob blushed, glad as always for his dark skin, dark enough that it hid the bright pink he'd seen on lighter-skinned people. "I do, midge. But you always see that, right? Even when we're fighting or mad or even just... irritated and feeling misunderstood, right?" Because they did have their moments. No relationship was perfect, and that was a good thing, Rob figured. They'd get bored if things were too easy.

Janie snorted, just a little. "Of course, honey. And don't call me Piglet. I know you want to, but just don't. You know I don't snort on purpose."

"It's cute, but I won't. This time." Rob chuckled and leaned back, elbow on the bed. "Point is, hon... if you see all that when I look at you, but for whatever reason I was sure you didn't love me? I'd do my damndest never to look at you where you could see me, too. Even with all my limbs present and accounted for. You see what I'm getting at?"

She did. He could tell she did. She was blinking, her mouth a little O, and it was damned adorable. "I... you..." she mumbled and Rob laughed.

"Yep. Figured that out all by myself. Now, are you planning on coming to bed, midge? Or do I have to... look at you some more?" He winked, then groaned softly at the sudden lap full of redhead he had.

"You," Janie said with a teasing grin as she kissed him lightly, "are the very best toilet brush a girl could ever have. But let's keep that between you and me, hmmm?" She kissed him again. "Because you know how I don't share."

"I do," Rob grunted as he rolled them on the bed and stared down into her eyes. "It's one of the many things I love about you."

He turned off the light and started to remind her of the rest in the dim glow coming past the edges of the curtains from the motel sign outside.

"This was a stupid idea," Bobby Bodeen growled as he tried to lever himself up from the floor. "I told you, you prick. Tried all this shit before I even left the fucking hospital, and it don't work!"

Thomas rolled his eyes. "Gee, Bobby-boy. Did you try as hard then as you're doing now? Because I'm really impressed by the five whole minutes you've been at it. Maybe you should give up, since it doesn't come as easily as drinking a fucking beer, you moron!"

"You motherfucker, I'm gonna kick your ass!" And that was the Bobby he knew and loathed, Thomas thought. Except he didn't, really. In fact, he kind of respected Bobby. Just a little bit. Not enough to mention to anyone but himself.

So Thomas snorted and smirked, hoping it would spur Bobby on. "Not without an artificial leg to stand on, you're not. Come on, wuss-boy! I know cross-dressers with more stamina!"

Actually, just about every transvestite Thomas knew had more stamina than most straight men of Thomas' acquaintance. It took a lot of damned gumption and effort to spend all day, every day, in heels, not to mention the damned uncomfortable undergarments, and... dear God, tucking. That alone had earned Thomas' respect after he'd tried it one Halloween and lasted an entire twenty minutes.

"Fuck off, Tommy-Lightloafers," Bobby snarled, though it didn't have the heat it would have if Bobby had really meant it. "You don't fucking know what it's like!" And down Bobby went again, before he'd even managed to get fully upright. "Fuck!" he shouted, beating the floor with clenched fists. Thomas sighed.

"Look, man," he said as he crouched down beside Bobby. "I know it's not easy, okay? You're trying to figure out how to make something that's not a part of you move like it *is*. But you don't have those nerves and muscles that you're used to, so right now, it's sort of like dragging a wooden block around. It's hard. I get that. But it's not impossible."

Yeah, he had Bobby's attention, even if the guy looked like he was waiting for the punch line. There wasn't one, but as long as Bobby was listening, Thomas figured he might as well say the rest of it.

"It doesn't help that the VA hospital gave you such a crap prosthesis, either. It's not fitted properly, and frankly..." Thomas frowned. "Truth is, Bobby, they make them much lighter and even custom, which would probably be a lot easier for you. But we don't have that kind of time right now, so get your ass up, stop being a pigheaded asshole about using the cane I brought you, and walk across the fucking room. Unless you'd rather sit there and cry, of course, but if you do that?" He smirked again. "I have a camera phone and I know how to use it."

Bobby just sat there for a minute, staring and silent, but then the man's face sort of... crumpled inward and Thomas actually saw Bobby's eyes well up. Shit, that hadn't been what he'd been going for at all.

"I can't do it," Bobby grunted, hitting the floor with his fists again. "Fuck you, Tommy. I can't! Look at me! I'm on the fucking floor like a God damned baby! I should be able to fucking do this and I can't! Walking should be like riding a fucking bike, but it's not, okay? It's like I forgot how,

and no matter how much shit you heap on me, I'm never gonna be able to fucking remember, you asshole!"

Thomas felt himself blinking because he'd never actually thought about it like that. Prosthetics really weren't his thing, though, so he wouldn't have. Even so... "That's the answer right there, Bobby-boy," he announced, almost a hundred percent sure that he was right. "Riding a bike. You're expecting too much from yourself, shit for brains. Sure, riding a bike was easy. *Once you learned how*. But I'll bet you a hundred bucks, Bobby... the first time you got on one, you fell on your ass. Or more likely your head, because that would explain a lot."

And Bobby was nodding. Barely, but Thomas would take it. "In fact, I remember you and your dad in the field out by the school. You were like... eight or so. Remember training wheels, jackass? You still fell over sometimes, but they helped. Then your dad took them off and even though you had a couple accidents after that, you started riding like a pro. Well, a professional eight-year-old, anyway."

"Shit, Tommy. You remember that?" Then Bobby frowned. "What the fuck, man! Were you checkin' me out?"

Thomas rolled his eyes. "You wish. It was just... my dad ran off a couple years before that. I was sort of... watching you with *your* dad so I could... imagine what it must be like, y'know? To have a father who was there. Who did shit like that with his son." He shrugged and looked away.

Bobby cleared his throat a little. "Sorry, man," Thomas heard him mutter, and Thomas shrugged again, then looked back at Bobby.

"It's okay. Mom did the best she could, and I sort of got used to it, after a while. But the point is, Bobby-boy... that prosthetic leg. It's like a bicycle, okay?" Then, "No, just hear me out," when Bobby snorted.

"Your artificial leg is sort of like that first bike, jackass. It's not a part of you, and I know that sucks, but it's how it is. And just like the bike you had when you were a kid, you need to learn how to move with it. Once you've got that down, you can teach *it* how to move with *you*. In the meantime, think of the cane as training wheels. Something that's there to give you a little extra bit of stability and support."

And wonder of wonders, the man actually seemed to be listening.

"I'm not saying it's going to be easy, okay?" Thomas went on. "Because most worthwhile things aren't. You'll probably feel as stupid some days as you'd feel if you were trying to learn to ride an actual bike for the first time, as an adult. But it'll get easier, and then it'll become second nature. Or..."

"Or?" Bobby echoed, and Thomas hid his grin because... oh, yeah. Bobby was seeing it as a challenge now. Not as some make-the-cripple-feel-better stunt on Thomas' part.

"Or you can give up," Thomas answered seriously, though he was sure Bobby wouldn't, now that he had something to compare it to and hopefully understood that having to work at it was normal. Or that was what one of the nurses at the hospital claimed, and as she did work with prosthetics, Thomas was inclined to believe her. "You can throw that artificial leg and the cane out with the trash and spend the rest of your life swinging around on crutches, getting drunk and being a bitter, angry piece of shit. It's up to you, man. The second option is probably easier, so I'm sure that what you'll do."

"Jesus Christ. Fuck off, Tommy Pull-some-pud," Bobby grunted, but he was pushing himself up from the floor and reaching for the cane... and there was a sort of determined look on his face that hadn't been there before, so Thomas was fine with it.

Even so, "Oh, that's clever," he answered, standing as Bobby did. "What's next? Ass-jockey? Butt-pirate? Hell, rump-ranger? I've heard them all, Bobby-boy. Or should I call you Hopalong?" Thomas' grin matched Bobby's. "Get moving, Peg-leg Pete. Before I run out and get you a fucking parrot."

Good Lord. Thomas hadn't actually thought it was possible, but it felt like he and Bobby Bodeen might actually be becoming... Christ. Friends, of all things. It was weird. But kind of cool, no matter how unexpected. God, he wanted to tell Alan. See what the man thought.

He'd have to call Alan later, Thomas decided. If only to find out why the Hell the man wasn't in Oak Grove yet. Alan had said a few days, so he should have been there, damn it.

Thomas had some things to talk about with his lover, after all. Mostly the fact that... they needed to break up. Because Molly was right. Hell, Momma was right. There was no way Thomas was going to let this insane wedding take place. He was going to stop it, somehow, and when he did?

Well, he had a feeling it would be best if he were single when that happened. No matter how long it might take him to win JJ back.

"Maybe you need knee pads and a helmet more than a parrot," he suggested when Bobby stumbled again. "I'm pretty sure they sell them at the five and dime..."

"Bite me, jerk-off," Bobby muttered as he struggled to stay upright, and Thomas laughed, even while he put a steady hand on Bobby's shoulder for just a second.

"Is that bite you *then* jerk off, or bite you *and* jerk off? Because I'm really good at multitasking, but I don't think you could handle it, Ilene. As in 'I lean.' To the left, in your case. Keep moving, jackass."

And Bobby did. Even with the grunts and grumbles and insults, the man kept moving, which was... yeah. Cool.

The last thing Genna was expecting was to see Bobby Bodeen coming in to the diner with her son. No, she realized, watching them. The *last* thing was the fact that Bobby wasn't on his crutches. In fact, he was... walking! By some miracle, he was walking.

With a cane, yes, and Tommy seemed to be holding him up a little, but God! Bobby Bodeen was *walking*! And seemed to be friendly with Tom-tom, which was another miracle, though minor by comparison.

"Well, look at you two," Genna said, beaming hugely from behind the diner's counter, though she wasn't sure of whether it was because their hometown hero was looking more like the boy she remembered or because he and Tommy had apparently buried whatever hatchet they'd had between them. "Pick a table, boys. I'll have Joe rustle you up something right quick. Unless you know what you're in the mood for?"

Tommy was shaking his head, but Bobby spoke right up. "Actually, Miz Paulson, ma'am, if you've got any of your famous meatloaf lyin' around..." And oh, that hopeful look was flattering. So much so that Genna couldn't help smiling even bigger.

"You got it, honey. And I'll bring you the same, Tom-tom. You boys want coffee or soda pop?"

"Um, I'd pure love a Coke, ma'am," Bobby said, and Lord, he sounded almost good. Not as angry and snarly as the last time she'd heard him, though that had been on the street and a good month earlier. Young Bobby hadn't been to the diner more than twice in the two-some years he'd been home.

He did have some manners, though, Genna admitted. Even if they seemed a bit rusty. "I'll have that right out for you, son," she answered, giving him a smile. "And Bobby? It's good to see you like this. I do believe you almost smiled."

"That'd be your boy's doing, ma'am," Bobby announced. "He's been... helping me out for the last day or so. Um, we got something we need to talk to you about if you got a few minutes, ma'am."

Oh, Lord. Please God, don't let her Tommy have turned the town hero gay, she prayed. She'd never hear the end of it.

"It's about JJ and Molly, Momma," Tommy added, and that was a relief. More so than Genna had expected.

"Fine. Fine. You boys just relax. I'll have your plates and drinks out here in two shakes. We can talk after you've eaten, because the both of you look like a stiff breeze could blow you away.

"Joe!" she called into the back, "Two meatloaf, extra gravy. Mashed potatoes and some of that parmesan spinach!" Then she filled glasses with ice and Coke before heading for Tommy's table. "Here we go, boys. Won't be but a minute. Now, how's my Tom-tom been helping you, Bobby?" Because if she was wrong and it actually was a gay thing, Genna figured she might need to shut

down for a day or two and hide out while the rest of the town found out and hopefully only egged the diner.

"It's nothing, Momma," Tommy started, but Bobby cut him off.

"Fu... um, bite me, Pull-some," Bobby growled, and Genna blinked at how good natured the young man sounded. Not at all serious and completely unlike what she'd heard from Mike over at the Bucket. Even with the almost-curse.

"It ain't 'nothing,' ma'am. Your boy here... he's a damned fine doctor. Talked me into trying to use this stupid, clunky fake leg, and..." Genna didn't know why she was surprised that Bobby Bodeen could still blush. Then again, he'd been a holy terror before he'd gone off to join the Army, so maybe that explained her shock.

"And?" she prodded with a smile as she joined them, taking Tommy's untouched Coke for her own.

"Well, ma'am," Bobby added, looking just a bit ashamed, "Tommy done what none of the docs at the military hospital could do. He explained why it was so hard without making me feel stupid. Without telling me that I'm a soldier, so I should be able to handle it. And he stuck with me all night while I tried, too. Didn't give up on me, no matter what I called him."

And, oh, that did a mother's heart proud, Genna admitted, especially because her Tommy and young Bobby had been at odds for their entire lives, as far as she could remember. "Well, he's a good boy, Bobby. Could have knocked me over with a feather when you came walking in here. Oh! I shouldn't have said that! But it was... amazing, Bobby. I'm so proud of you!"

Yes, Bobby Bodeen could definitely blush, Genna noticed yet again. Bright enough that she could almost feel the heat from across the table.

"Still hurts a bit, ma'am," Bobby said softly, fascinated by the silverware in front of him, judging from the way he was fiddling with it, "but your boy says he knows some folks out there in Los Angeles who'll be able to make me a custom leg, and that'll feel better." He shrugged, looking uncomfortable.

"God. Shut *up*, Pete," Tommy grumbled. "I'm not a fu... flipping saint, okay? You just needed some direction and... and 'buck up and deal, soldier' is a piss-poor motivational technique in the first place! Jesus, did they really say that? That's, like... criminal! Just 'hey, buddy, you're back from the war, or most of you is; now do this because we say so'? Christ! They should be brought up on charges!"

Bobby looked even more uncomfortable when he answered. "I might possibly have, um... thrown the fake leg at the first few doctors before they could even talk. I think they marked me down as... what was it? Incurrigible." Then he blushed again, and Genna tried not to laugh. "There was talk of charging me with assault, but they didn't. I think 'cause it'd be a media

nightmare when I lost my leg and the assault was because I knocked one of the docs out with the fake one."

Just like that, they were all laughing, and they didn't stop until Joe came out of the back with meatloaf and such for the boys.

When he set a plate containing a grilled bologna and cheese sandwich with mustard and pickles in front of her, Genna frowned. "I didn't order this."

Joe chuckled and rubbed the back of his neck, just like he always did. "No, but you meant to, Gen. You ain't had a bite to eat since before th' lunch rush. Now, you eat that up, woman, an' there might be a piece of that huckleberry pie in your future." And, oh, that man's eyes surely did shine.

"Got orders to do," Joe added gruffly. "You boys make sure she eats it all." Then he turned away and went back to the kitchen with a speed she'd rarely seen from the laid-back Cajun.

"Well. That was... odd. But eat up, boys. I'm dyin' to hear what you've got to say about Molly and young Johnny." It didn't escape her notice that Tommy, at least, was watching her with an amazed but happy gleam in his eye. She didn't know why, but in the end, Genna figured it was because she was actually eating the sandwich Joe had brought her.

It would be insulting if she didn't, she told herself, especially after Joe had gone to the trouble of making it. Besides, she really was a little bit hungry.

Okay, Bobby thought as he watched Tommy Paulson and his momma from across the table, this was the last possible scenario he ever would have imagined, even a week earlier.

He was sitting there, in Miz Paulson's diner, and he'd walked in there on his own... well, his own one foot and his temporary fake one. And Tommy Paulson -- the kid Bobby had called all manner of names, back in the day -- was the one who'd gotten him to try hard enough to even manage it. Tommy had even promised to talk to some nurse he knew about getting a new fake leg made that would match his real one. Jesus.

He still couldn't believe it. Not after all the years of Bobby talking trash and painting nasty shit on Tommy's locker in high school. Faggot had been the nicest word he'd used, and yet... here he was, just over ten years later, and Tommy was home and a doctor.

And apparently a good man, even to Bobby.

That was the surprising part, really, because after as much time as Bobby had spent in the military, he'd had to broaden his mind to things like... gay didn't mean evil or bad or even wrong. It wasn't for him, granted, but he'd heard and seen more proof that liking men didn't mean a guy wasn't still a brother -- and that someone could have your back, effectively, regardless of

their sexual wants, and not be a sissy, like his daddy'd always claimed -- to ever think that gay meant wrong again.

So it wasn't that Tommy was gay. It was that Tommy had even bothered to try helping him. The guy who'd done everything in his power to make Tommy's life miserable, back in the day. Bobby doubted he'd have done the same, in Tommy's place, which really meant... Tommy was the better man.

It was strange to think it, and Bobby knew he would have tried to beat anyone who might have suggested it to him, even a few days earlier. He'd been so sure that he was the best man ever. The tragic hero who'd gone away whole and come back... lessened, but with his legend that much larger for what he'd lost. And Tommy, damn him and bless him, had yanked Bobby's head out of the hole in the sand that he'd dug all on his own.

The fact that he'd managed to walk to the diner -- with a cane, yes, and with an occasional supporting arm from Tommy -- was proof enough that he owed the man, no matter how much the stump of his leg was hurting from the unaccustomed pressure.

He owed Tommy Paulson because Bobby felt more like a man on two feet. Even with one being artificial. Even with the cane. And Bobby wasn't the sort to ignore that kind of debt.

So if Tommy wanted JB Boudreaux, then Bobby was for damned sure going to do everything he could to see that it happened. Even if he didn't understand why someone like Tommy would still be pining after a bleached, metal-studded, ink-covered freak like JB. That part was none of his business.

He was choosing to ignore the fact that stopping the wedding meant Molly would be single. He couldn't think about that yet. Couldn't quite manage to make himself believe that she felt anything for him other than some slight affection for a former lover, and that was only if he were lucky. Even so, he was on board with Tommy's plan, such as it was.

In the meantime, though, while he waited for Tommy's momma to finish her sandwich, Bobby inhaled the entire plate of food that Miz Paulson's boyfriend had set down in front of him. He was a little bit surprised that he hadn't heard a thing about the cook at the diner dating the owner. It seemed like something the rumor mill wouldn't have missed, but whatever.

Bobby made a mental note to warn his daddy that Genna Paulson was off the market, though. The last time they'd talked, Daddy had mentioned her, and while it was the first time Bobby had heard the man sound interested in a woman since his momma'd passed away, well... snooze and lose, wasn't that the old saying?

"That was... you make a mighty fine meatloaf, Miz Paulson," Bobby announced as he set his fork down on his empty plate. "Mighty fine. Thank you." Because that was only polite, especially since he doubted the woman would let him pay.

"Well, aren't you the sweetest thing, Bobby Bodeen! You're right welcome. And please. You're old enough to call me Genna, son." That smile. Lord. Like she really meant it.

But of course she did, Bobby told himself sternly. She was a lady, after all. He'd just been away for so long, and then when he'd got back, he'd been... well, spending all his time at the Bucket, and no ladies ever went there that could be called such.

"Thanks, Miz Genna," he answered, and he deliberately ignored the little kissing motions Tommy was making where his momma couldn't see. He was *not* a suck up, damn it. "Appreciate it." And he did.

God, it was like he'd been in some sort of fugue state for the last however long, and now he'd come out of it. Dragged from his own stupidity by Tommy Paulson, of all people. And Tommy's momma was sitting across from him and treating him like a real person, calling him "son." It was... fucking weird. But nice.

"All right, boys," Miz Genna said next. "Now, what's this about JB and Molly?"

Bobby shook his head, looking pointedly at what had to be four bites of sandwich still left on her plate. "Sorry, ma'am, but we're under orders. You understand."

She hemmed and hawed and grumbled a little, but she finally cleared her plate, and that made Bobby smile. Not only was Miz Genna seeing the cook, but she respected him, too. It gave him hope for their future.

"We need to stop the wedding," Tommy announced, and Bobby rolled his eyes at the suddenness of that statement.

"Fu... Fudge, Packer," Bobby said, because he just couldn't resist the obvious dig, "You couldn't build up to it? Jesus. Just 'we have to stop the wedding'? God, you're retarded." He shifted his gaze to Miz Genna, hoping she saw the teasing in his eyes. "Is he retarded? You're his momma, and I'd get it if you never wanted to tell him before, but you can tell me the truth, ma'am. Tommy's retarded, right? He was licking windows on the short bus, wasn't he?"

"Oh, you're fu-flipping hilarious, Hopalong! If I was, you'd know! You were in the last seat, rubbing pudding all over your face!" And, God, Tommy could be damned funny when he wanted to.

"Thank you, Lord," Miz Genna was saying, and that stopped them both. She was looking at the ceiling, which didn't really make any sense unless she was actually thanking God for something, though, and... "Thank you for Tommy's daddy being gay, Lord. Because if this is how Tommy would have been with a brother, I'd have gone insane years ago. Amen."

"What?" she asked when she looked away from the heavens and caught them both staring. "I was talking to God and being sincere. Is that so strange?"

Bobby didn't know which one of them started doing it first. He only knew that there were tears coming from his eyes, he was laughing so hard. And when he finally stopped and looked across the table, the look on Tommy's face started him up again. Then the look on Miz Genna's, a few minutes later. And, God, it felt good.

Like family, almost.

Dinner had been interesting, Alan admitted for about the thousandth time in the two days since it had happened. Interesting and clearly not what JB had hoped, though Alan had sort of planned it that way.

Yes, he wanted JB. There was no doubt of that. The man was hot and gay and definitely interested. But so very, very not single, and Alan didn't mean the woman JB was so determined to marry, either. In fact, he figured that if JB really thought about it, even wanting to take Alan to bed sort of killed the whole marriage thing. He hadn't met JB's Molly, but Alan seriously doubted that she would be willing to stand by while JB took men -- various or just one -- to bed repeatedly. Then again, Alan sort of got the feeling that JB wasn't terribly experienced.

It wasn't anything the man had said, really, but after that morning in the shower, Alan had done some thinking, and... a guy didn't come that hard and fast unless he was either entirely inexperienced or had gone so long without that it all felt new to him. And sure, JB talked a good game, but the guy was obviously used to that. He had to be, what with going from nothing to talking his way into getting a game put out with no contacts whatsoever.

No... if Alan knew anything at all, it was that JB was probably still a virgin, and definitely waiting for Thomas. And that being so, Alan couldn't -- wouldn't -- do anything that could ever possibly screw things up. Or not anything more than he already had. And that, really, was why he was avoiding Thomas' calls.

Sixteen voice mails in the last three days, and Alan hadn't listened to a single one. He hadn't had the balls.

The wedding was in two days, and he couldn't even listen to Thomas' messages; that didn't bode well, since JB had specifically asked Alan to step in as a replacement for a distant cousin who'd gotten pneumonia, somehow, and couldn't do his ushering and groomsman's duties. And like an idiot, Alan had said yes, because just watching JB eat spaghetti should be listed as one of the deadly sins. Or all seven. Whatever.

So, somehow, and Alan was choosing to ignore the fact that he absolutely knew the means -- he'd been letting his cock think for him -- he was in the wedding party, sworn to make sure things went flawlessly for a ceremony he truly believed should never take place.

Fuck.

He was still trying to figure out what to do when he swung by the office on his way to the pool. Janie or Rob usually had time for a swim, after all, and he found it easier to forget his own problems when he had someone to talk to about things that didn't matter. Usually that meant life in LA, because there wasn't a chance that the couple would ever be moving there. They liked Oak Grove entirely too much to ever even consider it. But they might visit someday, and Alan thought that could be fun. He'd never shown his town to straight people before, much less straight married people.

"It's ridiculous," he heard Janie shouting as he reached the door, and that had Alan pausing right there. He'd never heard Janie and Rob fight. He hadn't even thought that they could, they seemed so in tune with each other. "The stupidest thing ever, Rob!"

"Damn it, midge," he heard Rob say back, though the man was only speaking loudly, not yelling, "it's not up to us! Johnny is gonna do whatever Johnny wants to do. And getting upset about it isn't gonna make it go away. You know that." And Rob was obviously bothered by whatever was going on, too, because he was saying gonna, rather than going to, Alan noticed.

"That doesn't mean I have to like it," Janie answered, her words just as loud as the first ones he'd heard, and Alan felt sort of creepy for listening, but he was just waiting for a lull. Really. He told himself that over and over, even while he stood there and eavesdropped.

"No, but he's our friend. Our brother, almost, considering how long we've all known each other," Rob answered, still sounding reasonable. "And you and I might know this whole...marrying Molly thing is a huge fucking mistake, Janie-girl, but Johnny doesn't! Or he seems to want to go through with it even if he does. So we're gonna grit our teeth and get all dressed up and fucking *smile* while he and Molly -- because she's a part of this, too -- do everything in their power to fuck up their lives and Jayce's. And we're gonna be fucking supportive for all of them when it falls apart. Got it?"

Well, that was enough to tell him that he and the Sylvesters were on the same page, anyway, so Alan was smiling just a bit as he opened the door and stepped in to the office.

"I have to say I'm with Janie on this one, Rob," Alan announced, fingers clenching in the thick terry of the towel he had over one shoulder. "Your Johnny, or JB, or JJ, as Thomas calls him, is making a huge mistake. And it would be a really good idea if we stopped him -- and Molly -- before it goes too far. By which I mean... before they actually say their vows and it'll take a lawyer or twelve to fix things."

God, it felt good to just put it out there. It felt even better when Janie and Rob stopped looking at him like he was some interloper, which happened just as soon as he reminded them that he'd been with Thomas in every sense and spent time with JB, and knew -- beyond a shadow of a doubt -- that it wasn't only Thomas who was still in love, but JB, as well.

"Okay," Alan offered, "here's one idea..."

Jesus, JB realized as he stared at his reflection in the mirror, he was nervous. It was his wedding day, and he was fucking nervous, which was just bizarre since it was Molly and they already had a kid, and it wasn't a *real* wedding. But it was, in the sense of God and family and friends, even if not in the usual way.

He and Molly would never be having sex. He knew that. So did Molly. But being married would give her and Jayce so much more respectability, so much more... security, that JB knew it was the right thing.

Still, a tiny part of his mind mumbled, what if she found someone else? What if he did? Then they'd be stuck. Trapped. Because JB didn't have any doubts that any man Molly might meet and want to marry would be sincere -- she was actually that amazing of a woman -- but he'd have to be a fool if he didn't demand whatever he could get from JB in a divorce settlement. And any man JB might possibly meet... well, that wasn't likely in Oak Grove, was it?

So it didn't matter, JB decided. If Molly met someone, he'd come to some sort of agreement with her. An agreement that her new man wouldn't like, probably, but one that would let Molly and Jayce and Jayce's new step-dad have a good start.

He wasn't thinking about Alan, damn it. And he for damned sure wasn't thinking about Tommy. Wasn't even entertaining the possibility of *considering* thinking about Tommy, for fuck's sake.

Because Tommy had been in town for over a week and hadn't even tried to see him. And JB didn't fucking care. He didn't. Tommy didn't matter.

"Daaaaaad! It's time!" his best man said from the doorway, and JB forced a grin onto his face. Plastered it there so it wouldn't slip.

"Cool, buddy," he answered as he turned around and went to meet his son at the door. Nothing was going to change. Jayce would still spend every other night or so at his house, and Molly would still live at her place, and life would go on just as it always had.

It was a simple ceremony, JB reminded himself carefully, desperately. It wouldn't change a single thing, aside from Molly and Jayce getting everything if he died unexpectedly. Which would have happened anyway if he'd just had a will drawn up, but that was irrelevant.

Molly wanted exactly what they were doing. Wanted a wedding. She'd said so, many a time. She hadn't thought he was listening, of course, but he'd heard her. And Molly was... God, his best friend and the mother of his child, and if doing this would make her happy, then he'd marry her a dozen times over and still owe her for giving him Jayce.

He reminded himself of that as he walked down the aisle and took his place to the side of the podium... altar... whatever. He wasn't sure it counted as an altar when it was in his backyard, rather than a church.

He stood there with his groomsmen, and when the traditional bridal march started, he found his eyes going to the top of the aisle, just like everyone else's, and oh... oh, he could almost imagine getting it up for a woman, all of a sudden. Molly looked that amazing.

The tea-colored gown hugged her curves, flattering her in a way JB had never considered necessary. And the silk flowed as she strolled slowly down the aisle toward him. Her veil was so light and transparent, JB could see that she hadn't gone crazy with her make-up, and that was good. He'd always thought she looked her best without loads of goop.

And then she was standing beside him and the preacher was saying the usual words.

"We are gathered here today to join this man and this woman in holy wedlock. It is not a state to enter into lightly..." JB tuned out the rest, his heart racing, stumbling in its beats.

"If anyone here can show just cause why these two may not be joined," the minister said, "let them speak now or forever hold their peace."

"I... I object," JB whispered, turning to give Molly an apologetic gaze, only to find himself stunned by the fact that she was uttering the same words.

Then "I object," came from the crowd who'd gathered for the wedding, and JB was floored at seeing it was his own mother, his father standing beside her and nodding agreement.

"Um, we object, too, man. Sorry," from Rob, while Janie just muttered "No, no, no, no, no..." under her breath.

"What the..." he started to say, but then he looked up the aisle again and saw... Jesus fucking Christ. Bobby Bodeen. Walking!

"Molly," Bobby said. Just that. Nothing more. But then the guy *looked* at Molly, and JB didn't have a single clue as to what she saw there, but whatever it was had her running down the aisle to fling her arms around the man, and...

"If it matters at all, I object, too," JB heard, and even though the voice wasn't one he'd heard in ages, he knew it. He knew it and he didn't want to hear anything else it had to say.

"Well," JB said quickly, words just pouring from his mouth, "this wedding is obviously over, so... sorry, enjoy the food and I'll just be going now, and... okay. Bye."

"No." It was said so simply, so surely that JB found himself frozen in place. "No," that voice said again, and this time there were hands on his shoulders, pulling him around.

"You don't get out of this so easily," Tommy said, and... damn. Tommy had turned into a stud, JB noticed. Even taller, even more muscled, though he looked a little thin. Like there wasn't enough fat spread out over those ridges that were only partly concealed by Tommy's tux.

"Easily?" JB gasped. "You think this is *easy*?" Because just standing there looking at his betraying bastard of a true fucking love without breaking -- even after nearly a decade -- was the hardest thing JB had ever done. "Fuck you, Tommy. Just... fuck you!"

Rather than the anger JB was expecting, Tommy just looked at him, sorrow and regret and apology in those eyes, along with something JB didn't want to see right then, and if JB had been any less determined to never lose his heart again, he would have caved. As it was, though...

"Goodbye, Tommy," JB said bluntly as he pulled away from Tommy's hands, and it was the easiest thing he'd ever said. Not painful at all. Except for the part where it was. "We were through ages ago. Just... go back to LA, okay? You're not wanted here by anyone but your momma."

Oh. Oh, he felt that shattered look in Tommy's eyes -- on Tommy's face -- all the way down to his toes. And it didn't feel anything like as good as he always thought it would. It felt like... God, JB realized, it felt like he'd just ripped out his own heart.

That didn't stop him from walking away, though, and going to Molly, where she was still wrapped up in Bobby Bodeen.

"Hey," he said quietly, not wanting to disturb them too abruptly, since they seemed to be entirely unaware of everything but each other. "There's a perfectly good wedding going to waste, here. I'm sure the minister wouldn't mind if you guys took advantage of it."

He did his best to smile at Molly's disbelieving look. "You can get the license later and do the actual deed at Town Hall, Moll. I'd really rather have someone use what's here than nobody at all."

"If they don't want it, we do," a voice said from behind him, and JB turned to see Tommy's momma looking entirely scandalized but a good bit pleased as well, as the cook from the diner grinned. "Been gone over you from the start, Genna," the man added, clearly not caring who else heard, "and it'd be an honor, if you'll have me."

"I... don't you want to date first?" he heard Tommy's momma yelp, and even though he was walking away, he heard the cook's reply of "No... I know what I want and it's you, honey," and that just made it all that much worse.

"Someone use the damned wedding!" JB shouted over his shoulder, and he didn't care if it was rude that he was leaving. Didn't give a fucking rat's ass. Molly and Bobby Bodeen. Tommy's momma and her cook. Love was alive and well in Oak Grove, Arkansas. Just not in JB's life, damn it.

"JJ." And that was the last fucking thing he wanted to hear, but apparently he couldn't avoid it. "Damn it, JJ, just slow down and let me talk to you!"

And he did, but not because he cared about anything Tommy had to say. Not even close. He just wanted the fucking bastard to leave him the Hell alone.

"What?" he snarled, whipping around to glare at Tommy... and if his eyes noticed just how fucking perfect Tommy was again, well, who could blame them, other than him? Tommy was a damned fine specimen of a man. Even with looking just a little bit starved. Hell, Tommy's cheeks were fucking hollow! Not that he cared, JB reminded himself. "What do you fucking want, Paulson?"

Tommy just stood there, looking at him. JB saw those eyes gaze up at his bleached hair, then move down, pausing at the ring through his eyebrow. He saw them slow at his nose, seeing the hole there, even though there wasn't a ring in it at present.

"What else?" Tommy murmured and JB didn't have a single problem with answering, not when it was likely to make the man go away that much sooner, leaving JB and his shattered heart in peace.

"Piercings?" he replied bluntly. "Nipples, navel, cock, scrotum... and I've got more ink than you've probably ever seen. I moved on after you left, Tommy. Grew up. Changed. Had hundreds of lovers, even." And that was possibly the biggest lie he'd ever told. Even bigger than when he'd told Molly he was going to marry her, because he for damned sure hadn't been able to go through with that.

"I barely even remember you, Paulson," JB added, going for the kill. "It's not like we ever had sex or anything. You were just the first real blip on my fucking gaydar, is all."

JB wasn't expecting the sudden look of understanding on Tommy's face. In fact, he had no idea of what it meant at all. All he knew was that he wanted to hurt the man and he hadn't managed it yet.

"Alan, on the other hand, knows just how to flip every switch I have. So if you ever need any tips, you might want to check with your ex. We've had a really fun week or so, just... hanging out." And with that, JB pulled himself away, going to his truck and breathing a sigh of relief when Tommy didn't follow.

He dug the spare keys from the magnet case under the tailgate and got in, not sure of where he was going, but knowing that anywhere was better than home. For the moment, anyway.

Anywhere was better than home, where there was at least one wedding going on, and where the man who'd broken JB's heart was.

Hopefully, that man was feeling something like the despair *he'd* felt for what seemed like forever, JB thought vengefully. Hopefully Tommy was finally understanding what he'd done. And if not, JB decided, he didn't care. Just as long as Tommy was gone by the time JB came back... from wherever the Hell he was going.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. He was so screwed.

Not only had he been ducking Thomas' calls, but Thomas had shown up at the wedding. To stop it, which was exactly what Alan had been planning on doing himself, but shit.

At least Thomas hadn't noticed him, Alan thought, relief singing through his body. That had likely been due to the fact that Thomas hadn't been looking at anyone or anything other than JB, of course, though Alan had made a point of sort of... ducking down behind the guy he'd been standing next to.

Now, it looked like the bride had found herself another groom, and this was the strangest damned wedding Alan had ever been to. Especially when Genna Paulson stepped up behind Molly and whoever Molly was going to marry now, and was with... some guy Alan had never seen, though for the man's sake, Alan hoped it was that Joe Genna had gone on about a few times during their extended phone calls.

JB was gone, of course. He'd stormed off, Thomas right behind him, and Alan really hoped that meant the two men were actually talking. Or screw the talking. He hoped they were fucking. Talking was overrated. And where JB and Thomas were concerned, Alan figured words would do more harm than good.

Between the people milling about and the minister trying to get everyone's names and prospective spouses straight for the ceremony, Alan didn't notice the disturbance amongst the attendees. He didn't even notice the spreading silence until it reached him, and by then it was far too late. His stomach was already dropping down to somewhere in the vicinity of his toes as he felt his eyes following Genna's and Molly's against his will.

Yeah... that was what he'd been afraid of.

"Uh, hi, Thomas," he managed, Thomas' name coming out as more of a yelp because the man had grabbed Alan's shoulder and was dragging him into the crowd. "Oh... shit." He was definitely screwed. And not in the good way, damn it.

Thomas didn't have a single fucking clue about what he was going to say to Alan. No idea at all, although he suspected that once he started talking -- or yelling, as the case may be -- the words *betraying fucking bastard* and *huge fucking slut* and maybe even *two-timing thief* would come out of his mouth.

It would be different, maybe, if he thought Alan hadn't known who JJ was when the two men had... Jesus, slept together. Thomas would still be fucking furious, but he would possibly have understood. JJ looked nothing like he used to, after all. Nothing like the boy Thomas had

described to Alan. Hell, JJ was even calling himself by a different name these days. JB. Hah. So, maybe, if Alan hadn't known, Thomas could have been a stronger man, a fair man.

But Alan had known. Of course he had. There was no other reason for Alan to be ignoring Thomas' calls. And JJ had known Alan and Thomas were an item. An ex-item, because that was what JJ had said. Thomas should ask his ex. As in ex. Non-current. Former. *Ex*.

Which they hadn't been, or at least not officially, because Alan had obviously been too busy fucking JJ behind Thomas' back to bother picking up the God damned phone!

He had no idea of what his face was showing, but Thomas thought he must look somewhat fierce, judging by the way people were getting out of his way, and that was good. He needed to be out of the damned crowd. Needed to be... somewhere else. Somewhere that he could scream and yell and possibly kick Alan's ass without worrying that they'd be interrupted.

"Look, Thomas," Alan said carefully, and yeah. Around the side of JJ's house was far enough, Thomas decided, because there wasn't a chance in Hell that he could ignore that placating tone.

"You fucking bastard!" Thomas growled, shoving Alan away from him so hard the man stumbled. "You fucking piece of shit, Alan! What, were you that hard up? Or is it just that you were pissed off, huh? Because I, what? Didn't tell you about JJ sooner? Jesus, Alan! I know we were gonna break up, but I thought we were friends! Aside from the fucking... *fucking*, I thought we were friends, God damn it, and then you. Fuck! You snuck into my hometown and started fucking my... JJ? Jesus!"

And that was even worse, Thomas decided as the words left him. Bad enough that JJ couldn't stand him and was sleeping with Alan, but damn it, Alan was his best friend, or had been, and now... Now Thomas had nothing. No lover, no friend, no... anything. He for damned sure didn't have JJ. He'd lost everything, all around. Shit.

"... it's not like that, Thomas, I swear," Alan was saying. Babbling, really. "I just wanted to see where you came from first and Emma Boudreaux invited me to dinner and I met JB and I didn't know he was JJ right at first, but then I did and things got... weird, and I never fucked JB!"

That last just as Thomas was snarling "You fucked JJ!" and the strangeness of similar words meaning opposite things coming from both of them at once had silence stretching between them for a good five seconds. Then "You never..."

"I swear, Thomas. I... well, okay, I was going to say that I never touched JB, but that's not true. I..." Alan was blushing and staring at the grass between their shoes, and that was guilt Thomas was seeing. He'd seen it on Alan before, after all, just never when it was something so... important. "You weren't even together," Alan added, "and it didn't mean anything, okay? It was just..."

And just like that, Thomas felt all his anger, all his righteous fury draining away. Because Alan was right. He and JJ really weren't together. Hadn't been for years. And no matter how much

Thomas had been thinking of JJ as his... he wasn't. Never would be, either, going by the things JJ -- JB, Thomas reminded himself -- had said.

What had he been thinking, anyway? That he'd just come back to Oak Grove and bust up the wedding, and then he and Johnny Boudreaux would ride off into the sunset holding hands like they were in some stupid gay romance? That JJ had been just sitting around, waiting for Thomas to come back?

Well, yeah, Thomas realized. He really sort of had. Had hoped so, anyway, once he'd realized that JJ wasn't dead. Hell, even in his occasional pessimistic view of the future, Thomas had assumed that he and JJ would yell at each other, maybe even fight like cats and dogs, but would turn out making up and finding some way to be happy together. In those visions, JJ forgave him for being an asshole; for breaking JJ's heart.

There hadn't been a single fucking picture of the future that involved JJ Boudreaux having sex with Alan, though, but why wouldn't he? Alan was a damned good-looking guy, and clearly not so attached to Thomas that he could be bothered breaking up with him before starting something up with JJ, damn it.

All of which left Thomas feeling just... empty. Hollow.

"Never mind," Thomas said, what little energy he'd had left fleeing him with the words. "Just... never mind, Alan. I'm heading back to LA tonight. I should be out of the apartment by this time tomorrow. I..." He sighed. "Never mind. Just... goodbye, Alan."

He had no idea of whether Alan had anything to say to that, mostly because Thomas wasn't listening. Instead, he was walking to his rented SUV and settling himself behind the wheel. Fastening his seat belt. Turning the key in the ignition. Everything was its own step, and that was good. As long as he kept things to an ordered progression, Thomas figured he'd make it to the apartment above the diner before he broke.

God help him, but he'd brought all of it on himself.

"I never should have listened to Eric," he whispered, the words disappearing under the sound of the engine. "I never should have listened to anyone but myself."

September, 2008
Vista del Sol, California

"Come on, Thomas, I know you're in there," Alan called, willing his voice to carry through the closed door of Thomas' new place. "Could you *please* stop being a pissy little drama queen and let me in? I know you're mad at me, but come on! I spent the last three weeks hunting you down; doesn't that count for anything?"

"Go away," he finally heard, and thank God. Alan had really thought he would have to wait for Thomas to leave for the hospital to get even that much out of him, and who knew when that would be? "Just... leave me alone. Why don't you go have sex with someone I'm in love with, since you've got so much free time? Oh, wait. You already did that. Bastard."

"Oh, for... God damn it, Thomas!" Okay, he was finally pissed, Alan realized. Pissed off and about to go screaming harpy on Thomas' stupid fucking ass. "Open this God damned door before I break it down! I seriously can't believe you're putting us both through all this shit because of a fucking hand job! Christ! Like you've never given someone a friendly tug or two!"

Silence. Absolute fucking silence from behind the door and that was just fucking enough, Alan decided. He was through letting Thomas Paulson ignore him. They'd been lovers for two years, and friends for all of that, and Thomas was being a dick.

"Thomas..." Alan said, hoping the warning was clear in his voice, "I swear..."

"Hand job." He almost didn't hear the words, Thomas was speaking so quietly. Or maybe just speaking normally on the other side of the door. "What the fuck are you talking about, Alan?" And that was an improvement. At least Thomas was calling him by name.

That didn't keep Alan from rolling his eyes, though. "I'm talking about your JJ. Who else? I'm talking about you getting all... moody Mona and bitchy Beverly because I jerked the guy off. Okay, I know. I shouldn't have let it go that far. I even knew it at the time, but you know me, Thomas. I'm never at my best with a morning hangover." God. That was so true, it hurt. "And to be fair, JB really is a pretty thing."

He actually thought he heard a lock flip, though open or closed, Alan didn't know. But then he heard it again and the knob was turning under his hand.

"I do know you, Alan," Thomas said, sounding... God, so tired. Sad. "I know just how much you follow your dick wherever it leads you. Especially when you're not with someone, which apparently you decided you weren't. Trust me, I've heard about it more than once since we met. So why should I believe you? Why should I believe that your dick led you to a hand job and then just... gave up?"

And Thomas really *did* know him, so Alan couldn't do anything but tell the truth to the one eye and three inch wide strip of Thomas he could see through the slightly opened door. "Because. God, Thomas. At first, I felt guilty, okay? About the... jerking off, sure, but about wanting more

than that. Then JB sort of gave me the feeling that while he really was attracted to me, there was something else going on. I mean, he didn't say so or anything, but he knew all about me. Knew my last name; knew what I do for a living. I'm pretty sure Genna didn't tell him, and Emma Boudreaux for damned sure didn't know, so..."

"Uh-huh," Thomas grunted and Alan almost stopped right there, but that door opened a little more, maybe another half an inch, so he went on.

"So I wasn't going to fuck someone you loved, Thomas. Even if we weren't really together anymore. I mean, you and I? We hadn't had sex in way more than a month, between your job and mine. Would I have fucked JB if he'd been anyone else? Someone other than your JJ?" Alan grinned sheepishly. "Hell, yes. In a heartbeat. But even if I'd hated you, Thomas, which I never have, by the way, I would never have had sex with JJ. Not once I realized what it meant that he knew so much about me."

Thomas snorted, and the sound should have made Alan feel better, but it just didn't. Not when Thomas still sounded so damned worn. "It means he knows everything that happens in fucking Oak Grove," Thomas grumbled.

Alan shook his head, despairing of Thomas' ability to read between the lines. "It means, oh oblivious one, that JB loves you. He checked me out without knowing if I'd ever be in your quaint little hometown, Thomas. He was keeping an eye on the competition. Even if he doesn't know it. Now, can I please come in? It's not that I don't adore your lovely hallway. The scent of cat urine alone is positively alluring. But I'd rather not stand out here all day, if you don't mind."

"New shoes, huh?" Thomas answered, but he opened the door and Alan grinned, then breezed right by.

"You know me too well," Alan agreed, but he wasn't really paying attention. Instead, he was staring around the little shoe box Thomas had moved to, taking in the sagging single bed against the wall and the ugly sofa stained with God only knew what. It was clean, at least, Alan consoled himself as he inhaled and smelled nothing but pine and lemon and a faint tinge of bleach. "Good Lord, Thomas, where did you find this place? 'Shit-holes-'r-'us'? It's hideous! And not in the delightful sense of a too-tacky Hawaiian shirt, either."

"It's cheap," Thomas said with a sigh, "and I'm only here for a few hours every couple days. But if you don't like it, you can leave, Alan."

Alan shook his head, clicking his tongue in that way he knew irritated Thomas. "Oh, honey. Nobody could ever like this place. It's maybe half a step up from a by-the-hour motel." And then he finally turned to give Thomas a grin that would show the man he was teasing -- sort of -- and he got his first really good look at his friend. "Jesus! What the Hell happened to you!"

Thomas shrugged like he had no idea of what Alan was talking about, but that wasn't possible, because... okay, Thomas had been working hard before they'd gone to Oak Grove, but this...

"You look like shit," Alan said bluntly. "You've got circles under your eyes, Thomas, and you look like you haven't eaten at all since the last time I saw you. I can see your wrist bones, and trust me. On a guy built like you, that's not a good thing. Now sit your ass down and tell me what the fuck is going on."

Work, work and more work, which Alan really should have known, or even just suspected. Extra shifts because Thomas didn't want to go home, though Alan couldn't really blame him, considering what home was. Not really eating, since every time Thomas had a spare minute, he'd get maybe a bite down before there was some emergency that required his attention. Thomas was basically living on coffee and vitamins, Alan was sure, which didn't make for a healthy man and was especially worrisome, since Thomas was a doctor.

If Thomas kept on like that, Alan was afraid the man would make some sort of critical error.

"That's it," Alan snapped a few minutes later. "You're killing yourself, Thomas, and chances are, you'll kill someone else by accident, if you keep on like this. You're exhausted, you haven't been eating right, and caffeine is not a substitute for sleep. How many hours have you put in over the last week?" The answer was enough to have Alan growling. "Pack a bag. You're coming to my place. I'm calling you in sick to the hospital, which is maybe a little bit ironic, but there it is. You're going to get into my bed and sleep, Thomas, for at least eight hours. Then you'll eat. Then you're going to sleep again. We may not be lovers anymore, but you're still my best friend and I'm not going to let you do this to yourself. Consider yourself warned."

Thomas was staring at him bleary-eyed, so Alan sighed and started moving about the cracker box room, shoving jeans and T-shirts into Thomas' gym bag, along with underwear, socks, and a set of scrubs. He looked into the bathroom, then shuddered and backed away when he saw a cockroach crawling over Thomas' toothbrush.

"We're ready, Thomas. Put some shoes on and let's go." And it was pretty damned telling that Thomas was actually worn out enough that he listened, considering how long it had taken Alan to even get the guy to open the apartment door.

Forty minutes later, Alan stood in the doorway of his own bedroom, watching Thomas sleep like the dead. If it weren't for the subtle rise and fall of Thomas' chest, Alan would have thought Thomas really was dead, he was lying so still. "Christ."

Yes, Thomas was a wreck, and a lot of that was due to his work schedule, but at least some of it, Alan was sure, could be laid at the feet of one Johnny Boudreaux, and Alan himself.

"Jesus, this is a fucking mess."

Thomas was floating. He was floating and nicely warm, rather than sweating, which he usually did at his crappy apartment, what with the air conditioner being broken and the management not giving a shit. Well, that was what he'd gotten from them telling him to fix it himself or take fifty

bucks off his rent. So he'd taken the fifty off because he'd be damned if he was going to pay to fix the old-ass window unit and then pay full rent because it was working.

So Thomas was floating and comfortable and more than half asleep, he figured, because even his horrific little bed felt soft and good, and he was so liking the dream. Enough that he would fight to stay in it for just a little while longer. He'd hadn't felt so good in... God, weeks. Months, maybe. Like he'd actually slept for more than three hours and was a little bit rested.

He stretched, still holding on to the sleepy haze, only to fly fully awake when the bed didn't end where it should have; when his extended leg didn't poke out from under the covers and dangle over the edge. "Shit!" Then he looked at the clock and yelped it again. "Shit!"

"Calm down, Thomas," he heard. "You have the day off. Take a shower, okay? There's a new toothbrush by the sink for you. Yours had... *things* on it. I'll start some breakfast." Alan. It was Alan, Thomas realized, which made sense since he was in Alan's bed, not his own, and... and it all came back to him.

Letting Alan in. Being so fucking wrecked. Alan dragging him back to the apartment Thomas had thought of as home for close to two years. He didn't actually remember falling into bed, but chances were, he'd already been asleep.

Jesus, Thomas thought as he followed Alan's directions and started the shower running, he really owed Alan. And not just an apology, though that was suddenly on the top of his mental list, because even with Thomas not answering Alan's calls since Oak Grove, the man had stayed a true friend. And hadn't slept with JJ, which shouldn't have mattered anymore, but somehow did.

God, water pressure was an amazing thing, he decided. Of course, so was soap without bugs crawling on it, which was the reason Thomas had switched to the liquid kind in the pump bottles. Thomas didn't even want to think about what Alan had said about his toothbrush. He must have forgotten to wrap it up that... whatever the Hell time of day it had been when he'd gotten back to his rat trap after his latest shift.

"You have the flu," Alan announced when Thomas wandered in to the kitchen a good half an hour later wearing the jeans and T-shirt he'd found on the bed. "And you'll be thrilled to know that Doctor what's-his-name didn't seem at all surprised. In fact, he said something to the effect of that explaining why you've been dragging around the hospital and looking like crap lately. You've got three days, so use them wisely."

Then Alan was setting a plate of pancakes, bacon, and eggs in front of him and sitting down across the table with a similar assortment, and that was good because Thomas really didn't know what to say. If Doctor Fortesque had noticed something off about him, then Thomas figured maybe he'd been in worse shape than he'd thought.

It felt completely bizarre to be sitting down and eating; it felt even stranger to know that he wasn't going to have to rush off at a moment's notice. But somehow, sitting there with Alan, even after the last few weeks, felt normal. Comfortable.

Even so, Thomas waited until he'd eaten close to half of the food he'd been presented with before looking across the table and offering Alan what he hoped was an apologetic grin. "Um, about before," he said simply, "I'm sorry, okay? I was just... Christ. I was being stupid. Sorry."

Alan rolled his eyes and Thomas smiled a bit more. "What you were being, Thomas," Alan announced, sounding just as certain as he always did, "is a big, jealous idiot. Of course, now that I've seen your JJ, I can't say that I blame you. It's just as well that we broke up, though, because I don't look a thing like him anymore. And I'm not really the type for all those rings in... interesting places. So. The question is, how do we get you two together again?"

Okay, and there were so many things wrong with what Alan had just said that Thomas could barely even breathe. Starting with... Alan didn't look like JJ at all. Not even when... except he kind of did, Thomas realized with a good bit of shock. The same coloring, similar builds... and God, Alan's smile even reminded him a little bit of eighteen-year-old JJ, before Thomas had gone and ruined it all. "Jesus fucking Christ," Thomas whispered.

Then Alan laughed and Thomas couldn't do anything but stare while the man shook his head. "It's okay, Thomas. I know you didn't know. Hell, I figure your subconscious deliberately hid it from you. God knows I had no idea myself, until I saw the 'big wall of Johnny' at his folks' place."

Thomas just sat there, shaking his head. Christ. It seemed so obvious, now that Alan had pointed it out. He was deliberately ignoring the fact that Alan had seen the interesting rings in JJ's flesh, which sort of led him directly to the next thing that was wrong with Alan's earlier statement.

"What do you mean 'get us together'? Because there's no 'us' for me and JJ, Alan. Not anymore. It's... Fuck. He made it really clear that he doesn't want anything to do with me, okay?" Much as he hated it, that was the truth, and Thomas knew it. He couldn't lie to himself about it. Couldn't stand to believe anything else; not when JJ had seemed so... sure.

"No," Alan said with a snort. "He said something or other to make you think I was fucking him, or vice versa, because that much is obvious; then I'm guessing he said some stupid shit just to hurt you. Well, news flash, Thomas. Nobody goes to that much effort to hurt someone they don't care about. Plus, I called Janie and Rob at the Clearing while you were asleep, and according to them, young Mister Boudreaux has been moping around town and being a bigger pain in the ass than usual for the last... oh, since he chased you off. Molly and Bobby Bodeen, on the other hand, have been seen cavorting in the streets, much like Genna and Joe Coubillon. Or was that canoodling?" Alan shrugged. "I never can keep those straight. So I ask again: how do we get you and your JJ on the same page?"

Thomas chuckled just a little bit. "You can never keep *anything* 'straight.' And please. I don't want to hear about Momma and Joe. I'm happy for them, but just the idea of Momma having... God, sex?" He shuddered, only partly kidding.

"As for the other..." Thomas sighed and shook his head. "What's the point? Really. I mean, think about it, Alan. I live here. My work is here. The hospital! And JJ's whole life is there, in Oak Grove. So even if you were right about JJ caring -- which you're not, by the way -- there isn't a single chance of making it work. I... I see that now. Should have seen it before, but I guess I was just too caught up in wishing, you know? So let it go, Alan. That's what I'm going to do." And he was, Thomas told himself, because everything he'd just said was true. And JJ hated him. Alan just didn't want to see it.

"You're obviously still exhausted and not thinking clearly," Alan said sharply. "So we'll talk about this later. After you've had another ten hours of sleep, minimum, and at least three meals. Now, there's a basketball game on, so off you go, Thomas. Couch. Now. I'll bring you some iced tea and those nasty chips you like, in a little while." He shuddered dramatically and Thomas laughed, just like he knew he was supposed to. "Now, shoo! Unlike you, I actually have things to do, here. Go be a vegetable."

Thomas was still chuckling a little bit as he set his plate in the sink and headed out into the living room. Alan being all mother-hen was kind of cute. It was bound to get irritating soon enough, but for the moment, it was actually... nice. Sort of helped fill up that empty spot in his chest, too.

It would get better, though, Thomas told himself. It had to. It just... had to.

November, 2008
Oak Grove, Arkansas

Some mornings, JB woke up feeling fine. Like nothing had changed, even though Molly was a Bodeen, all of a sudden, and that bastard Harlan Kincaid was trying to get to know Jayce now that JB's son had a *real man* to look up to. Not that Molly or even Bobby was having anything to do with that, which was a damned good thing.

Even with all that, some mornings JB woke up feeling just fine. Other mornings, he... didn't.

He blamed the dreams, of course, because what else could it be? They were awful. Fucking horrible. Worse than the ones he'd had after he'd walked in on Tommy and that bastard... whatever the fuck his name had been. Prick. No, Eric. Prick was more fitting, though.

It wasn't every night, thank God, because JB figured he would be a total wreck if it were, rather than the only halfway pathetic jerk he'd turned into. It was getting to the point, three months after the wedding that hadn't gone anything like as planned, that even Molly and Jayce barely wanted to be around him.

Thank God that he was doing well professionally, because Jim had called with the news that they were going ahead with JB's new game, rushing it through beta-testing so it would be available for the holidays. That was some comfort, at least. Not enough to keep him from dreaming, though. Not enough to keep him from seeing Tommy's face, all grown up and too damned good looking for JB's peace of mind... and not even close to enough to erase the stunned and betrayed look on Tommy's too-thin face when JB had implied -- well, more or less stated -- that he'd been screwing around with Alan.

God, it wasn't fucking fair. How could he give a shit what Tommy thought? After all the passed time, all the years. Tommy hadn't even once had the decency to call or write or... God, anything. Anything to explain why he'd done it. Why he'd ripped JB apart and left him shattered and bleeding on the inside.

"Because he didn't care, you asshole," JB snarled to himself as the alarm started blaring beside the bed. "He didn't give a shit, and it's beyond fucking pathetic that you still do." And sadly, saying it out loud didn't make any difference to his heart. It just kept beating, aching, giving a good strong twinge every time JB thought about how... God. How broken Tommy had looked in that one split second before the mask of stoicism had slipped over his face.

And he'd run, JB remembered. Not literally, but still. He'd gotten into his truck and driven off to town. He'd sat at the Bucket, drinking the beers and shots offered by a surprisingly silent Mike... and by the time he'd woken up the next morning, with a hangover unlike any he'd had since he was eighteen, Tommy was gone, Molly was married to Bobby Bodeen, and Tommy's momma was a brand-new bride, too.

Yeah, everyone else had moved on. But not JB. No, sir, not him. He was just... "Jesus. I'm a fucking joke. A bad one, at that."

It was true, too. He'd spent the last ten years thinking he was fine, thinking he was over it all. He'd been to New York and Paris, even London, when the first game had taken off. He'd dyed his hair and covered himself in tattoos, pierced things that would have made him cringe just thinking about when he was younger, and all in an effort to prove that he wasn't JJ anymore. Wasn't the same boy who'd belonged, body and soul, to Tommy fucking Paulson. Then the man had shown up at JB's wedding, and...

And that was exactly the problem, JB knew. He hadn't expected to see Tommy there. Hell, he'd never thought he'd see Tommy again in his life, no matter that he'd known the man was in Oak Grove. So he hadn't been prepared, hadn't steeled himself to it, and the minute -- the very second -- he'd seen that tall, still-perfect man, he'd... God, JB had lost all that. Lost his illusions of being fine and not caring.

They'd all just gone, torn away like a hideously thick scab when the bandage he'd slapped over his broken heart was ripped away, leaving him bloody and sore and unable to even admit to the unhealed nature of the wound.

Which was exactly what the dreams had been trying to tell him, JB admitted with a sigh. Because Tommy... oh, God, Tommy had looked just as broken as *he* was; just as... Jesus. Sad.

So it had taken JB three months to figure it out, or maybe just to be willing to look at it clearly. As clearly as he could. He saw what he'd been doing, and what he'd done.

What JB didn't know was what to do about it. Fortunately, he realized a moment later -- before he could decide to do what he'd done every time he'd felt... lost... for the last ten years, which was bury himself in work, then a bottle -- he had someone he could talk to. His best friend over the years, and that hadn't changed just because she'd married another man.

"Hey, Bobby," he found himself saying less than a minute later, "Molly around?" Then "Moll, I... I need to see you. Can you come over? I... shit, Molly. I think I fucked up."

Oh, she was going to tear him a new one. JB just knew it. But she'd know what to tell him. Molly would be honest with him, and that was what he needed. And if Molly thought it was all as hopeless as JB suddenly thought it was, well... at least he'd know it wasn't just him.

"And it might be good to be dressed when my former fiancée gets here," JB announced as he rolled from his bed and made tracks for the shower. "It might be even better if I stopped talking to myself like a crazy person."

If anyone had told Bobby Bodeen, even six months earlier, that he'd be part of a deep conspiracy to get Tommy Paulson and JB Boudreaux talking, he would have said they were nuts. Well, to be honest, he told himself with a grin, he'd have beat them with a crutch, then gone back to drinking beer after beer at the Bucket.

If anyone had told him that he'd be walking on his own and married to Molly Kincaid, he probably wouldn't have hit them. Insane people couldn't help what came out of their mouths. He remembered that from the Army.

But that was then, and this... well, it wasn't. It was better. So much better that Bobby couldn't even begin to describe it. Hell, he was even getting along with Molly and JB's boy now, after a shaky start. They were making a family, the three of them, though JB was sort of a fourth. He was Jason's daddy, after all.

That still rankled a bit, but Molly had told him how that had come about, and while Bobby couldn't say he was happy about it, he supposed he understood. And Jayce was a great kid. It wasn't like Bobby hadn't had his share of drunken mornings involving nudity, either, so he really couldn't throw stones. No matter how much he wanted to.

So, okay. Water under the bridge. And at least it had been JB rather than some straight guy who would still be sniffing around. JB would always be there, sure, but not as a rival, and that was... cool, when Bobby thought about it. Even if he didn't like JB much, what with the guy saving the fucking town while Bobby'd been away.

But it wasn't just about JB, Bobby reminded himself. It was about Tommy Paulson, too, and Bobby for damned sure owed the man. Every change in Bobby's life, every single bit of good and happy he had was directly related to Tommy and Tommy's determination that Bobby could and would learn to use his prosthesis.

Of course, Tommy had also made him a promise, which was exactly how Bobby had been roped into the whole plot.

"Hey, man. It's me. Uh, Bobby. Bobby Bodeen," he said to Tommy's voice mail. He glanced quickly around the back two tables of the diner -- Conspiracy Central -- and winked at Miz Genna. "Your momma gave me this number. I know you're busy and shit, but I was wondering if you talked to that gal you know. The one who works with the pros... pros... fuck it, the fake legs. Gimme a call back when you can, Pull-some. Later, man. Oh, Molly says hi, but don't go getting any ideas, Tommy-boy. She's a Bodeen now."

Bobby chuckled and took a long drink of his Coke as he hung up the phone, then nodded. "I guess that's phase one, complete."

Molly was giggling, as were Miz Genna and Janie from the motel. "Come on, honey," Molly asked after a minute or so, "you really think 'she's a Bodeen now' was necessary?"

Rob, Janie's husband, laughed. "Oh, yeah. Bobby and this Tommy might be friendly now, but it'd be a big red flag if Bobby didn't even mention remembering you two going out." He shrugged. "It's a guy thing."

Molly shook her head, then rolled her eyes and muttered "men," probably because not just he and Rob were nodding, but JB's daddy and Joe Coubillon were, as well.

"I think this might actually work," Emma Boudreaux announced with a pleased grin. "I still think we should tell Johnny, though."

But Alex was shaking his head, the Lockheed Feed cap perched on his head announcing the man was on a break. "No, honey," he said to his wife, and Bobby couldn't do anything but respect the way Alex Boudreaux was resisting Miz Emma's pouty eyes. Then again, the Boudreauxes had been married for ages, so maybe it just took practice.

"No, Em," Alex said again. "If we tell Johnny and this doesn't work, he'll feel worse than he already does. And if it *does* work and Tommy ever finds out about it, finds out Johnny knew all along? It won't be good."

Truer words were never spoken, Bobby thought, but it was Miz Genna's husband who said it out loud.

"You got yourself one smart man there, Emma," Joe said, nodding at Alex, and thank God that was the end of it, Bobby told himself with relief. This whole working with a damned committee thing was starting to give him a headache. Besides, they couldn't kick the next part of the plan into gear until Tommy fucking Paulson called back.

Thomas was down-deep tired. Almost as much as he'd been when Alan had rescued him from himself a while back. Those three days had saved his life, Thomas was almost sure of it. Well, those few days and the fact that Alan had made Thomas strip down and really look at himself in the full-length mirror behind Alan's bedroom door.

He hadn't even recognized himself for a minute, he'd been so... not gaunt, but pretty damned close.

Still, that had been just about three months earlier, and Thomas had been taking better care of himself since. He'd made a point of eating and catching naps, here and there, when he hadn't had time to actually sleep. It hadn't been perfect, granted, but it had helped.

Finishing his residency, which he'd done two days earlier, had helped even more, but between wanting to keep his word to Bobby Bodeen and needing to learn the basics of the type of casting involved, he hadn't had much time to sleep.

Luckily, some of what he knew about casts for broken bones applied, so he'd been able to avoid a week-long lecture from Sally, the nurse he knew in Prosthetics. He'd even let her talk to Bobby, which had helped.

So he was taking a little time, which Doctor Fortesque had actually been in favor of when he'd asked Thomas about his plans, and he was visiting Oak Grove. Again. Christ.

Of course, he hadn't stuck around for his own momma's wedding last time. Hadn't even come back for the official one at Town Hall, but this time... well, at least he'd brought a gift. Sort of. A picture of his gift, anyway, because it wouldn't be delivered for a few more days... and while he was there, he'd be taking molds of Bobby's good leg, as well as the stump of the other, and once he took them back to LA, Sally would get to work.

It felt... good, Thomas realized. Good to be home, even for a little while. Good to be keeping the promise he'd made to Bobby. And it felt good to know that even in a town the size of Oak Grove, there was every chance that he'd be able to avoid seeing JJ.

He hadn't seen the guy at all the last time, until the wedding, which sort of implied that JJ didn't spend much time in town. In fact, if Molly was to be believed, JJ worked from the big house Thomas had seen that last day. The day when he'd crashed the wedding and realized the end of all the hopes he'd foolishly been holding on to once he'd known JJ was alive.

And even if he did run into JJ somewhere, Thomas told himself sternly, he would manage to nod and keep walking. Wouldn't call him JJ, wouldn't say a word. Because everything he'd told Alan was true. There was no way to make it work, even if JJ had been willing.

But that wasn't why he was in Oak Grove, Thomas reminded himself. He was there for his momma and his new... Step-Joe. And Bobby Bodeen. And to see Molly, who had called a week or so earlier, just to say hi.

He reminded himself of that as he parked his rental around the corner from the diner. He wanted to surprise Momma, after all. Hell, she didn't even know he was coming. So. Momma and meatloaf, then he'd give her and Joe their wedding gift -- the picture of the brand new, industrial barbeque grill Thomas had bought for the diner -- and explain about the actual grill arriving soon. Then Bobby, and Thomas figured he could visit with Molly while the polymer mix hardened on Bobby's legs.

Thomas was whistling softly as he started to the corner, but his own name stopped him. "Well, well. Is that young Tommy Paulson?" he heard, followed by a second voice saying "I do believe it is, Ruth. You still got some damned good eyes on you, darlin'; pretty, too," and Thomas was already laughing as he turned.

"Doc Miller! Miz Ruth! Man, you two haven't changed a bit," he announced as he hugged the little gray-haired lady first, then shook Doc's hand. "It's good to see you, sir," he added, because it was, especially with the old man being seventy if he was a day.

Doc Miller was actually the reason Thomas had gone into medicine. He'd been the one to set Thomas' arm when Thomas was nine and fell from the old oak tree down by the creek. Doc had even warned Thomas that it would hurt; then he'd just... yeah. It had hurt, all right. But Doc hadn't lied to him. Doc hadn't lied about how hard medical school would be, either. But every

time Thomas had even considered giving up, Doc sent him something. Usually just a few words on a post card, but it was enough. Enough to keep Thomas hanging in there and plugging away and all those other bad sayings from crappy posters.

"Still a charmer," Miz Ruth tittered, but Thomas could tell she was flattered. "Now, tell us, Tommy. How's everything out there in Los Angeles?" She drew out the last "e," like most of the people in town, but not to sneer, so it was fine.

"Sunny," Thomas answered with a grin. "Warm. And good Lor... uh, sorry, Miz Ruth. It's busy." Next thing Thomas knew, he and Doc were talking about his residency, and Doc's training, years in the past. Miz Ruth asked about his love life, and Thomas thought she was maybe the only person in all of Oak Grove who didn't know he was a card-carrying Friend of Dorothy, right up until she said it was a shame that a good-looking boy like him -- and a doctor, no less -- couldn't find a decent boyfriend.

He ended up walking her and the Doc back to their pretty little one-story house, nodding when Doc explained that they'd moved because his hip wasn't so good with stairs anymore. And when he finally left them, after lemonade and some homemade sugar cookies, he figured the eight-block walk back to his car was worth it.

It was even more worth it halfway, when he heard shouting coming from around the corner of Maple and Elm, nearly a block away, it was that loud. He couldn't make out all the words and he only knew one of the voices, but that one voice had his heart racing. Had him frozen between running toward it and away, too, and he'd been a fool to think he'd ever be able to just walk past JJ, Thomas realized.

"... you... 'gusting old man... in Hell before..." JJ was shouting. Then the other voice, sounding older and slurring enough that Thomas thought *drunk*, broke out again.

"...cking faggot... keep... from... grandson... turned... against..."

"...rself! After... her momma! Evil... astard!" Yeah, that was definitely JJ. And probably Harlan Kincaid, Thomas figured, from what he'd heard, and that couldn't be good. He hadn't seen Molly's daddy in ages, but the man had been fucking huge, back in the day. There was no way JJ would come out on top if it got past words.

Just like that, Thomas was running. Toward the noise, not away. And that was a good thing, he would decide later -- much, much later -- because that was when he heard the sudden outraged roar, followed by the slam of a car door and the squeal of rubber.

He ran faster, everything else forgotten when he heard the dull thud and cut-off cry, everything in him praying he was wrong, that it wasn't what he thought. Then he rounded the corner.

He barely noticed JJ's truck weaving away too fast, though some part of him noted that it *was* JJ's. It was the same one Thomas had watched drive away from him once before. Only that time

JJ had been driving it, not lying on the street beside a parked Toyota with a big dent in its side and smears of... Jesus, smears of blood that trailed down to JJ's limp, twisted form.

"No," Thomas moaned, even as he put on a last burst of speed. "No. No, you hear me, JJ?" he demanded of the unconscious man as he dropped to his knees beside him. "You don't let that bastard win, okay?"

JJ's pulse was there. Not as strong as Thomas thought it should be, but he couldn't be sure since his own was going a mile a minute. But it was there, and that was what mattered. But JJ's bleached hair was turning red in places and that wasn't good. Head injury, obviously, and they tended to bleed a lot, but still, not good. Not anything like good. Jesus. Thomas stripped off the button-down shirt he'd been wearing over his T-shirt and wadded it up, then stopped. Protocols.

He checked JJ's neck, carefully feeling what vertebrae he could. He shouldn't even be thinking about moving JJ at all, but the man was crumpled up against a tire and Thomas couldn't get a good look at the head wound... and JJ's leg was obviously broken; possibly an arm, too, but Thomas couldn't be sure. The arm looked twisted but there wasn't an obvious ridge of broken bone pushing from it like there was under the leg of JJ's rapidly discoloring pants.

"Don't you fucking die because of Harlan fucking Kincaid, you hear me, JJ? You do, and I'll kill you myself!" He carefully slipped the wadded shirt behind JJ's head, just sliding it into the gap between that bloody hair and the car's wheel well. It was the best he could do without moving the man, and that would be just too damned risky, especially on his own.

There was blood soaking through the knee of Thomas' pants where he knelt, but Thomas didn't care. It was coming from the compound fracture of JJ's leg, though, and that worried him. "Belt," he snarled at himself, disgusted that he was so flustered. This was what he did. He'd logged more time in the ER than any other resident. This should be second nature to him. But it was JJ and he was... fuck, he was scared.

He had his belt off and wrapped tight around JJ's leg in moments, forcing himself to see just another patient, just another accident victim. It was only when his phone clattered to the ground that Thomas remembered he hadn't left it in the car, and that was a help. A big help. *Thank God.*

"Tommy Paulson. I need an ambulance. No, shut up! Just listen to me! It's a hit and run. Compound fracture, head wound. Possible neck and spinal injuries. Heart beat is steady but slow. Look, I can't tell you that. I don't have anything here. Just get someone out here. Now! Come on, JJ, come on. Jayce and Molly will never forgive me if I let you die, so just hold on..." It wasn't until he heard the voice in his ear again that he realized he was still holding his phone. "What? Yes. JJ... Johnny Boudreaux. The victim's name is Johnny Boudreaux."

He dropped his cell then, ignoring the squawking still coming from it and concentrated on his... patient. His JJ.

The Oak Grove ambulance had arrived in minutes, though the EMT in charge had taken one look at JJ and said "County" before he and his partner maneuvered JJ carefully onto the backboard, then strapped the whole assembly to the stretcher. Fortunately, Tommy knew where that was, even though he'd only been there once, back when one of the guys on the football team had nearly paralyzed himself in a stupid stunt involving a goal post, a pile of traffic cones, a chicken, and an umbrella. The chicken hadn't been so lucky.

So he knew where it was and while just about every instinct he had was screaming at him to jump into the back of the ambulance and try to help, Tommy knew he'd only be in the way. He was too close, too emotionally involved to be useful to the EMTs right then.

"Go," he ordered, snatching up his phone. "I'll be right behind you." As soon as he ran to his car, anyway, and God. He needed to call JJ's folks, let them know what was happening. And Molly. Dear fucking God, Molly. Molly, who had a kid with JJ... and whose own father had run JJ down.

Fuck, it was a nightmare.

Thank God nobody tried to stop him as he ran down side streets, because he didn't know what he would have done. Then he was at his car and out of breath, but that didn't matter. Not even a little. Keys and ignition and squealing tires of his own, fastening his seatbelt as he peeled toward the edge of town and County General, which was a good forty miles off, and "Come on, JJ... hold on. Don't let that fucker win. Even if you hate me, don't let that fucking asshole win..."

He knew he was speeding, but Tommy didn't care. He could see the flashing lights of the ambulance up ahead. *Barely* see them, but that was fine; it meant they were making good time. Meant they were taking it all just as seriously as *he* was.

The last thing he wanted to do was call people. It wasn't something he was good at. He'd always been better with face to face. But it had to be done, so he swallowed hard and slowed down just a little as he dialed the number from memory, and thank God someone answered because it wasn't the kind of thing he wanted to leave on voice mail or a machine or whatever.

"Miz Emma," he said quickly, hoping his throat wasn't going to close up before he got the words out, "it's Tommy. There... there's been an accident. They... God. They're takin' JJ to County. I think... maybe you guys need to come." He swallowed again. "I don't know, ma'am, but I'm followin' them right now. It's... well, it ain't good. I'll tell them you're on the way."

The call to Molly wasn't going to be any easier, he knew. Not when he'd have to tell her it was her daddy who'd done the deed. But maybe that part could wait.

Jesus. Just... Jesus. God help him.

"Ow..." JB moaned, only it barely made a sound. Which made sense, he decided, because his mouth was drier than a fucking desert. And shit, his head hurt. What the fuck had he been drinking?

Whatever it was, he made a solemn vow to avoid it for the rest of his life because it wasn't just his head. Fuck, his whole body hurt like he'd fallen off a God damn cliff.

And maybe he had, JB decided with another painful moan. Because that would explain it. If he'd gone on a bender and fallen over a cliff, the way he was feeling made sense.

"Jesus," he whispered, because he couldn't seem to move, which probably would have worried him if he couldn't feel so much pain burning through every part of his body.

"Hey... hey, it's okay, JJ. You're gonna be fine. Just rest, okay?" And that voice shouldn't have made him feel... not better, but less miserable, though JB couldn't figure out why. It shouldn't have, but it did.

"... kay..." he thought he said, but he couldn't be sure. He was... gone.

The next time JJ woke up, Tommy was ready for it. More than ready, what with it being two days since the last. That was because of the drugs, of course, but he'd still been anxious. That JJ hadn't cursed him out was worrisome, in and of itself. The fact that JJ likely would make a full recovery, given time, was a miracle, as far as Tommy was concerned.

"Coulda gone the other way," Doc Miller had said when he'd stopped by and checked JJ's chart, a courtesy County General extended to the old man who'd been on their board until a year or so earlier. "Good thing you were there so quick, Tommy. Boy woulda bled out from that leg by the time anyone even knew he was lyin' there, most likely."

God, the thought alone still made Tommy's stomach clench, because Doc was right. Who knew how long JJ might have lain there in the street before someone noticed? Harlan fucking Kincaid had chosen his spot well, even with being drunker than a skunk.

Drunk enough to drive JJ's truck into a wall, in fact, because that was what had happened. Nobody knew whether Harlan had even known what he was doing when he'd put pedal to the metal and plowed right in to the side of the hardware store. There hadn't been any skid marks, in any case.

Tommy didn't care. He was pretty sure Harlan fucking Kincaid didn't care, either, and no one would ever know the answer to that entirely irrelevant mystery because the evil old bastard was on another floor of County, showing no signs of brain activity at all.

So Tommy had been sitting there, thinking about all that and puzzling over the fact that he was seeing himself as Tommy again, rather than Thomas, when JJ woke up. And this time, he got that cursing he'd been expecting, though not directed at him.

"Oh... shit. What the fuck..." JJ groaned and Tommy was right there, cup of water and bendy straw at the ready. He slipped the smooth plastic between JJ's chapped lips and watched while that long, stubbled throat swallowed twice, then he pulled it away.

"Ugggh. Thanks," JJ muttered, already sounding less... raw. "Anyone get the number of the truck... fuck!" And that was the moment when Tommy knew JJ remembered. There had been some question, because of the head injury.

"629 WDE, I think," Tommy offered, and when JJ opened his eyes, they were only a little bit bloodshot. "How are you feeling?" Because he could do this, Tommy told himself. He could be professional and not make this into something it wasn't. He was there because JJ's parents had insisted. Because they felt better with a doctor there in JJ's room, even with Tommy not being licensed to practice medicine in Arkansas.

JJ was blinking, though, and Tommy was just waiting for the surprise on JJ's face to turn to something else. Disgust, maybe. Or fury. Something. It didn't, though. Instead... "You saved me," JJ murmured, those blue eyes still blinking. Flash, flash, flash right at him. "I heard you, Tommy. Shit, did they catch that fucker?"

Okay. This was... God. Good. But so, so wrong, Tommy knew. JJ should be pissed off. Should be telling him to leave. But JJ wasn't and it was just... yeah. Good and wrong, but nice.

"Let's just say you'll be needin' a new truck, JJ," Tommy finally managed to say. "And unless you're feelin' particularly generous, old Harlan's gonna be spendin' the rest of his days in the State Home you pulled Miz Belle out of." Jesus, Tommy realized, he sounded like a hick. Or, no. He sounded like... fuck. Like Tommy Paulson, with the hard-won veneer of college and Los Angeles stripped away. Hell, he felt like Tommy Paulson, too. Like he'd never been anyone else. And maybe he hadn't.

JJ was looking at him strangely, but Tommy chalked it up to the meds. Then JJ's lips twitched a little. "Sounding like the boy who broke my heart isn't going to help you here, Tommy," was what JJ said a moment later, and Tommy blushed.

"I'm not," he started, then shook his head. "It ain'... isn't like that, JJ. I just... God, you were all broken and bloody and I couldn't think, okay? And I guess talkin'... talking 'properly' isn't as much of a habit as I thought because it just... went away. Believe me, JJ. The last thing I want to do is remind you of what a fucking asshole I was." Tommy sighed. "And this really isn't how I thought I'd be doing this. I mean, I wasn't sure you'd even let me talk to you, but..."

"Jesus, Tommy," JJ snapped, but then he stopped, just groaning and grunting, sweat breaking out on his face. "That old bastard fucked me up good, huh?"

Tommy was frowning, too. He knew he was, even as he patted JJ's face dry with a tissue from the dispenser by the bed. "He... God. He broke your right leg in two places. Badly, JJ. Um, you're gonna have some interesting scars, and chances are your ink will never be the same. Your right shoulder dislocated when you hit Janice Jamison's car. Your ribs all along that side have hairline fractures, so you're lucky that bastard was seeing double or triple, because if they'd broken and gotten a lung, or worse... God. And your head..."

Tommy swallowed and looked away from JJ's piercing eyes. "He cracked your fucking skull, man. They got the bleeding under control pretty quickly, and that was a good sign, but nobody knew if you'd be... God. If you'd be *you* when you woke up. We've all been... fucking scared, okay? Wonderin' what you'd remember and what to tell you if you had blank spots, and... and head injuries aren't always predictable. It could have been... really, really bad. So excuse me if I'm a little... fucking relieved and not makin' a whole lot of sense, okay? It's been a fucking week without knowing anything for sure!"

"A week?" JJ looked exhausted, suddenly, but also surprised. "Shit. I guess that explains why you look like crap. You've been here the whole time." It wasn't a question, but Tommy nodded anyway. "Well, I'm awake and I know my name. I know that fucker Harlan ran me over with my own truck, and that should earn him a special place in Hell, because that's just not right. You don't run someone down with their own truck. I never should have stopped when he threw that egg at me. And you really are a wreck. So go. Get some sleep, Tommy. Now. Go. Leave. You. Bed. Out."

Well, what else had he expected, Tommy asked himself sadly. Sure, JJ didn't sound like he was mad, really, but having the man basically order him to go away answered the question Tommy hadn't known was even lurking in the back of his brain.

JJ was being nice because he thought Tommy had saved him. And maybe he had, but not to make JJ feel like he owed Tommy anything. Not even politeness.

"I'll send your momma and daddy in," Tommy muttered as he stood up, stretching until his back popped. It was a damned uncomfortable chair he'd been using. "And I'll give Molly a call, let her know you're really awake. I'm sure she'll want to bring Jason by when school gets out."

And just like that, Tommy knew his work there was done. JJ was going to be fine and Tommy could... do whatever it was he was going to do. He just didn't know what that was going to be yet.

"What are you doing?" Molly demanded, and Tommy turned after jumping a little. He hadn't even heard her on the stairs. Then again, she had a kid, so maybe she was used to sneaking around, just to make sure Jayce didn't get into too much trouble.

"Well, in the 'big city,'" he said, making air quotes, "we call it packing. Here in Oak Grove, I guess it'd be 'puttin' things up,' right?" He winked, but slowly. He was still exhausted, but he

wanted to get things done before he toppled over and slept for another fourteen hours, which was what he'd been doing periodically since he'd first gotten back from the hospital. The sleep had helped, though. He knew what he was going to do, finally. Hell, it was the only thing Tommy figured he *could* do.

"I see that," Molly nearly growled, and if Tommy hadn't known she had it in her, he'd have been shocked. As it was he only grinned to himself and continued folding his clothes. "I meant... I thought you were going back to the hospital."

Tommy looked over at her and arched his brow. "Molly. Honey. I get that you're worried about Johnny, okay? But he's awake now. He doesn't need me sitting around his room making him uncomfortable, twenty-four seven. County has plenty of doctors. He'll be fine."

"I..." And now Molly looked uncomfortable, which was just strange. "Does he know you're not coming back?" she finally asked, and Tommy frowned. Then again, maybe Johnny hadn't explained things to her.

"I'm guessin' so, Moll," he said simply, still folding everything but what he'd need for the morning. "I haven't been there in four days, and... he's the one who told me to leave."

Something in the way Molly's breath caught told Tommy that she really hadn't known. Hell, she looked downright stunned when he turned around again.

"It's okay, Molly," he said carefully, wondering if she was experiencing some weird hormonal imbalance. "It's not like I haven't been busy, you know. I mean, I came here to do Bobby's legs and give Momma and Joe their wedding present. Which arrived while I was pretty much living at County, so that's taken care of. And I already called Bobby. We're gonna do the leg thing tomorrow, before I take the rental car back. So don't worry. I'm old enough to amuse myself." Because that had to be what was bothering her, he'd just realized. She was worried that he'd been bored while everyone was looking after Johnny Boudreaux.

Tommy sighed and shook his head at her stare. "Seriously, Moll. I need to get this done, okay? Hey, remind Bobby I'm stopping by at ten in the morning, will you? And make sure he has some coffee in him." He grinned. "He used to be a total jackass unless he had a least a Giant Jumbo of Coke in the morning. After, too, but whatever. See you, okay?"

He heard her clattering down the stairs and shook his head. Hormonal, for sure. Of course, she'd been married to Bobby Bodeen for months. Might be there was a good reason for that.

Then again, he'd been moody himself, a time or two, Tommy admitted silently. That didn't mean he was pregnant.

"You're an asshole," Molly said, standing in the doorway and staring at him with her arms crossed over her chest... or under it, if JB was being precise.

"Excuse me?" Because he wasn't doing anything but lying there.

"I said," Molly repeated slowly, like JB was dimwitted or something, "*you* are an *asshole*, Johnny Boudreaux. How the Hell could you tell Tommy to leave after all this? He saved your life! Then he sat here, day and night, waiting for you to wake up. He barely ate, and I'm about a thousand percent sure he didn't sleep more than a couple minutes at a time. Then as soon as you do wake up, you tell him to get out? Let me say it one more time. You. Asshole. And again: asshole. You. Get it?"

Well, fuck no, he didn't get it at all. "I was on all sorts of drugs, Moll, but I'm pretty sure I told him to get some sleep because he looked like shit." Yeah, JB remembered that. It was sort of fuzzy, but yeah. "Jesus, his eyes were sunk so deep in his head, I only knew they were brown from memory." And, God, Tommy's cheeks had been all hollow. Even more than they'd been at JB's non-wedding. He'd thought that was the pain meds making him imagine things, though. They'd always affected him oddly. He was still on them, too, though in lower doses. Low enough that he didn't feel like he was packed in cotton balls, anyway.

But Molly was frowning and pursing her lips like she did when she was thinking, so JB didn't say anything else. "Swear to me, Johnny," she demanded after a little while. "Swear to me that you didn't tell him to go home. Because I'm gonna be royally pissed if you did, especially after that talk we had."

JB groaned. The talk. Christ. He'd been trying to forget about that ever since it had happened. The talk. Sob-fest. Whatever. The day he'd broken down and blubbered all over Molly and told her how he wasn't over Tommy, would never be over Tommy, would spend the rest of his life paying for his own wounded pride and hurt feelings because he'd sent Tommy away thinking JB was a completely repulsive slut who'd fucked Tommy's best friend, ex-lover, whatever.

"I told him to go to bed," JB said seriously. "Jesus, Molly. I figured he'd go to his momma's, or that place over the diner to catch some Zs. I never told him to leave..." Except maybe he had. "I told him to leave," he contradicted himself a second later, "but not like... *leave*. Just... go somewhere with a bed." He sighed. "Shit! And I kind of thought maybe he was coming by when I was asleep, so I was just missing him, but he hasn't been here at all, has he? Fuck!"

"Ah." That was what Molly said. Like JB was supposed to get something profound from that.

"Jesus, Molly! 'Ah'? Is that all you've got? Just 'ah'? Ah, what? Ah, you see? Ah, JB's a fucking idiot? Ah, what?"

"Bit of both," Molly answered, but she was wearing her sassy grin all of a sudden, which had him feeling almost... hopeful. "I'll take care of it. You just... go back to sleep and frolic with the wee lambikins in la-la land. Gambol in the clover or whatever it is you gay boys do when you're on the good drugs."

And that was so very much the Molly he remembered from years ago -- before Jayce, before... life had happened to them both -- that JB couldn't help laughing, even though it made his ribs and shoulder and... well, made his everything ache.

"Love you, sweetie," Molly said, still grinning as she leaned down to kiss the bandage on his head. "So does Jayce."

"Bobby still hates me, though, right?" JB muttered, giving her a hopeful little grin that had Molly laughing.

"Well, yes. But mostly because he thinks you're going to suddenly decide you like girls and steal me away from him." She winked.

"Could I?" JB asked, though he already knew the answer.

"Not in a million years, Johnny. You rest now, and I'll see you tomorrow." One pat to his hand, and she was gone, leaving JB to... gambol.

Fuck, that had been no fun at all, Tommy thought as he stripped the latex gloves from his hands. He'd never thought Bobby would be such a whiner.

First it was "the things are too tight," referring to the stiff plastic sleeves Tommy had built and then adjusted around Bobby's knees to hold the polymer that would make the molds. Then "it's cold," and a few seconds later "it's hot." And finally, the latest. "I gotta piss, man," when Tommy had asked him just that question before they'd started. He'd even warned Bobby that the setting process would take a good twenty minutes.

Jesus. "Could you be a bigger pussy, man?" Tommy demanded. "I swear to God, Sally showed me how to do this on an eight-year-old girl and she didn't bitch and moan as much as you're doing. Chill the fuck out, okay? Five more minutes." Of course, Tommy didn't figure it helped any that he could hear Molly and Jayce giggling in the kitchen, and God knew if he could hear them, so could Bobby.

Then, "Shit," Bobby said quietly, "a little girl? What happened to her?" And he looked a little bit queasy, but also sort of... morbidly fascinated.

"She was messing around with one of her friends," Tommy said absently as he pressed gently at the outside of the plastic, checking the firmness of the substance within. "And she slipped off the curb in front of her school. Broadwood Academy. Very exclusive. Unfortunately, there was a bus pulling up. One eight-year-old leg never wins when it's up against a few tons of metal. By the time anyone knew what had happened, her leg was crushed, clear up to the thigh. She was lucky it wasn't both."

He nodded sharply and started releasing the butterfly clips down the side of Bobby's stub. "This one's done, man."

"Yeah, yeah. Great. What about the girl?" Well, Tommy thought, at least Bobby was distracted now. And had grown a sense of caring about people who weren't Bobby Bodeen or Molly, at some point, too. It was kind of surprising, but in the good way.

"Well, her daddy's some big shot with one of the studios and her momma used to be an actress. Cynthia Paige? She was in that crappy horror flick that came out junior year, remember? So they're rolling in it. That's why little Lucy Joy was getting a custom prosthesis at eight. She'll need to do this at least once a year as she grows up, just so her legs will match. And she took it with a smile, Bobby. Even told me and Sally some really bad jokes." Tommy gave Bobby what he hoped was a serious stare. "So when a grown man who's been to war and shit starts carrying on more than a little girl with her whole life ahead of her, I can't help but ask... Could you *be* a bigger pussy? And this one's done, too."

After that, it was just a matter of removing the molds carefully, and while Tommy saw Bobby starting to say something a few times, he also saw the man stopping himself and holding his tongue.

"Well, that's it, Bobby-boy," Tommy said with a grin. "I'll get these to Sally and she'll get it done. You should have your new leg in... oh, a month or so, since she's fitting it in around the hospital stuff." He saw Bobby screwing up his brow and Tommy shook his head. "Don't worry. Your insurance will cover it. I already checked. They would never tell you so unless you asked, and why would you ask when they already gave you a piece of shit, right?" He tapped his temple. "Tricky folk, those insurance guys."

And Sally had gotten all teary-eyed when she'd heard about the war vet with the crappy wooden leg who'd just married his high school sweetheart, but Tommy wasn't ever going to tell Bobby that. Or that Sally had talked the other techs into doing the work for cost, once she'd learned about how the military doctors had tried to motivate Bobby.

"Well. You need to get all that shit off, Bobby-boy. Better get the wife to help, too. It can be stubborn, especially in the back, where it's hard to reach. See you." He smiled a little, then gathered his things. "Later, Jayce," Tommy said, ruffling Jason's unruly black hair as he went out to his car and drove off.

"Well, hey there, Mrs. Bodeen," Genna said with a huge smile. She and Molly had gotten to be close in the months since their shared wedding. Despite the twenty years between them, they'd become good friends. Even more so with the Conspiracy they'd hatched to get her boy Tommy and Johnny Boudreaux to let go of the past and just be happy.

Of course, that plan had become pointless once Tommy had shown up and saved Johnny's life, because there wasn't a single damned thing that could compete with that. Heck, Genna still

remembered the look on Tommy's face when he'd staggered into the diner, worn to the quick even after half a day of sleeping.

He's gonna be fine, Momma, her boy had said, and if she'd had any doubt at all left in her heart about Tommy's feelings for Johnny, the relief she saw in Tommy's eyes would have killed it.

But Molly looked worried, and that couldn't be good unless... "Oh, no. Did something go wrong with the... mold things, honey?" Because what else could it be? "Did it not work?"

"No," Molly said, shaking her head quickly. "Or yes. I mean, it worked fine. Tommy said they were perfect. But then he took off without even talking to me and he was packing yesterday, Genna! And I don't see his rental anywhere, so..."

Oh, was that all? Except Molly seemed to be really upset and that meant... something. "Well, let's just go check upstairs, then. Tommy wouldn't leave without saying goodbye."

Except that was exactly what he'd done the last time he'd visited, wasn't it, Genna reminded herself. Sure, he'd come back, and given her and Joe a brand new, top of the line grill to replace the one that had been behind the diner forever, but... he'd still run off without even a word. She hadn't even known until Alan showed up, hours later, to tell her.

The apartment was empty, Genna saw, her heart sinking just a bit. The bed was made, the dishes were in the drying rack, the towels in the tiny bathroom were clean and neatly folded. In fact, the only thing that showed her son had even been there was a sheet of plain white paper on the dinette table, held down by the salt shaker shaped like a piece of toast. The pepper shaker was the toaster, and the set had been the first thing Tommy's father had ever given her, back when she'd been fourteen to his sixteen.

Momma, the note said, *You were out and I can't miss my flight. I'll call you when I get there, or Alan will if I fall asleep between the airport and the apartment. Love you, Momma, and in case I didn't say before, I think Joe's a good man. I know he'll treat you right. Talk to you soon. Love, Tommy*, and it was the fact that he'd signed it Tommy rather than Thomas that had Genna holding back tears. He hadn't done that since his second year of college. If nothing else, she told herself, at least her boy had finally remembered who he was.

Molly, of course, took the contents of the short letter differently. "Wait, Tommy's living with Alan again? Because he says 'the apartment,' not 'Alan's,' or even 'my place.' God, Genna, have we been completely wrong, all this time? Jesus, Johnny's gonna be... oh, no. This'll break his heart for sure, and there won't be any fixing it, this time. Shit!"

"Language, dear," Genna murmured, trying to work it all out, herself. It surely did sound like Molly was right, but Genna knew her boy better than that, damn it. Tommy loved Johnny. He never would have stayed by Johnny's bedside all that time if he didn't. Doctor or not, an entire week without any sort of break other than for the bathroom and hopefully a few showers? No, that spelled love.

So if Tommy had gone back to Los Angeles, which he had obviously done, then there was something going on that neither Genna nor Molly knew about. Tommy had been acting impatient and secretive for days, now that she thought about it, and Genna was going to get to the bottom of it. Starting with the man Tommy had been spending so much of his time with, once he'd finally left the hospital.

"Come on, honey," Genna announced, and she thought it was possibly the determined tone to her voice that had Molly standing up straight again. "I smell a rat, and I'm thinking it lives at the Miller house."

She watched while Molly put it all together, then smiled at the slow grin spreading across Molly's face. "You think he's up to something," Molly said softly, and Genna snorted, though she tried to make it as ladylike as she could.

"Who, Tommy? I'm his momma, honey. I *know* he's up to something. And Doc Miller is a wily old goat. That man's got more twists and turns in his makeup than straight and narrows. I have no idea of why Ruth puts up with him, unless he's got an amazing... you know."

"Genna!" Molly gasped, and Genna laughed, amazed that she'd actually managed to scandalize the young woman.

"Oh, honey," Genna said, giggling as she headed down the stairs, "I have a son. And a new husband, if you'll recall. It's not like I don't know about those things. Though I admit I know more now than I did a few months ago." She didn't even mind that she was blushing. Ladies should blush, she figured, when they were talking about... man parts.

"I'll get Joe to keep an eye on things until Candace gets here," she announced, referring to the teenager who waited tables at the diner most afternoons. "The high school lets out in half an hour, so he should be fine until then. You call Janie and see if she can meet us at the Millers'. Doc may be a tricky old coot, but even he can be flummoxed by multiple women."

And they had a plan.

Not as good as the Conspiracy, but that was fine. The men had been making that whole idea far too complicated, anyway.

She, Molly, and Janie would find out what was going on. Genna only hoped they didn't have to call in Emma. The woman's pout alone would probably damage Doc for years to come. Poor old Doc, if Emma got involved.

December, 2008
Vista del Sol, California

"Are you sure you know what you're doing, Thomas?" Alan said yet again, only this time he thought he knew what that slight jump was about. "Come on, Tommy, talk to me." And no jump, which just convinced Alan that Thomas -- or Tommy, rather -- really *had* thought it through. Even so... "You know you can stay here as long as you need to, Thomas." And there was that jump again. Like being called Thomas was somehow jarring.

"I'm sure, Alan. I wasn't until I went back again, but I'm really damned sure." Then Thomas was sighing and turning away from the boxes that had been in various stages of being filled for the last three days. "Look. JJ... *Johnny* might not trust me. Might not want to care about me again. Yet. But he does, Alan. You were right. And I ain't... I'm *not* going to let that go. I can't, man. Not when I finally know what you apparently knew all along, okay? I just need to finish puttin' this shit up and get over to the hospital before... Shit! It's three already! I gotta... Fuck, Alan, I have to go!"

There was nothing Alan could say to that. Nothing at all. Thomas had made up his mind, and Alan was just about completely certain that Thomas' decision was the right one.

"Go," Alan said, tossing Thomas -- Tommy, he reminded himself again -- the keys to Alan's car. "I'll 'put your shit up' while you're gone, okay? And, Tommy?" Again, no jump like Thomas was startled. "Good luck. I'll take you out for dinner when you get back, okay? Mama Lucia's if it goes well, and Little Juan's if it doesn't." He winked and Thomas grinned, and then Alan was left there, staring at the enormous pile of tangled... crap Thomas had left behind.

"Christ," he muttered. "It's a good thing he's going to Oak Grove. Those wrinkles would never work here in LA."

He was going to miss Thomas. Alan knew that. But Tommy? Oh, Tommy and he would stay friends, even with most of a country between them. And he had rather liked Oak Grove, Alan reminded himself. There was nothing to say that he couldn't pay a visit in a while. Once things were settled between Tommy and his JJ, anyway.

Because things would definitely get settled. Alan knew that much just from the half hour he'd spent on the phone with Genna the day before. And thank God Thomas had come home when he did, Alan realized; otherwise Alan knew he would have spilled the whole story.

He was glad he hadn't, though. Because if some old man in his seventies could resist the combined force of nature that was Molly Bodeen, Genna Coubillon, Janie Sylvester, and Emma Boudreaux? The least Alan could do was keep Tommy's secret from his momma. Which reminded him.

Alan turned away from the distressing pile of tangled clothing and grabbed his cell, scrolling through his phone book quickly, then hitting the call button.

"Hey, Mom," he said when the call was answered, "how you doing?" He laughed and leaned against the door jamb. "You saw that, huh? It wasn't anything, really. Just a four-day job. Good to know I got screen credit, though. Hey, are you busy Thursday?" He listened, then shook his head, even though he knew his mother couldn't see him. "No, Mom. Nothing's wrong. Really. I just thought it might be fun if I came up for a few days."

Alan rolled his eyes. "No, I don't need money. I'm fine, Mom. I promise. I just..." He swallowed and said it, flat out. "I miss you, okay? And I've been thinking about your pot roast. Well, maybe dreaming is a better word. So is it okay? I mean, I won't be wrecking any plans or anything?" Because God knew his mother usually had plans. For a woman in her fifties, she was incredibly... active, God bless her.

"No. No, that's cool. I'd love to meet... what's his name again? Oh. Okay, sorry. I just always thought Sidney was a man's name." Alan laughed, then shook his head again. "Of course it doesn't bother me, Mom. I'm gay and I was raised by *you*. Gender doesn't mean squat."

He blushed. "Yes, ma'am. Sorry. Gender doesn't mean *anything*; that's what I meant to say. Because 'squat' is a misogynistic term that reviles women because they're unable to urinate standing up when used in that context." He paled then and lied. It was necessary, he told himself, and what guy didn't lie to his mother from time to time?

"No, Mom. I didn't call you ma'am. I said man. As used colloquially to indicate a person of either gender. So is it cool if I come up for a few days and meet your new..." God he didn't know what to call her. "Friend?" Alan tried hopefully, only to cringe a moment later.

"Sorry, Mom. But, you know... I actually do call my boyfriends 'boyfriends.' Because they're male." And he cringed again. "No, it's not because I think I'm better than them. They call me that too, okay? It's just easier to say boyfriend than 'homosexual male who I like a lot and really enjoy having sex with,' okay? God...dess. You're going to make me change my mind about visiting if you keep this up. You know that, right?"

Alan smiled softly, then whispered "Boo," into the phone, which had his mother going silent, then bursting out laughing.

"I love you, Mom," he said a few minutes later, "and I'm never going to stop, okay? No matter how weird and psycho-feminist you get. I'm glad that you have a gir... female lover. As long as you're happy. And I'll drive up Thursday afternoon, okay? I just need to drop Tommy... Thomas at the airport. Hey, have you told Sidney about your gay make-up artist son and his inability to find a man who'll keep him? Because I can't wait to see what kind of long-lost relatives and friends-of-friends she'll be able to drag out of random skeleton-filled closets. That'll be super-fun!"

And even though his mom was laughing at his sarcasm, Alan knew there would be at least one or two needy, clinging gay men -- who were just as lonely inside as Alan was -- showing up at his mother's table, come Thursday night. And maybe that wasn't a bad thing.

"Love you, Mom," he said again, then he hung up and turned around to face Tommy's pile of shit, which was far more distressing for Alan than wandering the minefield of his mother's fluctuating sensibilities.

"Are you certain about this, Thomas?" Doctor Fortesque was asking, and damned if that wasn't bizarrely close to what Alan had been asking ever since Tommy'd come back to LA. And it wasn't that he minded people caring, but at what point had the people around him decided that Tommy was a moron?

Of course, he couldn't say that to Doctor Fortesque, so Tommy just nodded. "I'm sure, sir," he announced, still resenting that he needed to defend his decision to anyone, though the senior resident advisor and evaluator surely deserved some respect. "It's where I'm from, and... honestly, it'll cover the terms of one of the grants I accepted back in med school." And that was true enough. Thomas had planned on trying to find a way around it, but Tommy? Well, it was good that he'd found himself again.

Doctor Fortesque was looking at him, though. Like he was weighing and measuring Tommy. So Tommy tried to look staid and calm and not fucking worried that the man might deny his request.

"So, after everything," the older man said softly, "you really want to go back to your hometown. After Columbia and Johns Hopkins. You honestly believe that you'll be happy practicing general medicine in Oak Grove, Arkansas."

There was just the slightest sneering tone in Doctor Fortesque's tone when he said Oak Grove, and while Tommy really wanted to snarl, he forced himself to hold back, to be civil.

"I know I'll be happier there than anywhere else, sir. And I'll be on call with the county hospital. Doc... Doctor Miller has offered to mentor me until I get my license to practice in Arkansas, and if we're being candid here, sir?"

Tommy waited until Doctor Fortesque nodded, then he clenched his jaw and went on. "I don't think I'm really suited to ERs and trauma units. I'm good in them, sure. But I drive myself crazy with wondering what happens to my patients after they're reassigned. I think working in Oak Grove is exactly what I need. And Doc Miller was always my idea of what a doctor should be. So if I can work with him, that'd be... well, honestly, Doctor Fortesque, that'd be a dream come true for me."

Tommy bit his lip -- on the inside, where it didn't show quite so much -- and held his breath while the supervisor whose recommendation he needed considered. Then he exhaled and held his breath some more.

Finally, though, Doctor Fortesque sighed and gave Tommy a piercing gaze. "You're really sure, then. Because you could be amazing here, Thomas. You were the best of your entire batch of residents. The best I've seen in years, honestly. On the few occasions that you were mistaken,

you still led us toward the correct conclusions and diagnoses." Doctor Fortesque bent slightly, leaning closer over the desk. "You could have a brilliant future here, Thomas. Seven figures, base, within five years. Are you certain that you want to give that up?"

It was tempting, the future Doctor Fortesque was painting for him. Hell, it was a whole lot tempting. He was that good. That skilled. That... professionally desirable, according to the man who was sitting across that desk.

Tommy tried to picture it. Tried to see himself in some chrome and glass office like the one he was in now, and it was easy. He could see it all, so clearly, so easily.

He would have his own administrative assistant, some woman named Tiffany or Mandy or Tracy. And she would do everything in her power to make his life easier because he was such an important man.

He would field calls from doctors all over the country who wanted his opinion on this or that, and he would only take patients who were rich enough, famous enough, to not only demand his services, but pay well for them, too.

It was an appealing picture, right up to the part where Tommy went home from work. To his million and some dollar condo in whatever the fashionable part of town was, by then. Right up to the point where Tommy was standing at his wall-sized window with a glass of wine to keep him warm because there was nobody who gave a shit about him. Except Alan, of course, but Alan would have found a real lover by then, and even spending time with the two of them wouldn't take away the emptiness Tommy -- or Thomas, because he would definitely be Thomas again by then -- already couldn't stand even thinking about.

"I am," Tommy said, sure of it down to his bones when he finally answered. "I'll be better off back home, sir. And... Doc Miller ain't... isn't gonna be able to make his rounds much longer." Tommy frowned, then met Doctor Fortesque's eyes. "He's a good man, Doc Miller is. He's the one that made me want this in the first place. Medicine, being a doctor. And I'll feel better knowing I'm the one who'll take over his duties when he finally retires. Assuming he ever does, sir."

Doctor Fortesque sighed and rested his elbows on the desk, giving Tommy what looked like a wondering smile. "I never thought I'd actually see it," the man murmured, but Tommy made out the words. He didn't quite get what they meant, but he heard them.

Then Tommy's supervisor was sitting up and giving him the strangest smile Tommy had ever seen. Like Doctor Fortesque was proud and disappointed and amazed, all at once.

"I'll send a letter of recommendation, along with your file, to the Arkansas Medical Board," Doctor Fortesque said firmly, as though he'd just realized something, though Tommy didn't know what. "That should speed things along, Doctor Paulson. You should be able to sit for whatever exams the state deems necessary within the next six months. In the meantime, you might want to bone up on the footnotes in every text you had during med school. I can't say for sure, but when I

took my first Arkansas state boards in Parsonsville? A good sixty percent of passing was from the footnotes. Now, go, Doctor Paulson. And... good luck. I hope you find whatever it is you're looking for."

Tommy was in a cab and halfway to Alan's before he got past the euphoria of all the glowing things Doctor Fortesque had said. Once he had, though, he remembered the man saying Parsonsville, as well as the advice.

Doctor Fortesque was the last person Tommy -- or Thomas, for that matter -- would have expected to come from such common roots. The man sounded slightly English, after all, and dressed like he was going to be tapped to walk a runway in Paris any minute.

Of course, Tommy realized, so did he. Not the accent, granted, but he'd definitely abandoned his own country-boy drawl, and if he could have afforded it, he would have been wearing Armani and such every day.

He would be lying to himself, Tommy figured, if he didn't admit that the idea of all that money was still appealing. And yet every time he thought about it, he still saw himself standing alone and lonely, with beautiful things but no one to share them, and that was just... sad, he realized. Sad and depressing.

Much better to do what he was doing. Much better to throw himself into a situation he only hoped he could turn to his advantage.

And even if it didn't work, Tommy told himself, he'd still be home. He'd still have Momma, and Molly and Jayce, and Bobby Bodeen, Doc Miller, and Miz Ruth, and even JJ's parents. Johnny's parents, he corrected himself, because he wasn't going to even think "JJ" until he had a right to.

He would earn the right, Tommy promised himself for possibly the thousandth time since he'd gotten back to LA. He would woo Johnny, completely derail Johnny's distrust... and then he would offer himself, Tommy knew. Offer himself up as whatever Johnny needed him to be.

And somewhere in there, he'd still manage to do whatever Doc needed him to do and he'd be the best damned doctor Oak Grove had ever seen. Other than Doc Miller, of course.

Tommy was relaxed, comfortable with his decision, no matter how it played out, when he got out of Alan's car. He locked it automatically, then headed up to the apartment.

He wasn't even remotely surprised when he saw Alan sleeping beside the haphazard pile of clothing Tommy had left behind. Alan could fall asleep at the drop of a hat, after all.

What did surprise Tommy was that he was still tired enough to crawl onto the bed on the other side of the pile. Still, he'd deal with it later, he decided blearily. After he woke up. There was still a shitload of stuff to do, and Tommy was sure he could pack the pile in less than twenty minutes.

He was going home, and that was what mattered.

Home to Oak Grove and his momma and Step-Joe.

Home to friends he hadn't even known he had. Molly. Bobby Bodeen. Jayce.

Home to practice his craft in a place where he'd never make seven figures over the entire course of his life, most likely, regardless of net and gross and base and bonuses.

Home, where there was a bleached-blond man with more ink and piercings than Tommy had ever imagined could be appealing. A man who Tommy desperately hoped would one day be able to forgive him for being a frightened young idiot who'd chosen the coward's way out.

Yeah, Tommy thought as he drifted off, he was going home.

December, 2008
Oak Grove, Arkansas

Jesus, JB thought, gazing at himself in the mirror for the first time in weeks. He looked like shit. He was pale, even in comparison with the tight wrapping around his ribs; he had more bruises showing through his ink than he could count, even though they were fading... and didn't he look a fucking treat with the God damned monstrous strap-and-metal-and-cloth assembly wrapped around his leg. Of course, that was necessary, and at least it wasn't an actual cast. The doctors needed to be able to get to the stitches up and down his leg, after all.

But add that to the hideous patchy-looking hair on his head -- some tufts of bleached, dark-rooted clumps, separated by spots that JB knew had been shaved when they'd been trying to put him back together -- and he looked... "Yeah. Definitely shit-like. Christ." And yet the amazing thing was, nobody had even bothered to say so.

"Shut up, Johnny," he heard coming from the doorway, and while he'd figured someone would be along any minute, he hadn't thought it would be...

"Tommy?" he yelped, then bit off a sharp cry when his attempt to turn quickly pulled things that weren't ready for any movement faster than a slow, ponderous shift.

"For fuck's sake," Tommy said, abandoning the wheelchair he'd brought and moving to stand behind JB. JB knew Tommy was there; he could see him in the mirror. "I swear to God, Johnny Boudreaux, if you put everyone through all of this and you topple over and kill yourself now? I'll beat your dead body until it's cold. Got it?"

Then Tommy was turning him -- carefully, because of his injuries and the crutches he wasn't supposed to be on yet, JB figured -- and helping him to the wheelchair... and by the time JB was actually seated there, he was exhausted. Breathing as though he'd just run a race and thinking the doctors had been right when they'd said another week or two before he should start using the crutches.

"I... what are you... I thought you went..." And damn it, JB thought. He'd been planning what he'd say if he ever saw Tommy again, but he couldn't seem to find a single well-rehearsed line. He could feel the blood rushing to his face, but then he realized that Tommy was blushing too, so maybe it was okay. Or maybe it would be, once he found out what the man was doing there in the first place. "Tommy?"

Tommy sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed, and JB didn't know whether it was good or bad that those eyes were locked on... Tommy's own hands, or the floor, maybe, but definitely not on JB.

"I heard they were letting you out today," Tommy muttered, long fingers tangling together. "And I think they're nuts, but Doc says you got some kind of nurse coming to stay for a while. I just..." he sighed again and JB held his breath for a moment. "I wanted to tell you some things, Johnny,

but you're gonna be stuck at your place for a while and I didn't think you'd want me coming there, so this is kinda my last chance, y'know? So here I am and I'm hopin' you'll listen, okay?"

The last thing JB figured he should be noticing was that Tommy wasn't calling him JJ. Tommy had always called him JJ, but he wasn't then. It was... fucking disturbing, even through the tiny haze of the meds JB would still need for probably another month. At the same time, though, JB was also thinking that Tommy had gone back to LA. And that sort of led to the whole question of why Tommy was here, rather than on a beach somewhere. Or... working, actually, because Doc had told JB all about the life of a resident in a major hospital when JB had asked, so working was more likely.

"You're not careful, they're going to fire you for taking so much time off," JB murmured, but Tommy was shaking his head.

"I finished my residency before that old fuck-head decided to... to try killin' you, Johnny." And that was relief. "And my new boss don't... doesn't mind much that I took the time off to come do this. So, you gonna let me talk?" And that was Tommy, JB admitted. Or, rather, it was pretty much the Tommy he remembered from the beginning, so maybe -- just maybe -- college and medical school and life in big cities, and lovers JB didn't know about and didn't *want* to know about, hadn't changed Tommy as much as JB had thought. Feared. Expected. Whatever.

"I... yeah," JB finally said. "You talk. I'll listen. Then it's my turn." Because he really did have things to say, but right at the moment, it seemed more important to let Tommy do the talking. More important to Tommy, too, because the man was nodding and still not looking at JB, damn it.

"I was an asshole," Tommy said, sounding so blunt and raw and honest that JB wanted to hug him or hit him; he wasn't sure which. "I was so fucking scared, Johnny. And Eric..." Tommy sighed. "Well, it doesn't matter. I'm the one who listened to him. I'm the one who decided it would be better to hurt you than try to explain what I was feeling. Because if I didn't ever tell you, then it didn't have to be true, y'know?"

Well, no, JB answered silently. He didn't have a fucking clue. Tommy was swallowing hard, though. "And if... shit, Johnny. I needed you to hate me, I think. I think... even then I knew, deep down, that if we broke up without you hating me, I'd just end up right back with you, and to Hell with the consequences, and... that was what scared me so much in the first place. That I was so fucking wrapped up in you. In us. So I let him convince me that it wasn't normal; that it was dangerous to be so..."

Tommy shook his head. "I made myself believe it. And I made myself believe that I had to hurt you to be free. But then I thought you were dead and it hit me. I mean, it really *hit me*. Even after what I did, after years away from you and home and everything else...? I wasn't free, Johnny."

Those brown eyes finally lifted and JB saw the small tears staining Tommy's too-thin face, and that was fine because JB figured he had some of his own building. "Okay..." he started, but Tommy wasn't finished, apparently, because the man cut him off.

"I haven't been free from the minute I knocked you over at the fair, Johnny. I don't think I ever will be." Then Tommy did that swallowing thing again, and JB bit his lip to keep from saying... something stupid, most likely.

"I thought you were dead," Tommy said again, and JB would have to find out where the Hell he'd gotten that idea because Alan had said something like that too, but not the source, and... later.

"Then I knew you weren't, but you were getting married. And you had a kid. With Molly! And you and Alan... okay, not what you made it sound like, but I didn't know that then. But I knew I still loved you. And then that fucker Harlan nearly killed you for real, and I knew. I knew, Johnny."

"Knew what?" JB barely breathed the words, mind reeling from the words before them, but he could tell Tommy heard him. Those tired brown eyes went sheepish, but Jesus, so sure. Like Tommy was getting ready to share some universal truth as simple and complex as the sky being blue.

"I knew," Tommy announced, his voice sounding a little bit careful but entirely determined, "that I was through. Through pretending I was fine. Through telling myself that you were my past and that I'd find my future somewhere else, with someone else. Through wishing I'd acted like a lover instead of a scared little boy. I knew that I would do whatever it took to try to earn another chance, Johnny. Especially once you woke up and didn't seem to hate me so much anymore. So. Here I am. And I'm not going anywhere."

Tommy blushed deeper. "I, um... I'm renting Doc's old house. Working with him until I can sit my state boards. He's that new boss I mentioned before. And unless you tell me it's really over -- that there's not a single possible hope for me -- I'm gonna be right there in Oak Grove, day and night, twenty-four hours a day. And I'm gonna do whatever you want, Johnny. Be whatever you need. Just... tell me I at least have a chance. Please."

Jesus fucking Christ. Just Jesus *fucking* Christ. JB didn't know whether to laugh or cry or dance a jig or... okay, not that last, he decided, because that would fucking hurt. And a part of him wanted to just tell Tommy yes. Yes, and that Tommy was already who and what JB needed, what he wanted. He almost did just that, in fact, but... there was something in Tommy's eyes, in his face. An expression that said Tommy needed this. Needed to work at it, to prove himself. Beside, JB's words to Alan, months earlier, were still true. He and Tommy weren't the same. They needed time to get to know each other. To learn how they'd changed in the time they'd been apart.

And JB had a few things to prove, too. Like the fact that he was really over what had happened. That he'd forgiven Tommy for turning him inside out and making JB doubt his own feelings for going on ten years. That what he was feeling was mature and lasting, not the remnants of the idyllic romance that had turned so bad in a split second. And JB sort of thought maybe Tommy needed to prove those things, too. To himself, if not to JB.

So instead of an unequivocal yes, JB nodded slowly. "That's one Hell of a leap of faith you're making, Tommy," he said quietly, eyes holding that weepy brown stare.

Then Tommy nodded and offered a kind of half-smile and a jerky little shrug. "I'm sorta making it up as I go along, Johnny. And even if you don't ever give me a chance, at least I'll know I tried. Too late or not, I'm tryin'."

Okay, JB told himself with a purely internal smile. He would let Tommy try. He'd even help him out a little bit. "Then you'll come to my place for Christmas dinner," JB said simply. "Your momma and Joe said they'd do all the cooking, and Molly and Jayce are coming, along with that jackass Molly's married to now." Whom JB actually liked, now that they'd spent a bit of time together, but God help him if he ever said so, especially where Bobby Bodeen could hear. "You can meet Janie and Rob. They're running the Oak Grove Clearing now. Oh, they hate you, by the way, but it's Christmas."

He almost chuckled at the stunned look that took up residence on Tommy's face, but he managed to hold it in. Laughing out loud would only make his ribs hurt more, JB figured. "You make sure Doc and Miz Ruth make it, too, Tommy Paulson. They don't get out of town very much, and I figure I sort of owe them. They've both visited me more than they had to, so it'll be nice to give them an easy holiday for a change. One where Miz Ruth isn't doing all the work." And he owed them for somehow arranging things for Tommy to come back home for good, too, but he'd tell them that on Christmas.

Tommy still looked completely flummoxed a few minutes later, when Molly and Jayce came through the door.

"Hey, John... oh! Are we interrupting?" Molly asked, her eyes darting from him to Tommy and back again, and that seemed to rouse Tommy from his apparently stunned period of immobility.

"Um, no. No, we were... were we done here, Johnny? I mean, is there..." And uncertainty looked good on his man, JB thought with a little grin. Then again, what didn't?

"No," JB said, grinning at Tommy, then looking at Jayce and ruffling that unruly shock of black hair with the hand on his good side. "We're done... *here*," he emphasized. "We'll talk again soon, Tommy. And I'll see you at Christmas." After all, Christmas was only a few days away. JB was pretty sure he could wait that long.

It was a big party, Tommy noticed yet again when the front door opened to admit still more people from town. Much more so than the Christmas gathering had been. There had to be close to a hundred already, so it was a damned good thing Johnny had the gigantic house with the huge landscaped area out back. It was even big by Los Angeles standards, though Tommy figured it had cost only a small fraction of what a similar place in California would have... with nothing like the four acres or so Molly had said Johnny's house sat on.

Some of the Christmas decorations were still up, both at the house and in town, but as it was only New Year's Eve, nobody seemed to care. Besides which, Tommy told himself honestly, he sort of liked the little white lights that were tacked up around the edges of the room, tracing the joins of walls and ceiling. They were... pretty and festive and entirely suited to celebrating a new year.

New year. New life. Or maybe old life, renewed. Tommy wasn't sure yet. But either way, he'd meant what he'd told Johnny over a week earlier. He wasn't going anywhere. Not ever again. Or not without Johnny, in any case, because even though they hadn't really made any progress with regards to a possible relationship, they'd been talking at least once a day, and Tommy thought that they might eventually get back to where they'd once been, but with a good base of friendship and just plain liking to support the love Tommy still felt and suspected Johnny of harboring, as well.

"Hey, Pull-some," Bobby Bodeen announced, the glass of champagne in the guy's hand and the very slight slurring of his words announcing that it wasn't Bobby's first drink of the night, "looks like that 'nurse' is puttin' the moves on your boy again."

Well, damned if Bobby wasn't right, Tommy noticed, glancing toward the couch where Johnny was holding court, the overly attentive twenty-three-year-old male nurse leaning down over the back of the sofa and whispering something in Johnny's ear. "We got close to three hours 'til midnight, Bobby-boy," was what Tommy said, though he was about to go break up the little chat that had Johnny looking so uncomfortable. "Unless you want to be sleepin' it off in the car instead of kissin' your wife when the ball drops, you might want to think about slowin' down. Later, man, and thanks for the heads-up."

Of course, that whole slowing-down thing applied to him, too, Tommy decided, so he set his half-empty bottle of beer down on the mantle as he headed across the room, weaving through groups of people and nodding at the occasional "Happy New Year, Doc Paulson" he got. Because some of the people Tommy had always assumed hated him for being gay had turned out to be more open minded than he ever would have expected. Some of them had proved him right, granted, but they weren't the sort to come to Johnny's house anyway; not even for a party.

"Hey, JJ... Johnny," Tommy said, giving those pretty blue eyes a smile as he slid onto the couch right next to his... well. "I'd ask you to dance, but..." He gave a nod to the unwieldy bonds around Johnny's leg. "How you doin' over here?"

Tommy deliberately ignored the too young and too interested nurse who was still hovering and making annoyed little noises that he figured Johnny wasn't noticing. Except maybe Johnny was, Tommy realized, because that was definitely relief he saw when Johnny turned and smiled. It was maybe -- hopefully -- something more when Johnny grabbed his hand and pulled him closer, though, Tommy thought.

"I'd be better if Tony would get me a drink," Johnny said, sounding irritated, and oh, that was good. The nurse was damned good looking, after all, and while Tommy might have gone for the guy a year ago -- assuming he hadn't been with Alan then, which he had -- it was nice to think

that Johnny wasn't seeing anything appealing there. It would be even nicer to think that Johnny wasn't interested because the nurse wasn't Tommy, but Tommy was willing to take what he could get, and... Johnny being irritated with the young stud was fine with him.

"He's probably afraid it'll screw with your meds, Johnny. But if you really want a drink, I'll go get you something. Not whiskey or vodka or anything, but... something that won't do too much damage." Like a mimosa, heavy on the juice. Or even peach schnapps and ginger ale, though any sort of schnapps made Tommy shudder. Too many frou-frou drinks in too many gay bars while trying to forget the man beside him, Tommy figured.

The nurse was frowning, but Johnny was smiling, and that was what mattered. Then "No... no, it's fine, honey. It's not like taking a break from drinking is going to kill me." And Johnny was leaning against him while Tommy tried to wrap his mind around the fact that Johnny had just called him honey.

"So," Tommy murmured, once Tony-the-horny-nurse stalked off to the bathroom, "you got plans for midnight, JJ? Sorry. Johnny?"

Johnny sighed, then pulled away a few inches, leaving Tommy's side feeling cold, even after only a few minutes of contact. "I wasn't going to say anything." Johnny spoke softly, barely audible under the music and steadily rising volume of conversation around them as people drank and more people arrived to add to the cacophony.

"I promised myself I wasn't going to say anything to fuck this up," Johnny went on. "I did. But... if you don't want to be here, Tommy. I mean, if you're only here because you feel guilty or something, then just do us both a favor and say so, okay? Because you've been acting like this is a fucking chore. Like it's some kind of hardship to call me JJ when I was always and only ever JJ to you before. It's..." Johnny frowned. "Maybe I was wrong to think we could go back, Tommy. And maybe you were just being nice when you said you wanted to."

Okay, and that was... really not anything that made sense. Not to Tommy, anyway, which meant... "Okay, is it the drugs? Or are you really that stupid?" Tommy demanded, feeling entirely stunned. "I *love* you! And... and God, you've been JJ to me from pretty much the day we met. I just... shit." He sighed, trying to keep his voice as low as Johnny's had been.

"Nobody else ever called you that, okay? And this... we're starting something new, and yeah, in a way it *is* a hardship to call you JJ. Because it's how I think of you. It's what I always called you; you're right about that. So do you really think I want to deliberately remind you of what I did, back when I was so fucking stupid that I ripped you apart? And yes. You *are* wrong. We can't go back. All we can do is go forward. To whatever you want, Johnny, even if it's not me." God, he was breathing fast and hard, breaths just pumping in and out of his lungs like bellows, but Tommy couldn't help it. He'd just been as honest with Johnny as he'd ever been with anyone, and he hadn't planned on it. It had come pouring out of him on the tails of realizing that Johnny really thought he was just... feeling guilty.

He was seriously considering getting up and finding somewhere to hide when Johnny's fingers closed harder around his own, and Tommy... sighed. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Johnny whispered, leaning close again, then turning his head when he was up against Tommy's side once more. "And just so we're clear, Tommy...? It's when you call me 'Johnny' that I'm reminded of everything that happened back then. So we go forward, like you said. And right now, what I really want is for you to call me JJ again. And I want a kiss at midnight, damn it. From you. That's my plan. You okay with that?"

Jesus, Tommy thought, trying to breathe through the way his heart was pounding away like a jackhammer. Okay? Fuck, he was so far past okay, okay wasn't even a smudge on the horizon in his mental rearview mirror. But Johnny -- JJ -- was waiting for an answer, and damned if he could speak right then. So Tommy got up, turned, then sank to his knees in front of JJ, one hand holding that poor, strapped-up leg still while the other shifted JJ's good leg for room.

Then Tommy knelt there, staring into wide blue eyes that seemed to be making exactly the promises Tommy wanted... needed. And, "No," Tommy said softly, leaning up until his mouth was less than an inch away from JJ's soft, pink lips. "I mean, yes. It's a good plan. Except for the part where I have to wait two and a half hours to kiss you."

After that, it was easy.

Easy to move that tiny distance.

Easy to let his mouth close over JJ's.

Easy to moan around JJ's tongue as the kiss went deeper, harder, JJ's hands in Tommy's hair and his own carefully gripping JJ's arms, just above the elbows.

It was hard to stop, though; especially when it was because of Bobby Bodeen grunting out "Fuck, you two. Get a room. There's kids present and I wouldn't even let Jayce see me like that with his momma."

"You got a problem with me, Hopalong?" Tommy growled, pulling away from JJ to glare at the man standing behind the couch.

Bobby snorted and gestured at the people around them with a glass of what Tommy could only hope was Sprite. "Nah, man. You see anyone gaggin'? Still think it's weird that you an' JB have that whole freaky man-on-man thing goin', but whatever. I'm just sayin'."

Bobby smirked. He actually smirked, and Tommy made a mental note to beat the man with his crappy prosthetic once the new one arrived.

"It ain't right," Bobby finished, "to use that much tongue in public when you're not even married."

Then Bobby was laughing and JJ was laughing, and before Tommy knew what was happening, whatever he'd thought was going on seemed to be... over. Everyone who'd been staring had started chuckling, then gone back to whatever conversations they'd been having and JJ was looking... fucking amused as he stared at Bobby.

"Okay, number one," JJ said, and Tommy could hear the teasing in his tone, so he didn't bother to get up and act all protective, "we're not in public. We're in my house. And that means I can do whatever I want and people can leave if they don't like it."

Tommy grinned and gave JJ's good leg a gentle squeeze.

"Number two," JJ announced, giving Tommy a quick but sincere glance, "there's nothing wrong with kids seeing people kissing. And if you're afraid of letting my son see how much you and Molly love each other, we're going to have to have a talk about custody arrangements. And number three," JJ said, suddenly sounding tired, though he looked to be wide awake, "it's really fucking rude to throw the whole 'you're not married' thing in my face, Bodeen. Hell, California won't even allow it anymore, much less fucking Arkansas. So even if we wanted to get married, we *couldn't*. Not here. And since that's the way it is, I'm going to kiss Tommy whenever and wherever I want. If that's an issue for you, then... I guess you're really not the man I thought you were."

Then JJ straightened and apparently changed his mind. "Or maybe you are. Maybe you're exactly the man I always thought you were, Bobby Bodeen. Maybe it's just the last few months that have made me think you're something more than a homophobic prick. Just like Molly's daddy."

"Okay," Tommy found himself saying, standing with no recollection of coming up off his knees, and yet there he was. "This is gettin' out of hand, guys." And it was, because Tommy had a sneaking suspicion that whatever was going on between JJ and Bobby didn't actually have anything to do with the kiss Bobby had witnessed. "Just tell me the truth. Both of you," he demanded.

He waited until they nodded, though both JJ and Bobby looked around them first, like they might have made different decisions if there weren't so many people there. Tommy didn't care about that, though. He cared about making things right so he could get his midnight kiss, damn it. After all, legend did say that whatever someone was doing at midnight on New Year's Eve spelled out what the coming year would bring, and he was for damned sure going to make certain that *his* new year would involve a whole lot of kisses with JJ Boudreaux. No matter how JJ's eyes were drooping at the moment. Tommy figured he'd have them wide open soon enough.

"Do you guys really hate each other," he asked when he thought he'd left them waiting long enough, "or is all this shit just because JJ slept with Molly? And because Bobby's the one that lives with her and Jayce? Is it all fucking jealousy or is there some real reason for it?"

Tommy smirked when neither man responded. "And that's answer enough. Bobby? Get the fuck over it. It's done. It happened. *Once*. It won't be happening again. And JJ? Let it go. Bobby's a good man, even though I can't believe I'm saying so, what with as much of an asshole as he was

in high school. He won't let Jayce grow up wrong and he won't make your boy into someone like Harlan. And you guys need to separate now, which means you need to move on, Bobby, since JJ's pretty much stuck on the couch. We'll get together and talk about all this later, if we have to."

Bobby frowned, but Tommy could tell it was more of a reaction to being told what to do, rather than to the content of Tommy's words. Still, "Define 'we,'" Bobby said, and Tommy couldn't help laughing.

"You. Me. JJ. Molly. Jayce," Tommy answered simply. "Because that's who's involved in this relationship, I guess. I told JJ this already, and if the fact that I've moved back here for good didn't clue you... I'm not going away, Bobby. I'm gonna be right here, all wrapped up in JJ's life. And even if JJ decides he don't... doesn't want me?" Tommy bit his lip, then shook off the despair he felt at saying those words.

"I'll still be here," he went on. "Maybe I'll never find anyone again. I'm prepared to deal with that. Hell, if JJ decides against me, it's pretty much a sure thing that I'll never even... but that doesn't matter. However it goes, everyone still needs to work out where they stand. In a way that'll be good for Jayce, not just for the new baby." Because Tommy knew the signs, could see how Molly hadn't been drinking anything but juice all night and held her hand curved over her stomach, as though she was protecting it. "Whether it's a boy or a girl, Bobby, your child deserves to come in to a world where its momma isn't caught between. And that means we all need to talk, to establish some boundaries. But not tonight."

And just like that, Bobby Bodeen couldn't get away from them fast enough. Tommy couldn't blame him, either. It had to be fan-fucking-tastic to know that the one person you loved more than anyone else was giving you a child. A living, breathing piece of proof that you mattered that much. That they loved you back enough to spend at least the next eighteen years -- and really, the rest of your life and theirs -- bound together that way.

He flopped down on the couch beside JJ, carefully, then took one pale, limp hand in his own. "Well, that was interesting, huh?" Tommy prodded, sure JJ would have an opinion, at least. Then, "Um, just because you said it to Bobby doesn't mean..."

But JJ's hand was still lax in his own and the man looked tired. So tired, apparently, that he'd fallen asleep in the middle of his own party. That was the drugs, though, because they hit some people like that. Just had them nodding off at random intervals, though the sleep didn't tend to last long.

"You rest, JJ," Tommy murmured, slipping back onto the couch and wrapping his arm around JJ's shoulders. "I'll wake you up at midnight if I have to." Because, yeah... Tommy was definitely getting his kiss.

March, 2009
Oak Grove, Arkansas

"Hi, Miz Ruth," JB said with a grin as he walked into the office, "Tommy around?" And, okay, maybe he wasn't a hundred percent yet, but his stitches had been out for ages. Even though JB didn't care much for the cane he'd be using for another month or so, Tommy said it looked dapper, whatever the fuck that meant, so JB could deal.

"Just finishing up with Molly, I'm sure," Miz Ruth said, after squinting at the clock. "Why don't you pull up a chair and catch up while we wait, hmmm?"

And that was one of the things he loved about Oak Grove, JB realized for probably the millionth time. Everyone knew everyone. Always had time for a bit of gossip. Even the people in town who still thought he and Tommy were going to Hell didn't make much of an issue about it anymore, though JB thought they were probably just glad that the gays were together and obviously serious. Probably made the homophobes feel safe or something. As if either he or Tommy had any interest in their raggedy old asses.

So JB sat down and Miz Ruth poured him some sweet tea from the pitcher on her desk and they chatted for a bit, and when the door to the examining room opened, JB looked over with a grin. "Hey, Moll. How you feeling?"

Molly rolled her eyes but gave him a matching smile. "I'm fine. Why does everybody keep asking me that? God, it's like nobody ever had a baby before, which I seem to remember doing once already." She laughed and shook her head. "I swear, Johnny, if Bobby doesn't stop treating me like I'm made of spun glass, I'm gonna hide his leg."

Oh... he'd actually pay to see that, JB thought. So he said so, which had Molly and Miz Ruth both laughing. Tommy, too, because that was when he came out of the room behind Molly, and everyone else just... disappeared. "Hi, honey," JB murmured, getting to his feet. He probably had a dopey grin on his face, but he didn't care. "Thought I'd see if you could get away for lunch. Step-Joe's had a barbeque brisket going since this morning."

Tommy laughed, and yeah... if his own expression was anything like Tommy's, JB definitely looked like a big, sappy fool. "You got that phone call too, huh?" Tommy asked, even as he took off his doctor coat and hung it on the hook beside the exam room door. "Momma rang over here at nine to tell me Joe put it in at five this morning. Though why anyone would get up that early to mess around with meat is beyond me."

JB was too busy trying not to laugh, which was the only reason Molly beat him to it. Then again, Molly had developed an odd love of making Tommy blush. She was wildly skilled at it, too, which was just plain hilarious, most days. And right then was no exception.

"Oh, like you've never set your alarm early so you could have some extra time to 'mess around with meat' in the wee hours," she said, smirking as wickedly as she'd done back in the day.

Bobby Bodeen was good for Molly, JB realized yet again. She was... lighter, now that she and Bobby were married. Happier. And he would have liked Bobby just for that, but the truth was... now that they'd gotten things straightened out between them, JB and Bobby were starting to become friends. Even Jayce had noticed.

"I... What... Molly!" And that was Tommy, sounding shocked, though JB wasn't sure why. Of course, Tommy was also red as a ripe tomato, which was funny, too, and...

"Off with you," Miz Ruth ordered. "Shoo! This is a place of business, not a playground." But she was smiling, her eyes just twinkling merrily. "Doc'll be here in twenty minutes and I know the number at the diner if there's an emergency before then. Go, all of you, and leave an old woman in peace."

Then Tommy was shaking his head, that blush fading, and he grabbed his jacket, then leaned down to kiss Miz Ruth's wrinkled cheek. "You'll never be old, ma'am. I'll be back in an hour, okay?"

Just like that, they were outside and walking down the street toward the diner, and JB thought theirs was possibly the strangest relationship ever, though he didn't really have anything to compare it with.

Yes, it was him and Tommy, and that part was amazing. But Tommy had dated Molly and JB had a kid with her and Molly was having Bobby Bodeen's baby, and that kind of tied them all together.

"You okay, JJ?" Tommy muttered, bumping hips with him just a bit as they walked. "We don't have to go to the diner if you don't want to..."

JB blinked and then laughed, shaking his head. "I want to, honey," he answered. "I was just thinking. We're all caught up together, aren't we? You, me, Jayce and Molly, and Bobby. Your momma and Step-Joe... my folks. Even Janie and Rob." Who had come around once they'd had a talk with Tommy, the content of which none of them would tell JB. But they liked Tommy, now that they believed he wouldn't be hurting JB again.

One arm went around JB's waist and Tommy pulled him to a stop, then gathered him up against that slightly bigger body, which JB was never -- ever -- going to complain about. Not even when they were in public, though Bobby would have been distinctly uncomfortable if he'd been there. Molly, on the other hand, had that look on her face that JB just knew meant she thought they were cute.

"We're not 'caught up,' JJ," Tommy said simply, those brown eyes just shining. "We're family. It comes with the territory."

Well, JB supposed that was true enough. Even so, "You're sure all of this isn't more than you bargained for? I mean... it's a lot more complicated than just us, all of a sudden. I'd get it if..."

"Shut up," Tommy ordered, then enforced it by pressing a long, slow kiss to his mouth, and JB wasn't anything like stupid enough to pass on that. "It's complicated," Tommy agreed a few minutes later, and JB was pleased to notice Tommy's breath was as shaky as his own. "Sure, it's complicated, JJ. And it's gonna be messy sometimes and probably annoying. But it'll be fine. We'll be fine. We just do what we've been doing since you and I worked our shit out."

JB chuckled quietly and rested his head on Tommy's shoulder, just breathing in man and musk and traces of rubbing alcohol. "We keep making it up as we go along?" he murmured, smiling a little more when the brush of his lips on Tommy's neck had Tommy shivering.

"That's right, love," Tommy murmured back, holding him a little bit tighter. "We just keep making it up and we'll be fine."

"Awww... that's just adorable, boys. Sugary-sweet, even. Unfortunately, the pregnant woman wants brisket, so you might want to see to it that she gets it. Now. Or do I have to remind you of what a bitch I can be when I don't get what I want?"

"Good Lord," JB said with a loud laugh, "anything but that! God, Tommy. Did I ever tell you about when she was pregnant with Jayce? I swear to you, sweet Molly Kincaid just disappeared under this insane hormone-bomb of a peeing machine. She threw things, Tommy. A *lot* of things. And she's got damned good aim, too."

Tommy grinned and slowly released him, though one arm stayed around JB's waist and JB for damned sure didn't mind. "*Sweet* Molly Kincaid?" Tommy asked, and oh, his man was just looking for trouble with that tone, JB thought. "You mean there's two Molly Kincaids in this town? Because there must be. I've only met the evil bitch walking beside you, JJ."

"You take that back, Tommy Paulson!" Molly demanded, but JB could hear the laughter in her voice. "I'm sweet and... and innocent and..."

"And if the next word out of your mouth is 'pure,' I'll have to add liar to the list, Moll," Tommy answered with a grin. "Plus, if you try to hit me and get JJ instead, I'll put you over my knee. And you know I'll do it, too."

Molly made a face and fell back into step on JB's other side. "Save the kinky shit for your boyfriend, Tommy. He's got all those... rings in strange places, so he'd probably enjoy it. And I smell barbequed brisket!" Just like that, Molly was skipping ahead, looking for all the world like a little girl with a basket of candy in her future.

"You see, JJ?" Tommy said softly. "Making it up as we go along. It seems to be working pretty well so far, right?"

And yeah... yeah, it did.

"We need to talk about the house," JB said a few minutes later, as they were sitting down.

"We will, JJ," Tommy agreed, just like he always did, "but not right now, okay?" And, yeah, that was just like always too, JB thought with a sigh that clearly wasn't as silent as he'd hoped, because Tommy was suddenly wearing one of those frowning-at-himself expressions. "Tonight," Tommy added, and that wasn't usual. Not at all.

"Tonight?" JB was pretty sure he was blinking, but that was fine. He was sort of... stunned. "You mean it?"

And Tommy was nodding. Slowly, but nodding none the less. "I do, JJ. We'll talk about it tonight. I can't promise you'll like it, but we'll definitely talk. Been puttin' it off long enough."

"Oh, for..." and that was Molly, jumping in where she didn't have any business being, but then again, JB figured it was his own fault. He was the one who'd brought it up. "Why do men always make things so complicated? Tommy, move in with Johnny. You'll both be happier, and you know you want to. Talk to your momma about renting the apartment upstairs. That way you'll have somewhere to crash if you get a call that drags you into town late at night. Doc Miller can sell the old house or rent it out or something. There. See? Problem solved."

Molly smirked -- actually smirked -- at them. "Please. As if you don't both tell me everything that's going on in your lives. Without graphic details, thank God, because if I had to hear about what goes on between you two in the dark, it'd likely scar me for life."

JB was almost worried about the wicked grin on Tommy's face, but only almost because he had a sneaking suspicion that his own expression was remarkably similar. "Actually, Tommy likes to leave the light on, Moll. He has a thing for my ink. Or his tongue does..." And yeah, that had Molly *and* Tommy blushing. "In fact, there's this thing he does with his..."

"I'm not listening!" Molly announced as she got up from the table, but she was grinning, too. "I'm not listening, I don't care, it's none of my business, and... and I have to... Ladies' room. Yeah. Okay. I'll be back. And you *will* have a different topic of conversation by then, if you boys know what's good for you. Okay."

He sat there with Tommy, watching Molly hurry off to the back of the diner, then JB gave his lover a wink. "See? I told you. Hormone-bomb of a peeing machine."

Tommy nodded but he seemed to be thinking about something, too. He had that sort of distant look in his eyes. Then they cleared and JB swallowed at the serious stare he was suddenly receiving. "What, Tommy?"

"I... are you really sure you want me to... live with you, JJ?" Tommy asked, sounding so uncertain, JB wanted to hit him right then and there. "I mean, it's only been..."

"Jesus fucking Christ, Paulson," JB growled, "it's been ten fucking years. I know what I want. What I *don't* want is to waste any more fucking time." He reached across the few inches of Formica between their hands and tangled his fingers with Tommy's. "It was always you, Tommy."

Always will be, too. Now will you please stop being a fucking pain and just say 'yes, JJ, I'll live with you' so we can get on with our lives and be fucking happy?"

He loved the way Tommy blinked. Even loved the little bits of moisture he could see in the corners of those brown eyes. Then again, JB told himself, he pure loved Tommy.

And Tommy loved him, too. He could see it; hear it when the man -- his man -- finally spoke.

"I... yes, JJ," Tommy said slowly, carefully. "I'll live with you. For as long as you'll have me."

"Good. Thank God that's finally settled." Forever was a long damned time, JB knew... and not even close to long enough. "Candace is headed this way. You know what you want to drink? Because I already know we're all having Step-Joe's brisket."

Yeah, the whole making it up thing was good, JB decided. He could live with it. Hell, he could live with anything, just as long as Tommy was right there with him.