

*Can two weeks  
change a lifetime?*

# ONE MORE *Soldier*

MARIE SEXTON

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# Dedication

To Ethan Stone,  
who graciously let me steal his story  
and make it my own.

## One More Soldier

\* \* \* \* \*

I first met Bran eight years ago. He was eleven years old.

I was twenty-eight.

It was 1963 and I had just returned home from a long day fixing cars. It was an excruciatingly hot Houston day. The garage I worked at had been even hotter.

Coming home wasn't much of a relief. My apartment didn't have air conditioning and it was like an oven, as usual. I wolfed down two PB&Js and a beer, smoked a nice fat bowl, and then put on my swimming suit and headed for the pool. My apartment complex was made up of three buildings that formed a horseshoe around a large community pool, and I couldn't wait to immerse myself in the relatively cool water. It was how I passed most of my evenings in the summer. I'd spend twenty to forty minutes floating blissfully on the surface while my high wore off and then do a few laps before dragging myself off to bed to get up at six the next morning.

I arrived at the pool a little after eight and I was hoping to have it to myself. As far as I was concerned that was the benefit of coming to the pool late. But this time I found a kid I'd never seen before sitting on the edge with his feet dangling in.

"Hiya mister!" he said as I came through the gate.

I mentally groaned. Sharing the pool with kids was the worst. They were always screaming and splashing when all I wanted was a little bit of silent relaxation. But I said, "Hey."

"I'm Brannon Nelson," he said. "What's your name?"

"Will."

"What's your last name? My ma says I have to call grown-ups by their last name."

"Constantinescu."

"Constantil . . . ?" he trailed away uncertainly.

I sighed, wishing not for the first time my father's father had done what other immigrants had chosen to do and Americanized his name. But no such luck for me.

"Forget it, kid," I said. "Just call me Will."

"Okay." He was skinny and pale and his dark blonde hair was cropped short. He was in that terribly awkward pre-adolescent stage where he seemed to be

nothing but big teeth, protuberant ears, and giant feet. "My ma and I just moved into apartment twelve--"

"That's great, kid," I said, hoping to quell the story of his life, which I had a feeling he was just dying to share. As if to prove me right he kept talking as if I hadn't spoken at all.

"--in building C. My sister, too, but she's only eight. She wanted to come to the pool with me but my ma said no, she's too little, and it's almost her bedtime anyway, but since I'm eleven I can stay out later so she said I could come check out the pool, and it's really swell, isn't it? I mean, we never had a pool before! But I bet it's gonna be lots of fun. We used to live--"

Holy hell, this was going to be worse than I thought. I dove into the pool and was able to swim in underwater silence to the other edge before surfacing next to him. He was still talking.

"--died last year. I guess really, it was more like two years ago now, just about, and we stayed there for a while, but then my ma said we couldn't afford to live there no more so we moved here. She works at the diner down the street you know, so she says this is perfect 'cause it's so close, and I have to watch my sister until my ma gets home, but that's usually around seven, and after that she says I can

come to the pool and--"

"Jesus, kid," I said in exacerbatation, "shut up for half a second, will you?"

"Sure," he said.

And to my surprise, he did. He just sat there smiling at me, not saying a word. I was a little taken aback by his acquiescence. "Okay then," I said awkwardly. "Just gimme a few minutes before you start talking again."

"Sure thing, mister."

I didn't actually expect him to be quiet for long, but I'd take what I could get. I stretched out on my back, closed my eyes, and let myself drift on the surface, riding out the peak of my high, letting my mind turn off and my body cool down, until I finally emerged into the mellow THC-induced valley below that would carry me through until bedtime. I slowly cracked my eyelids open and looked over at him. He was still sitting in the same spot, watching me.

"Thanks, kid."

"Sure thing, mister."

"It's Will."

"Okay, Will."

"How'd your dad die?"

"In a car wreck."

"Jeez, I'm sorry, kid. That sucks."



"I know." He said it in a matter-of-fact tone that was way too old for his eleven years and it threw me a bit.

"Are you going to get in?" I asked. "Or are you just going to sit there all night?"

"Can't swim."

"Are you serious?"

"Ma says maybe she can afford lessons next year."

It was bad enough to live in the Houston heat. Now he had access to a pool but wouldn't be able to use it? That'd be tough on an adult; it had to be absolute torture for a kid his age. "Come on, kid," I said, before I had time to think about what a bad idea it was. "I'll teach you."

So for better or worse, I ended up teaching Brannon to swim. He met me the next three nights at the pool. He was a quick learner and not even bad company, for a kid. But on Friday night, I told him I wouldn't be there the next evening. I could tell he was disappointed, but it didn't matter. I sure as hell wasn't going to change my mind. Saturday was my night for myself, when I would sneak off to one of the little-known bars downtown for guys like me - - guys who preferred other guys. I never brought anybody home, but that one night each week I allowed myself the release of actually being touched by another man. Whether it was following one to his place or just a quick fuck in the

back room of the bar, it was something, and I wasn't about to give it up for some kid.

"I can still meet you on Sunday," I told him.

"I can't swim on Sundays," he said. "Ma says it's the Sabbath. I think when God said you shouldn't work on the Sabbath he didn't mean swimming, but ma says it's inappropriate."

I wasn't sure whether God cared about swimming or not, but I sure as hell wasn't going to contradict any kid's mom. "Then I'll see you Monday."

He followed me around for the rest of the summer, which just about drove me nuts, but once school started in the fall he found friends his own age.

Still, I would see him once or twice a month, at the pool or in the laundry room. He brought in my mail when I left town to visit my folks. He came to me when he needed help with his homework, or when his mom pissed him off. Sometimes he got on my nerves, but mostly I could tolerate him. He was a smart kid and he'd talk your ear off of if you let him. More than once I snapped and told him to shut the hell up. But just like that first day at the pool, he took it in stride.

The one good thing about a kid his age was that he

never asked any of the questions: *Why wasn't I seeing anyone? At the ripe old age of twenty-eight, why hadn't I settled down and gotten married? Was I going to stay a bachelor forever? Didn't I want a nice woman to take care of me?* They were questions adults always seemed to feel they were justified in asking. I thought maybe they could have learned a lot from Bran.

Over the next few years, I watched him grow. He was still skinny and awkward and gangly, although he did finally grow into his feet. He played basketball at his high school and he was incredibly bright and inquisitive.

In 1967 Timothy Leary got everybody buzzing about "questioning authority". Sometimes I thought Bran took the advice a bit too much to heart, but it was purely academic for him. He was much less rebellious than I had been at his age.

Early in his sophomore year of high school we realized I could no longer help him with his homework. He was so much smarter than I had ever been, and the string of numbers and letters he put in front of me was well beyond my ability. It was embarrassing, but he didn't seem to hold it against me.

I'd always been a fuck-up. I'd finished high school, but only barely. I spent the first few years after graduation pumping gas, until my boss Ed took me under his wing and taught me how to fix cars. It was a living, but it sure wasn't my dream. I knew Bran had potential, and I hoped he would be wiser than I had been. I tried to talk him into going to college, but he always shrugged me off. I was disappointed when, the summer before his senior year, he informed me that he had dropped out of school.

"Bran, you could have gone to college!" I said in frustration. "Why would you drop out now?"

It was a Wednesday night deep in August of 1969 and the heat seemed to lie like a blanket across the city, weighing us all down. Even the tepid water of the swimming pool could do little to cool us off.

"The rent keeps going up, and my ma's tips don't," he said defensively. "I can't expect her to continue supporting me, Will. I'm old enough to support myself."

I hated the thought of him wasting his intelligence, becoming a flunky like me, but what could I say? "What will you do?" I asked.

"I got a job on a ranch over near San Antonio. Room and board provided."

"Ranching's hard work," I said, but he just

shrugged.

"I can handle it, and the pay's good."

"When do you leave?"

"My ma's driving me out there tomorrow."

There wasn't much left to say after that. We swam a little longer, dunking each other and horseplaying as if we were both kids, rather than one of us being in his thirties. But finally it was time to go.

"Hey Will?" he said as we were about to part ways at the gate. "Thanks, man."

"For what?"

He shrugged, looking embarrassed. "For always being here when I needed you."

Other than teaching him to swim six years earlier, I didn't really feel like I'd done much for him. But his face was full of nervous sincerity, and so I said, "No problem, kid." He looked a little perturbed at still being referred to as a kid, which made me laugh. "Take care of yourself, Bran."

"You too."

\* \* \* \* \*

The months passed for me as they always did. The scorching heat of summer dwindled into winter. Since Bran

wasn't around that year, I had his sister Janice bring in my mail while I was visiting my parents over Christmas. Janice told me Bran had been home for the holiday, but he was gone again by the time I returned home.

I had a casual affair that year with a married man named Frank. It started in the fall and lasted through the spring. He would call me whenever his wife was out of town and we'd spend a few hours together at his house. It wasn't anything like a real relationship. Not that I'd ever *had* a real relationship. Still, I figured it was the best two gay men could hope for, even if it did involve sneaking around and keeping secrets. But in June of 1970 his wife confronted him, demanding to know if he was having an affair. He confessed he was, although he didn't ever admit that it was with another man, and they left town. I never heard from him again. I hated having to go back to the bars to get laid, but other than that, there was nothing about our relationship worth mourning.

One hot summer evening in July found me at the pool, waiting for the heat of day to pass so that I could return to my apartment. At thirty-five I was finding it more difficult to keep myself in shape than when I was in my twenties. Even the hard labor at the garage wasn't enough

to keep the love handles at bay. I spent a lot more of my pool time doing laps than floating now.

When I finished I was surprised to find that I was no longer alone. I had been so engrossed in my workout I hadn't noticed the newcomer entering the fenced-in pool area. I definitely noticed now though. He was hard to miss. The man's back was to me and he was wearing only short, tight swim trunks. The pool wasn't well lit, but he was standing directly under one of the lamps and I could see that his body was deeply tan and heavily muscled. Whoever it was, I was pretty damn sure I hadn't seen him around the apartments before. And I was praying to whatever god might be listening that he was gay.

And then he turned around and said happily, "Hey Will! How've you been?"

My stunned brain took a minute to connect that voice to a known person in my head. "Bran?" I asked in surprise.

"You didn't recognize me?"

"No," I said, and he laughed.

"The light's not that good out here."

That was true, but the real reason I hadn't recognized him was that he was an entirely different person now. My memory of him was of a skinny, awkward kid. He

most definitely wasn't that any more. His arms and chest were muscular, his stomach ridged. The dark blonde hair that had always been shaved short was now hanging in his eyes and was sun-bleached platinum. I hadn't seen him since the summer before, and in that year he had definitely become a man. A very fine man at that. I was torn between wanting to look at every inch of him and feeling like a pedophile for even thinking of looking.

"I've been working at that ranch the past year," he said as he slid gracefully into the pool. "But I decided to come home for a bit."

"That's great, kid," I said, because it was the only thing I could think of to say. He sank up to his chin and started to swim toward where I stood in the chest-deep water. "So you'll be here for the summer?" I asked.

"Not that long," he said. He was only a few feet away from me now, swimming steadily. In the low light, I saw just a flash of teeth as he grinned at me. And then his head went under and he kicked his feet up, propelling himself down under the surface of the water. I knew it was coming, but I didn't move fast enough. He grabbed my knees from below and pulled my feet out from under me, pulling me under.

When I surfaced, sputtering and coughing water, he



was laughing. "You used to do that to me every chance you got," he said.

"I guess you did owe me."

His grin got bigger. "We're not even yet, Will." He lunged at me, launching himself up out of the water and coming down with his hands on my shoulders, pushing me under again. It was a classic move -- every boy in the world and probably most of the girls too, had dunked somebody in exactly that same way at one time or another. I was more prepared for it this time and got a good lung full of air before he pushed me down. He was still laughing when I came back up.

"Is this some kind of challenge?" I joked.

Bran laughed. "Exactly."

The word was barely out of his mouth before I jumped at him, pushing him under as he had done to me. He came up laughing. "Is that all you've got, old man?"

"Oh, you're in trouble now!" I was laughing too as I pushed him under. He didn't resist much, and this time he stayed under. I knew he was going to try to grab my legs again, but in the low light I couldn't see below the surface enough to know which side he was coming from.

He ended up hitting me from the left. One of his arms hit me behind the knees, causing my legs to fold

underneath me. And his other hand . . . his other hand landed right on my groin as he pushed me down. It wasn't a hard impact. It was gentle, almost exploring.

I pushed away from him hard and came up sputtering. He was laughing again and I wished I could see his face. I wanted to see if he was embarrassed, or oblivious, or . . .

"We're still not even, Will," he said, and the low suggestive timbre of his voice hit me.

That contact had not been accidental.

My body was reacting against my will, and I was horrified. This was Bran! I had known him since he was only eleven, skinny and fighting acne. I had taught him to swim. I had helped him with his math homework. I had played with him in this pool more times than I could count, dunking him as he had just done to me . . . Well. Not *exactly* as he had just done to me.

He was starting to move closer again, and I found myself backing up. "I have to go," I said shakily.

His progress toward me stopped. "Sure thing, Will," he said, although the disappointment in his voice was obvious.

I scrambled out of the pool quickly and grabbed my towel, thankful that between it and the low light he couldn't

see the effect his touch had on me. I hated that I was aroused at all. I felt unclean. Like a pervert.

I didn't look back as I left the pool. I didn't even say goodbye.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once I was back in the comfort of my own apartment, I took a shower. A very fast, very cold shower. Normally the shower after a swim might have included masturbating, but I wasn't about to allow myself any such indulgence after what just happened. It felt wrong.

I got into bed and lay there, wide awake, replaying the incident in my mind. *Had I imagined it?* Certainly I hadn't imagined the hand on my groin. But my surety it had been deliberate? As I thought it over more I decided I had overreacted. First of all, there had never been any indication he was gay. Of course, it wasn't as if I had ever talked to him about it. And I hadn't known him all that well. After all, he had only been a kid. Still, it seemed unlikely. Then there was the fact that I was seventeen years older than him. I wasn't in bad shape for my age, but he was young, and gorgeous. Why would he waste his time hitting on me? I was only a couple of years younger than

his *mother*!

I hadn't been able to see his expression at the pool. My momentary conviction that he was making an advance was based on nothing more than his voice. And he had only said five words.

It was ridiculous. I was being a fool. In hindsight I regretted my hasty retreat from the pool. No doubt if I had stayed my suspicions would have been proven groundless.

I breathed a sigh of relief, feeling like my world made sense once again. And I finally fell asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next evening he showed up at the pool as I was finishing my laps again. This time there was no horseplay. He kept his distance, talking nonstop about his job at the farm. As we chatted casually, my belief the contact had been accidental seemed to be confirmed. I felt silly for having ever believed he'd been coming on to me.

"I really have to go," I finally told him as I got out of the pool and started to dry off. "I have to be at work early tomorrow."

"Will? Can I ask you a favor?"

"Sure."

"I bought a used stereo outta the paper. Got it all the way home and realized I got no clue how to set it up. Think you could help me with it?"

"You bet. Probably not tomorrow, but I could come by Saturday morning. Around ten?"

"That'd be great," he said. "Thanks."

"No problem." He was in the deep end of the pool, apparently treading water. Looking out at him in the near-dark, he was barely more than a shadow. It was easy to remember him as the scrawny teenager he had been the summer before. "Goodnight, Bran."

"Goodnight," he said. I turned to leave the pool area, but just as I was opening the gate, he called out, "Hey Will?"

"Yeah?"

It took him a second. I waited, one hand on the open gate, and finally he said, "I'm eighteen now you know." And just like that, my whole world flipped upside down. "See you Saturday."

\* \* \* \* \*

Bran's pointed statement about his age was not lost on me. There was only one reason he would feel the need

to tell me his age, and that one reason was the most wrong reason I could think of. I avoided the pool on Friday night, but I had promised to help him with his stereo on Saturday. I debating not going but I knew he would only seek me out. In the end it seemed safer to go to his house and hope the presence of his mother or sister would deter his advances.

His mom wasn't at the apartment when I arrived, but his sister Janice let me in the front door. She waved me dismissively toward his room before resuming her chattering phone conversation.

Bran wasn't in his room, but the stereo equipment was stacked on a desk and I groaned when I saw it. Miles of wire hung in a tangled mess from the back of each piece. Whoever owned it before Bran had obviously done the bare minimum amount of work necessary, unhooking just enough wires to allow Bran to pull the components out of the cabinet. I'd have to untangle the whole rat's nest before I could even start to hook it up.

"What a mess, huh?" I heard Brannon say behind me.

"It's a disaster," I said as I turned to face him. "What the hell were they . . ." And whatever words I might have had to say after that disappeared at the sight of him.

He was breathtaking.

Bran had obviously just come from the shower. Drops of water were dripping from his hair, beading on his strong, broad shoulders. He was wearing only a towel. Above it, his stomach was smooth and flat. Below it, his legs were strong and shapely.

"Yes?" he asked jokingly, interrupting my rather too-erotic thoughts.

I jerked my eyes away from his legs and up to his face. He was grinning at me mischievously, and I turned my back on him as quickly as I could. *Steady, Will, I chastised myself mentally. Just get the damn stereo hooked up and get the hell out of here.* "What were they thinking?" I asked shakily.

"I think they were in a hurry to get rid of it and put their new one in," he said.

I heard a drawer opening and closing behind me. I risked a glance over my shoulder. His back was to me. He had dropped his towel and was bending over to step into a pair of shorts. Although his back was tanned a deep, dark brown, his ass was pale white, his cheeks incredibly round and muscular. I averted my eyes again, closing them tight and trying to think about baseball. Or stereo equipment. Or . . .

"Is everything all right, Will?" he asked.

"Sure." But everything was not all right. There was something very wrong with my voice. It was decidedly too high. And too shaky.

"Do you want me to try to help, or should I just stay out of your way?"

"Ummm . . ." I opened my eyes again and looked back at him. He had donned a pair of shorts, and there really was no other word for them. Shorts. *Short* shorts. Once upon a time they had possibly been a pair of sweat pants, but he had cut the legs off them. And once upon a time they had probably fit him. But now they were more than a bit too small. The shorts had been washed so many times the fabric seemed impossibly thin. It was stretched tight and it did nothing to disguise the outline of what was underneath them. The hem of the cut-off legs curled up revealing the curve at the top of his thigh, where it dipped toward--

*Lord help me!* I thought as I turned my back on him. "Just stay over there," I snapped, and I knew it came out sounding much angrier than I had intended.

"Okay," he said, sounding disappointed.

I didn't care. I didn't care if he was hurt, or disappointed, or angry. I didn't care if he was confused. I only cared about one thing: getting the fuck out of there



before my brain turned off and allowed the turned-on part of my body to take over.

I started pulling at cords, resisting the urge to take out my frustration on them by simply ripping them away from the stereo. I started at the top piece and began to systematically unhook the various cables from the components. It didn't take long, thank goodness. Only a few minutes. Then another few minutes while I untangled them all. And a few more as I started reconnecting them. It was completely silent in the room all the while, but I could feel him behind me, watching me.

I tried not to think about those damn shorts he was wearing.

I failed. Miserably.

"Almost there," I said. That wasn't entirely true, but I felt like I needed to say something to break the silence.

"There's no hurry." I could tell without looking that he was now right behind me. Maybe less than a foot away.

"I just . . . I have to . . ." *Christ, what did I have to do?* "Once I connect this last cable, it should work."

"Great," he said, and he was even closer now.

My shaking hands made the job more difficult than it should have been, but I finally got the last component hooked up. "All done!" I announced. I stood up and hit the

power button.

Nothing happened.

*Shit.*

"It's not working," he said. *Good Lord, how could he be so close?* It sounded like he was almost on top of me -- and the thoughts that brought to mind were completely inappropriate. I resisted the urge to turn around and look at him. That wouldn't help anything!

I leaned over the top of the stereo again, looking down at the cables emerging from the back of it. I couldn't think straight. My heart was pounding. Why wouldn't the God damn thing just turn on so I could get out of Bran's room? What had I missed?

And then I felt him touch me.

It wasn't much. Just his hand, light and hesitant on the small of my back, but my entire world suddenly disappeared. My entire awareness shrank to that one point of contact. I had to force myself to breathe.

"Will?" he asked quietly, his voice barely a whisper.

*Oh God, this can't be happening,* I thought. *How am I supposed to handle this?* I had no idea, but what I told myself was, *Act casual!* "I'm not sure why it's not working," I said, and I couldn't believe how much my voice shook.

"Don't worry about it." And then he took that last tiny step toward me. I couldn't see him, but I felt it when his groin, and there could be no doubt that he was completely erect, pushed hard against my ass.

I froze. I wasn't even breathing. Every part of me was stone still, except the traitorous villain in my pants. He was shifting in a way that was entirely wrong. Or right. Depending on how you looked at it.

"I think I should go," I managed to say, but he didn't move out from behind me. In fact, he pushed closer. I felt his weight against my back and his lips against my neck.

"Please don't, Will," he whispered. His hand slid across my stomach, and my breath caught in my throat. He pushed harder against me and his hand started to inch toward my groin.

"Bran," I made myself say, even though my body was screaming for me to stop thinking and start reacting, "this is wrong on so many levels."

"I'm not a kid anymore," he said softly. And then his hand moved down, cupping my growing erection through my jeans. I heard myself groan. "*Please*," he whispered hoarsely, "don't say no."

I took a deep breath, fighting back the desire that was burning in the pit of my stomach. I turned to face him,

and he backed up, just a bit. Still, he was so very close. We were almost exactly the same height, and I found myself looking into eyes the color of storm clouds. My erection was straining at the zipper on my jeans, and my mind was racing with thoughts of what it would feel like to kiss him. My eyes traveled down his tan, muscular body to the thin fabric of his shorts, stretched even tighter now over his erect cock. A tiny wet spot was forming on the fabric where his tip pushed toward the waistband. I thought about how easy it would be to hook my fingers into that elastic and pull his shorts out of the way. I imagined sinking to my knees in front of him, feeling the weight of his cock against my tongue, that little drop of saltiness in the back of my throat. I imagined his hands gripping my head, pulling me down his length.

"Oh Jesus," I moaned, closing my eyes tight.

"Will?" he asked quietly, and I felt him move closer. I felt his hands pulling me against him, and that tempting bulge pushing against my own. I felt his breath on my cheek and then his lips against my ear. "Please let me touch you," he whispered. But the voice I heard was the voice of the boy in my memory, young and gangly, and it horrified me.

"I can't do this!" I said, pushing him away. "I can't!"

I turned and fled his room, practically running, and nearly knocking his sister over in my hurry to get out the front door.

"Will, wait," I heard him call, but I sure as hell didn't stop.

\* \* \* \* \*

Upon reaching the safety of my own apartment I slammed the door shut and leaned against it as if I had to hold the entire world at bay.

What now?

There was a terrible tightness in my groin, the almost painful feeling of having been so close and yet finding no release. I couldn't get him out of my head: the sight of his erection straining against the fabric of his shorts, the feel of his hands pulling me close, the sound of his voice in my ear whispering "*Please let me touch you.*"

I ripped my pants open and grabbed my still erect cock, determined to grant myself some type of relief. But then came the memory of him as a kid, only seven years ago, gangly and awkward, sitting on the side of the pool, saying, "*Hiya mister!*"

I stopped short, feeling sick to my stomach and

terribly unclean.

A cold shower. That was what I needed. A cold shower, and a beer. Or maybe a six-pack. It was Saturday and I didn't have to work the next day. Normally Saturday night meant going to the bar and getting laid, but I wasn't sure I could face it. I wasn't sure I would be able to keep my mind from straying to him, to Bran.

Why me? That was the thought that kept going around and around in my head. Why me? Bran was eighteen, built, and completely gorgeous. He could go to a bar downtown and pick up the man of his choice in a matter of minutes. So why in the world would he want a thirty-five year old mechanic like me?

I was still leaning against the door when he knocked, and I jumped half out of my skin.

"Will?" he called out. "Are you in there?"

"NO!"

"Can I come in?"

"That's definitely not a good idea."

He was quiet for a moment, and then he said, "It wasn't plugged in. That's why it didn't turn on."

It took me half a second to figure out what he was even talking about. *Stereos? We were talking about stereos? Seriously?* "I'm glad you got it figured out."

"Are you really going to make me stand outside?"

"Yes!"

I heard him sigh heavily. "Please, Will. I just want to talk to you."

"That wasn't talking!"

"I know. I . . ." His words trailed away for a moment, and when he resumed, his voice was softer. "I promise to ease up a bit, okay? Just let me in."

"I don't know, Bran . . ."

"I'm not going anywhere, Will," he said, with a hint of laughter in his voice. "You'll have to deal with me eventually."

How many times in my life had I wished a willing partner would come knocking? Now that one had I was afraid to face him. How messed up was that?

I opened the door a crack and peaked out at him. He was still wearing the same shorts, but he had donned a T-shirt too, and I kept my eyes resolutely on his face. "Keep your hands to yourself," I said childishly.

He smiled at me, although it was a sad smile. "I will."

I opened the door and stepped back into the living room, putting as much space between us as I could. He came in, closing the door behind him and leaning against it

just as I had done. He was barefoot. He glanced down at my fly, then grinned at me, blushing. "Feel better?"

I looked down and felt myself blush too as I realized that my pants were still undone.

"No," I snapped as I zipped them.

"I'm sorry if I came on too strong."

"Jesus Christ, Bran. I've known you since you were a kid! Coming on at all is coming on too strong!"

He looked thoughtfully at the ceiling for a minute.

"I didn't realize it would bother you," he said quietly.

"Maybe I should have thought of that, but I didn't."

"Bran, you're still a kid--"

"I'm not, Will. I'm eighteen now, and--"

"There are lots of guys out there who'd be thrilled--"

"I don't want them."

"You can't want *me*, Bran. Not really!"

"There's no time--"

"What do you mean there's no--"

"I've been drafted."

The air seemed to disappear from the room. I felt a terrifying sense of vertigo and I had to close my eyes to keep the room from spinning. "Drafted?" I asked stupidly.

"I leave two weeks from Monday."

*Drafted.* Sweet little Bran, who didn't know how to



swim until he was eleven and finally grew into his feet when he was fifteen and was too damn smart for his own good. It was bad enough that he hadn't gone to college, but now, to be drafted. Sent across the world to that cesspool of a war, possibly to die in the stinking jungle, fighting against the Viet Cong for God knew what.

"Will?" he said quietly, and when I opened my eyes, he was there in front of me, his grey eyes looking into mine. "I have two weeks to live my life, Will. Then it'll be basic training, followed by advanced infantry training, and then I'll start my tour. And that might be *it*, Will--"

"Don't say that!"

"--we both know I might not make it home--"

"Oh god."

"--and anything I want to do in my life, Will, I have to do it now."

That did at least explain his aggressiveness. Still, I wasn't sure it justified the weakening of my will power. "It doesn't have to be me, Bran. There's a bar downtown. I'll take you there. You can find somebody your own age and--"

His cheeks were starting to turn red, but he didn't look away. "I don't want it to be a stranger, Will." He took a step closer. I tried to step back but ran into the wall

behind me. "I could do it in the back room of a bar," he said, "or in some guy's car. Or go home with someone I've never met and hope for the best. But those are things I might regret, Will. Not this. Not with you. I know you'll be . . ." His words trailed away, and when he continued, his voice was just a whisper. "I know you'll show me what to do."

Suddenly the full extent of what he was asking for hit me. I was surprised at the sense of responsibility it instilled in me. "You've never been with anybody before?"

His cheeks were deep crimson now. "I've fooled around with girls a bit, but," he closed his eyes for a moment, looking truly embarrassed for the first time. "I couldn't ever . . . you know . . . Make things work." His eyes met mine again. Looking into them, I saw arousal. But there was something like fear in there too.

"This isn't something we can take back, Bran. You have to be sure--"

"I am!" He reached for me, stopping just before his hand reached my hip. My breath caught in my throat anyway, just anticipating. "Let me touch you now, Will. Please."

Right or wrong, my control was slipping. How many times could I say no? "Bran," I said, and my voice

didn't even sound like my own. "You're so damn young--"

He quit waiting for me to tell him it was okay. He pushed close and my words died in my throat. One of Bran's arms went around my waist. His other hand slid down my back, between my legs, squeezing, rubbing hard between my cheeks, and I moaned. Oh god, I really did want to give in. He pulled me tight against him.

He leaned close, lightly brushing his lips over mine. "Will," he whispered against my lips. "In less than six months, the US Army will put a gun in my hands and make me a killer. If I'm old enough for that, how can I be too young for this?"

And then he kissed me.

His lips were velvety soft, hesitant and sweet, and I heard myself whimper as the last of my resolve crumbled away. I had no power left to protest. The arms holding me were strong and sure, and the chest I felt beneath my hands definitely belonged to an adult, and any memory I had of the person he had been before fled. Maybe my reasons for saying no had been good, and maybe they hadn't. Either way I could no longer muster any conviction for them. Here and now he was a man in every way, and he wanted me. He *trusted* me.

I wrapped my arms around him and kissed him

back, relishing the feel of his hard body against mine. He ground against me and I let my fingers trail downward, finally touching him through the tantalizingly thin fabric of his shorts. Just the lightest touch of my fingertips and he gasped, pushing against my hand. His fingers started to fumble at the front of my pants, and I stopped him.

He looked at me, startled, and I knew he was afraid I was changing my mind again. The mute plea I saw in his eyes made me smile. "Let's go into the bedroom," I said, and the relief on his face was obvious.

He went ahead of me down the short hallway to my room while I locked my front door. Not that I had any reason to expect people to come busting in, but it seemed prudent. I also stopped in the bathroom for the jar of Vaseline. I wasn't sure we'd get that far but it sure as hell didn't hurt to be prepared.

When I finally made it to my bedroom I found that he'd shed what little clothing he'd been wearing. He was lying naked on my bed, and the view from the door of my room was unbelievably arousing. His knees were bent, his feet flat on the bed. There wasn't much hair on his chest, but his erect cock rested on a large patch of thick, brownish-gold curls. The hair trailed away toward his perineum, and the hint I could see of what was beneath was

smooth and hairless. I had every intention of exploring that part of him thoroughly.

But not quite yet.

He watched in nervous anticipation as I undressed. When I was as naked as him I sat across his hips, looking down at him. The Houston heat was starting to permeate my apartment and there was a fine sheen of sweat across his broad chest. Most of my sexual encounters were quick and impersonal. The idea of having an infinite amount of time with him was thrilling, and the realization that every bit of it would be new to him made it even better.

I trailed my fingers down his chest to his navel and heard his breathing speed up in response. My fingers continued downward, following the faint treasure trail to his thick patch of curls. He tried to arch toward my hand, but with my weight across his hips he couldn't move much. He moaned, arousal and frustration fighting for dominance, and I couldn't help but smile. I remembered how it felt to be young and so impatient.

I leaned over and flicked my tongue over his nipple. He still smelled like soap from his shower, yet his skin was already a little salty. I sucked the sensitive flesh into my mouth and rolled it gently between my lips and he whimpered a little. I moved to the other one, running my

tongue in circles around it first, and then nipping at it lightly with my teeth.

"Oh god," he moaned, arching against me. His hands made fists in the sheets at his side.

I moved up so I could look down into his eyes.

"You can tell me to stop anytime," I told him.

He shook his head. "I won't."

"But you can," I stressed. "Anytime."

"Okay."

"Or if you need me to slow down."

"Okay."

I kissed him lightly and felt him tense beneath me.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Can I touch you now?" he asked.

I laughed before I could stop myself. "I thought we were past that."

He didn't smile back. He looked nervous, but undeniably aroused. "Will you do that again?" he whispered.

I smiled as I moved back down to his nipple.

"This?" I asked as I took it in my mouth again, squeezing it between my lips.

"Yesss," he breathed as he grabbed my hair with one hand, pushing himself against me. I increased the

pressure, biting just a bit, and the air hissed out between his teeth. "Oh god, I had no idea that could feel so good," he said breathlessly, and I moved to the other side.

I teased him lightly with my tongue for a moment before nipping with my teeth. I bit him harder this time. He gasped, froze for a fraction of a second while that hint of pain turned to pleasure, and then he moaned, low in his throat. Both of his hands gripped my head, pulling me tighter against his chest as I teased his sensitive flesh with my teeth.

He was panting hard, grinding his erect cock hard against me, and I might have been able to let him finish just like that but I wanted to give him more. Better to let this wave roll back out to sea than to let it crest so soon. I pulled away and sat up so I could look down at him. His nipples were hard, slightly damp, and bright red against the smooth tan skin of his chest. He was unbelievably gorgeous, his grey eyes needy, begging me for more.

I moved off him, positioning myself so I was lying between his legs, and started to slowly kiss my way from his nipples down to his smooth, flat stomach. He sighed, and his breathing slowed again as he relaxed. When I glanced up at his face his eyes were closed, but there was no doubt in the world that he was enjoying himself. I

moved all around the thick curls of his hair, breathing in his heavy, musky scent, kissing him, nipping him. My cheek brushed his cock, and he gasped, straining toward me, his hands clenching the bedsheets at his sides.

I moved lower to his perineum. I caressed him there, first with my fingertip, and then with my tongue. He groaned, a deep sound low in his chest, as I sucked on the thick cord of muscle. I was dying to follow that smooth, pink flesh downward but I stopped myself. *One thing at a time.* This first time needed to be completely for Bran, and that particular area was one he might not be expecting me to touch just yet.

I put my tongue on the thick root of his cock and slowly, leisurely moved up. I left a wet trail up the loose flesh of his sac to the base of his shaft, then slid even more lazily up to flick my tongue over the sensitive spot just below his slit.

"Will," he hissed. Bran grabbed my head, his hands knotting urgently in my hair.

"Not yet," I told him. I used my fingers to lift his cock so it was pointing toward my mouth. I kissed the end of it and felt him shiver from the anticipation. There were salty beads of moisture at the tip and I licked them off before slowly slipping my tongue around his ridge, over



and over, making smooth deliberate circles. His calm breathing quickly became ragged, and his moans became whimpers.

"Will," he said again. There was more urgency this time and I knew he was close, far closer than he really wanted to be, but unable to stop the tide that was bearing down on him. I decided I had teased him enough.

I sucked the head of his shaft into my mouth, stopping just below the ridge and sucking hard. He cried out and tensed beneath me. Luckily I knew exactly what he was going to do, even if he didn't. His hands pushed my head down and his hips pushed up. He shoved his cock deep into my throat as he came, his erection pulsing against my tongue. I sucked harder, swallowing fast. I knew exactly how amazing it felt to have your pleasure ripped out of you in just that way.

Bran cried out again, "*Oh god!*"

My own erection was grinding against the bedsheets beneath me and I debated using my hand on it. But only for a moment. It was enough for now to have given something to him.

"Will?" he asked shakily. Bran's hands left my head and I pulled away so I could look up at his face. I thought he would be happy, but instead he looked worried. "Oh

god, Will, I'm so sorry--"

"Why are you sorry?" I asked, quickly moving up so I could look down into his face.

"I don't think I should have . . . while you were . . ."

I managed to keep myself from laughing at his discomfiture although I couldn't stop myself from smiling.

"I knew what was going to happen." I saw him relax a bit.

"What about you?" Bran asked, reaching for my cock. I pushed his hand away.

"Later," I said. I leaned down to kiss him and saw the look of trepidation in his eyes. I moved slowly, giving him plenty of time to stop me. But he didn't.

His reluctance to kiss me after what I had just done lasted only a moment. Once his tongue found mine he moaned again and his arms went around me, holding me tight. He kissed me hard and seemed almost to relish the flavor of his own seed on my tongue.

When I pulled back and looked down at him I was glad to see that he really was smiling this time. "Holy shit, that was amazing," he said, and I laughed as I rolled off of him. It was getting uncomfortably hot in my room and it was better to lie next to him than on top of him.

We lay there in silence for a while, staring at the ceiling, while he caught his breath. I still couldn't quite

believe it was happening. I did my best to keep my mind off the Bran I had known before -- and I really did have to separate them very firmly in my mind into two different people: the Bran who was an awkward kid, and the Bran who was very much an adult. An unbelievably sexy adult at that.

I started thinking about earlier in his bedroom -- his shorts, and his persistence, and my hasty retreat -- and found myself laughing. "Did you really buy that stereo out of the paper?" I asked.

"No," he said, and although I wasn't looking at him I could hear the smile in his voice. "It's mine. Brought it home with me from the ranch and hadn't hooked it up yet. Figured it was as good a way as any to get you into my room."

"Dirty trick, Bran,"

He laughed. "Maybe, but it was all I could think of. I've never tried to seduce anyone before."

That made sense. It wasn't as if guys like us had opportunities every day. "How did you know about me?" I asked, because I tried very hard to keep a low profile.

"I was afraid you'd ask me that."

I turned my head to look at him. He was smiling at me, but there was a light blush creeping up his cheeks.

"Why?"

He turned away from me, rolling on his side so he could reach over the edge of the bed to the bottom drawer of my bedside table. The drawer where I kept my magazines. I didn't have many, maybe a dozen dog-eared copies of *Physique Pictorial*, *Young Adonis*, and *Grecian Guild Pictorial*. Bran pulled one out and handed it to me. "I found those when I was fourteen," he said simply.

"How?"

"I was snooping."

The matter-of-fact confession made me laugh.

"What were you looking for?"

"Nothing in particular. I was bored. You were gone for Christmas and I was bringing in your mail. I didn't want to go home. So I started snooping, and I found those."

"I guess I should have hidden them better," I said, although it had never really occurred to me that I might need to.

He laughed. "By the time I was sixteen I couldn't wait for you to go on vacation so I could sneak in here and look at them. I thought about stealing one but I was too afraid of getting caught." Bran was lying on his side, facing me, with his head propped on his hand and his cheeks were starting to turn red again. "I used to come in here just to

jack off," he said. "I'd think about you, doing the same thing, looking at the same pictures." His eyes drifted closed, and his voice became lower. "It really turned me on, thinking about you. Thinking about you getting off." Bran opened his eyes again. He reached across to me, putting his hand on my chest, his fingers teasing the hair there. "I know this all seems sudden to you, Will. But I've been thinking about you for a very long time."

"I had no idea."

He smiled. "I have a good poker face." He rolled away from me, sitting up on the edge of the bed. "I should go. I promised to do some work around the house for my ma today, and then she's taking me out for dinner."

"Sure thing." I was surprised at the disappointment I felt at the thought of him leaving.

And like he was reading my mind, he asked, "Can I see you tonight?"

"Of course," I said.

"It's Saturday," he said hesitantly. "You usually go . . . somewhere." The look he gave me was a question. Of course, he was right. I usually went to the bar on Saturdays.

"I'll be here," I said, and he smiled.

"I can meet you at the pool."

"That sounds perfect," I told him.

I lay there, watching him put his clothes back on. It didn't take long. He'd only been wearing a T-shirt and that treacherous scrap of cloth that roughly resembled shorts. Once he was dressed, he crawled across the bed on his hands and knees and looked down at me. "Thanks, Will."

"Don't thank me, kid," I said. "It's not exactly altruism on my part."

He smiled at that. "I'll see you tonight."

\* \* \* \* \*

Since I arrived at the pool ahead of him I started my laps. Not long after a woman showed up with two kids. She sat in a lawn chair reading while the youngsters splashed and played. When Bran showed up, we said hello and then pointedly ignored each other, floating on opposite ends of the pool. It seemed like they would never leave, but eventually the woman rounded them up declaring it past their bedtime, and off they went, protesting all the way.

It was completely dark by then, and the weak lights around the perimeter did little to illuminate the pool itself. I was in the deep end, hanging onto the edge so I didn't have to tread water. I could see just enough in the low light to know Bran was swimming very slowly in my direction.

"Tell me you're not having second thoughts," he said.

"No," I told him. "Are you?"

He laughed, a low throaty laugh thick with arousal, and already my body was reacting to him. "Definitely not," Bran said, still slowly moving toward me. He was only a few feet away now.

"We can go upstairs," I said.

He shook his head. "No."

"Surely you don't want to go to your room?"

He laughed. "God, no!" By now, he was in front of me. Bran reached over my shoulder, grabbing the wall behind me to steady himself. "I want to stay here," he said suggestively.

"Here?" I asked uncertainly. My pulse started to race just thinking about it.

"Yes." He pushed closer. His erection ground against my own and I moaned. He kissed my jaw, and then his tongue touched my ear. "I told you I used to think about you," he whispered, and his free hand slid between us to rub against my erect cock. "This is something I've wanted to do for a long time."

"What if somebody comes?" I asked nervously.

His laugh in my ear was soft and throaty. "That's

the idea."

"I meant to the pool!"

He chuckled again and his hand gripped me harder.

Oh God, he turned me on! My ability to protest the locale was fading fast. I felt his fingers pull on the waistband of my swim trunks, and his hand slid inside, scalding me with its heat. His fist found my bare cock and I gasped.

"You can see the gate," he said as his hand started to move on me. "Just tell me if I need to stop."

In the end I wouldn't have known if anybody walked through the gate anyway. A bomb could have gone off ten feet away and I wasn't sure I would've noticed. He hung onto the wall, and I hung onto him. Bran kissed me hard as I slid my hand into his swimming suit.

And then there was only sensation. The lingering humidity of the hot day, the barely-cool liquid of the pool, his frantic breath against my lips, the sound of lapping water mixed with his quiet moans, the feel of his smooth shaft in my fist, and his strong, calloused hand stroking me, squeezing me, teasing me, until I cried out. He silenced me, his lips sealed hard against mine, and then he came too. I had to grab the wall behind me with one arm to hold us up because he couldn't seem to do it anymore.



When the shaking had passed he pulled away a bit. Even in the low light I could see Bran was smiling.

"That was as fun as I imagined," he said, and I laughed. "I can meet you here again tomorrow night."

"I thought your mom didn't let you swim on the Sabbath."

"I'm not a kid anymore," he said, suddenly serious. "Besides, I think swimming may be the least of my sins."

"Are you worried . . . ?"

"No." He moved in and kissed me quickly.

"Goodnight, Will."

"Goodnight, Bran."

\* \* \* \* \*

The next two nights were the same. Bran seemed to love the added anxiety of knowing we were in public with only the dark of night to hide us. It was fun. It had been a very long time since I'd done anything so daring. He made me feel younger than my thirty-five years. But on the third night he asked nervously if we could go to my apartment.

"Of course," I told him, and he followed me quietly up the stairs to my door, and into my room where we both stripped out of our wet suits. He was fully erect, but now

that we were in the light again, he looked nervous. "What is it?" I asked him.

He didn't answer. He grabbed me hard, pushing me down onto the bed, grinding against me. "Will," he moaned, sounding frantic and desperate. "I want . . ." his words died in his throat. His eyes held a question he couldn't put into words, hopeful but reluctant to make such a request out loud.

"I know what you want," I told him.

I rolled us over so I was on top, and grabbed the Vaseline from where it still sat on my bedside table. I scooped a generous amount onto my fingers and reached behind me to prepare myself. He watched me with huge eyes.

"You don't have to," he said quietly.

I laughed. "Don't worry, kid. I've done this before, you know." He looked a little bit annoyed, whether at being called a kid or being reminded that this wasn't my first time too I wasn't sure. I didn't worry about it. I had a feeling he wouldn't be annoyed for long.

I moved myself into position, using my hand to hold him in place against my rim. Anxious anticipation was all over his face and his breathing was ragged. "You won't believe how good this feels," I told him, and before he

could answer I slowly sank down onto him, watching his face the entire time. It was an amazing aphrodisiac, seeing the pleasure of it wash over him.

Bran's eyes closed slowly, softly. His breath caught for a moment, and then he moaned, arching his back and pushing deeper into me. "Oh God, Will," he said quietly, and he gripped my thighs hard, his fingers digging into the flesh above my knees.

I lifted myself up, letting him slide almost all the way out before pushing down onto him again. This time his hands moved higher, to my hips. The next time I lifted myself up he pulled me back down, driving his hips up into me at the same time.

"Do you want to be on top?" I asked, and his eyes snapped open in surprise. He looked at me for a moment, seeming to consider, but then, just barely, he shook his head. "Do you want to get behind me?" The same second of hesitation, but this time Bran nodded.

I rolled off of him and onto my hands and knees, and he moved into position behind me. Nothing happened. I was waiting for him to grab me, to push into me . . . Something. But when I looked back at him, I realized he was still unsure what to do. It was a bit awkward, but I was able to reach behind me and work him into place. I pushed

back against him and his head slid into me.

He moaned, finally grabbing my hips and driving himself in deep. And then he froze. "I'm afraid of hurting you," he hissed, and although I couldn't see him, I could tell his jaw was clenched tight as he fought what he wanted but thought he shouldn't take.

"You won't," I assured him. I reached up so I could brace myself on the headboard. "Go ahead, Bran," I said. "As hard as you want."

There was another second of hesitation, but then he finally started to move. Bran moved slowly at first. Out and in a couple of times while he found his rhythm. And then he groaned, a low, hoarse sound. "Oh god, Will," he said. And then, in the blink of an eye, he just let loose, holding hard to my hips and slamming into me again and again. I braced myself with one hand and used the other to stroke my own erection. Our evenings in the pool had been fun and intimate. This was something else entirely -- something completely primal -- and I was lost to it as much as he was, no thought at all. Only that urgent sense of pain and pleasure, one on top of each other, part of each other, neither one enough to erase the other. I didn't even know which was which, but both of them pushed me further, pushed me higher.

"Bran," I cried out, and then I came hard. As I clenched around him he came too, crying out loud enough I was half-worried the neighbors would hear. I was still shaking when he pulled away and flopped down on his back next to me. There was a sheen of sweat across his brow and he was breathing hard. The smile on his face was enough to light up the whole room.

"Oh my fucking God, that was incredible," he said in awe.

I laughed. "Says the guy who doesn't have to wash the sheets," I joked.

He stretched as he chuckled, sighing happily, and then surprised me by asking, "Can I sleep here tonight?"

"Won't your mom wonder where you are?"

He shrugged. "She might wonder but she won't worry. She thinks I'm seeing someone."

"You are seeing someone," I said lightly.

Bran laughed again. "Right. But I'm not telling her who. Not yet, anyway."

I looked over at him in alarm. "What do you mean, *'not yet'*?"

"I mean, not yet." He shrugged. "I don't want to tell her now. It'll freak her out, and if I don't make it home . . ."

"Don't you say that!"

"I don't want her memory of me to be ruined. But if I do come home . . ."

"What?" I prompted.

"I won't spend my life hiding Will." *Not like you.* He didn't say those last three words, but I heard them anyway.

"What else can you do?"

"Live my life."

I shook my head. "It's not that easy."

"Why not? If I can face a tour in that rotten jungle, then I can face whatever I need to when I get back--"

"People don't like it, Bran. They say it's a sin--"

"I know what they say. But there's places we can go, Will, where it's more accepted. Like in San Francisco, and LA." He was getting excited now, and I could tell he'd been thinking about it a great deal. "That Black Cat Tavern incident really got people talking. And then Stonewall. The Gay Liberation Front has spread beyond New York. There was an article in *Time Magazine* just last October urging greater tolerance--"

"It also said homosexuality was a '*crippling maladjustment*'," I snapped.

Bran sighed in frustration. "I worked with a black guy on the ranch. He was always talking about a '*race war*'.

Well our people are fighting a war too, Will. There are men like us living their lives out in the open. Not hiding at all. Every single one of them is a soldier in our war. When I get home, I'm not hiding anymore either. I'm going to fight."

"Fight who?" I asked in exasperation, but he seemed nonplussed.

"Everyone."

"For what?"

"The truth," he said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"I think you're nuts."

"Maybe," he said, "but I don't care. When I get home from Vietnam, I'm going to San Francisco. Our people in Cali are going to have one more soldier."

\* \* \* \* \*

Every morning when I woke, the first sound I heard was his breathing on the other side of the bed, and I would smile. And a heartbeat later would come the realization that it could not last.

"Seven more days," I said to myself when I woke the following Sunday. A knot of dread formed in my stomach.

Bran was on the other side of my bed, still asleep. He looked younger when he was sleeping, and I started to feel a nagging sense of guilt. I angrily pushed it away. He was eighteen. This was what he wanted. In seven days, the US Army would take him away.

I hated the whole fucking world for that.

I reached over with my foot and nudged him. "Bran, it's almost nine."

"Oh shit," he moaned, rolling onto his back and stretching. "I gotta get home."

"I know."

Bran's mom didn't ask too many questions. After the first time he spent the night, he told me she had commented that he had a right to *sow his oats* while he could. Still, he tried to spend time with her during the day. He would, after all, be leaving her too.

In seven days.

He eventually dragged himself out of bed and got dressed. He hesitated in my bedroom door. "I'll see you tonight, right?"

"Of course," I said, and he smiled.

Seven more days.

\* \* \* \* \*



That night, we went for our usual swim. We played like kids as the sun went down, and once it was dark, he pinned me against the side of the pool, his legs wrapping around mine as he kissed me. I ran my hands down his back, under the waistband of his swim trunks, gripping his firm ass as he ground against me. I always left it up to him whether we finished like this, or in my apartment. Or both.

Tonight, he whispered hoarsely in my ear, "Let's go upstairs."

Once in my room he stripped out of his suit and lay down on his back like he had the first night, with his knees bent and his feet flat on the bed. His skin was tan and his muscles pronounced on his young frame. His erect cock lay on his thick brownish-gold curls, and below it, the root of his shaft seemed to point downward like an arrow, drawing my eye lower between his cheeks, hinting at what I could just barely see below.

"Jesus, Bran," I breathed. "You're incredible."

"What do you mean?" he asked innocently, and all I could do was shake my head.

I crawled onto the bed, between his legs, and he spread them wider for me. Up until tonight it had been only blow jobs and hand jobs, and him fucking me. But tonight I

hoped to show him more.

He smelled like chlorine, but his thick, musky scent was there too. It was very familiar by now. I put my tongue on his perineum and licked him from there to the head of his cock. He grabbed my head when I reached the end, trying to push into my mouth, but I pulled away. "Not tonight," I teased.

"I'll do it for you, if you want," he said. He never came right out and said exactly what he meant, but I knew. He was offering to give me a blow job instead.

"Not tonight," I repeated, and the look of confusion on his face was priceless.

I moved back down between his legs, licking and sucking his perineum. I pushed on the back of his thighs, raising his ass toward me just a little. Moving a little lower, I flicked my tongue over that smooth hairless skin, then slid it down, down, to what waited below.

I felt him flinch when my tongue touched his rim. Such an instinctual response when you're not used to being touched there. I smiled. "Relax," I said quietly. "You're going to like this."

I put my tongue on his rim again and very lightly circled it, over and over. Slowly, I felt his muscles relax and heard his breathing start to change. I used my hands to

pull his cheeks apart and increased the pressure, pushing against him a little, and he moaned softly. I wasn't sure about other guys, but I knew that for me the edge closest to the front was the most sensitive spot, so I concentrated there, flicking my tongue over it again and again. He relaxed the rest of the way, pushing toward me. I let my tongue penetrate him, just barely, and he gasped in surprise. But he didn't tense up. Bran let his breath out in a rush, and then his legs spread wider. He put his hands under his own knees and pulled them up, giving me much better access.

Such a fast learner.

I pushed my tongue deeper into him and he moaned again.

"Oh god, Will," he breathed, and he pushed toward me, allowing me to reach a little deeper. He let go of one knee to grab his own cock, but I pushed his hand away.

"Hand me the Vaseline," Bran froze, looking scared, and I slapped him playfully on the flank. "Trust me," I said, and he started to breathe again. He handed me the jar, and I went back to licking him, teasing him and pushing my tongue into him until he quit worrying about what I was planning and started to enjoy it again. He was panting hard, pushing toward me, moaning softly. He tried again to grab his own cock, and again I pushed his hand

away.

"Will!" he hissed in frustration.

I laughed. "Soon," I told him as I got some Vaseline on my fingers. My saliva might have been enough but I wanted to be sure. The last thing in the world I wanted was to hurt him.

I put my slick finger against his hole, applying just the tiniest bit of pressure. He arched his back, moaning low in his chest. I expected to have to go very slow, but it seemed he had other ideas. He reached up to the headboard and pushed, and the entire length of my finger slid into him much sooner than I expected. He moaned again, and his muscles tensed instinctively around my finger. I waited patiently, stroking his thigh with my free hand. It was only a heartbeat or two and then he relaxed with a sigh.

I began moving slowly, sliding my finger in and out. I flicked my tongue over the head of his cock as I did, never sucking him in all the way, just tasting the salty drops that formed there, teasing him while I let the anticipation build. I moved my tongue down his shaft, over his sac, then sucked one testicle into my mouth. The timbre of his moans deepened as I rolled it gently with my tongue. I moved to the other one, licking and sucking it as I had the first, and still my finger moved slowly in and out of him. I moved

back to the head of his cock, flicking my tongue over his slit but refusing to let him push into my mouth. He whimpered a little and I looked up at him, my finger still moving in him.

"Oh god, Will!" he cried out in desperation, and I knew he was close.

I pulled my finger out, and he moaned, this time in frustration. When I pushed back into him I used two fingers, sliding them slowly in as I sucked his cock deep into my mouth. As my lips drifted down his shaft, his hands gripped my head and his fingers knotted in my hair. I felt him start to tense and so I reached that last little bit with my fingers, pushing against the secret spot inside.

There was no way the neighbors didn't hear him that time. He cried out, a ragged, wrenching cry, part surprise and part relief as he was pushed over the edge, bucking against me, his tight shaft spasming around my fingers as I swallowed again and again until at last he fell back, panting.

"Holy fucking mother of God, what was *that*?" he gasped out.

I had to laugh. His amazement at all things sexual made each act fun for me in a way I hadn't experienced in a very long time. I was starting to think I should seek out

virgins more often. "Cool, huh?" I asked.

"*Cool*" doesn't even begin to describe it," he said.

I moved up and lay next to him and he slid his hand across the bed to rest it lightly on my hip.

"What about you, Will?" he asked.

"I'm good," I told him, and it was true. I'd spent most of my adult life being happy if I could get lucky once a week. We were averaging twice a day. I had absolutely zero complaints.

He sighed happily and stretched, then turned onto his side to look at me. "It's okay if I stay the night, right?"

"Of course." It was surprising how quickly I'd grown accustomed to waking up with him next to me in my bed. I wished we could go on like this forever. I wished I could keep him here, hide him, keep him safe. "Bran," I said, and the words were out of my mouth before I even knew it, "we could go to Canada."

"No."

"We can leave tonight--"

"No."

"I'll go with you if you want, or you can just take my car--"

"No," he said more emphatically this time. "I'm not running away."

I sighed, because it was what I had expected. Bran wasn't the type to hide. "Okay."

"You could come with me to California."

"What would I do there?" I asked, and he laughed.

"Cars break down in San Francisco, too, you know."

I wasn't really sure what to say. I settled for, "We'll see."

We fell asleep side by side. Six more days.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bran's mom had taken his last week home off work. He spent his days with her while I worked, but once I got home he belonged to me. It was Friday night and we had just come from the pool, landing in my bed. I started to move down on him, but he stopped me. "Will," he said hesitantly, "I want . . ."

His words trailed away, but it was there in his eyes. The nervous anticipation I had been waiting for. "I know what you want."

I went slow, holding him and kissing him, using my fingers to prepare him, and finally, pushing gently against him. His eyes clenched shut, and I stopped, not wanting to

hurt him. "Bran," I said gently, "look at me." He did. He opened his eyes and looked into mine. "I'll stop if you want," I said, but he shook his head.

"No!"

Looking into his grey eyes I saw nothing but unwavering trust. It touched something deep inside of me. "I love you," I said suddenly, surprising even myself. Was it true? I didn't know. I'd never been in love before, and I wasn't sure that was what this was either. But I knew I didn't want him to leave. I knew the thought of him in some jungle on the other side of the world was more than I could bear.

"I love you, too," he said. And then he grabbed the back of my head and pulled me down, kissing me hard. And as he did, he pulled against me, pushing down, and I slid easily all the way into him. We rocked together, our legs intertwined, our breath mingling.

It was the most perfect moment of my life.

Only two more days.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sunday night was the hardest.

Bran would be leaving the next morning. His mom



was driving him to the train station. Part of me wanted to go with them but I knew it would only make it harder. His mother would be there, crying and watching us. We would have to pretend that there was nothing unusual between us. I didn't want our last moments together to be a lie. Instead he would walk out of my door at seven a.m. and if all went well I would see him again in eighteen months. If it went wrong . . .

I refused to think about *that* at all.

We made love, and there was no doubt that's what it was. Even if it hadn't been any other time before. It was slow and desperate and heart-wrenching all at the same time. I wanted to tell him again that I loved him, but I couldn't. Feeling him in my arms, his skin slick against mine in the Houston heat, his ragged cries echoing in my ear, I felt like my very soul was dying. I couldn't stand to let him go.

Afterward, he clung to me as he never had before, and I felt him shaking. I felt the tears on his cheeks. "Will," he whispered, "I'm so scared."

"I know," I said, fighting my own tears. I wanted to be strong for him. "It's okay to be scared," I told him. "But you're going to be fine."

"Promise me you'll come with me," he said.

"Promise me that if I make it home--"

"You will!"

--you'll come with me to San Francisco."

"Let's just get through this, Bran."

*"Promise me!"*

"I promise," I said, not knowing if it was true or not. I wasn't brave like him, or strong. I wasn't sure if I could do it. But it didn't matter, by the time he got home he wouldn't want me anyway. What did matter was getting him through this moment. "I promise." He cried in my arms, shaking from the force of his sobs. In that moment the man I loved became again the kid he had once been.

I held him tight, silently mourning them both.

\* \* \* \* \*

It happened six months into his tour.

We managed to keep in touch through his training, and even after he was deployed I received an occasional letter. But then came the day someone knocked on my door. And when I opened it, his mother. Her face was wet with tears, her eyes full of grief, and my entire world fell into pieces around me.

The funeral was the worst. I hated the guns. Guns

had taken him from me, why did they have to shoot them at his funeral? There were protestors too. They detested the war he'd never wanted to fight, and knew nothing of the one he did. I hated them for thinking they knew anything at all. Bran was better than any of them. *And he was gone.*

I sat at the back through the service, watching his family at the front. I watched them fold the flag and hand it reverently to his mother. *I should be there*, I thought selfishly to myself. *I loved him too.*

Afterward, his mom thanked me for coming. "You were like a brother to him," she said, as if it was a consolation. And again my heart broke inside my chest.

I wanted to shout to the world that I was not a brother, I was not just his friend. I had watched him and helped him and taught him. I had held him and loved him. I had known him as no one else ever had.

Or ever would.

Why should I have to hide it? Why should I have to lie?

Never in my life had I cried the way I did that night. I cursed God, the army, the Viet Cong, and everything else I could think of. None of it did any good. I wished I was brave like him. I wished I was strong. I wished I could make a difference.

Bran would have told me I could. He might have even made me believe it.

I thought about it all night, and when this morning dawned hazy and bright, the Houston heat already seeping into every crack and corner, I had a plan. Bran was right. Cars break down in San Francisco too.

They should have had him, but they'll get me instead. I'm not hiding any more. Our people in Cali are about to have one more soldier.

~ The End ~

## **About the Author**

Marie Sexton was always good at the technical aspects of writing but never had any ideas for stories. After graduating from Colorado State University, she worked for eleven years at an OB/GYN clinic. She quit the clinic at about the same time she started reading M/M romances. At some point in the ensuing months the static in her head cleared and her first story, Promises, was born.

Marie lives in Colorado. She's a fan of just about anything that involves muscular young men piling on top of each other. In particular, she loves the Denver Broncos and enjoys going to the games with her husband. Marie has one daughter, two cats, and one dog, all of whom seem bent on destroying what remains of her sanity. She loves them anyway.

You can find Marie at <http://MarieSexton.net> or on Facebook.