A photograph of a man from the chest up, wearing a black ribbed zip-up sweater over a black t-shirt. He is holding a black smartphone with both hands, looking down at it. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting. The text is overlaid on the lower half of the image.

A
Trouble
Halved
Andy Eisenberg

This story is dedicated to a friend from high school who walked past my Grandmother's front porch, two hundred miles from where we both lived at the time, surprising me to no end and inspiring this story more than thirty years later.

ALLEN slammed the door to his bedroom, knowing even as he did it that it wouldn't win him any points with his mother. Even so, it slammed with a satisfying thunk hard enough to rattle the pictures on the wall.

Throwing himself on his bed, he wished he had a time machine, that he'd go to sleep and wake up nine months in the future, that he was already in college where he could actually start his life and *do something*. High school and living under his parents' thumbs was getting harder each day.

Without warning, his door opened and his mother stood in the doorway, her face red. "Allen Matthew, if you slam this door *one* more time, not only will you be grounded for a week, but I'll lock you out of your computer."

He seethed, wanting to scream that he was eighteen, that he had bought his computer with money *he* had earned, that she didn't have the right to do anything to him anymore. In the end he remained silent, knowing anything that he said would set her off again. He'd asked to skip the annual Christmas visit to the grandparents in Pennsylvania, but she had hit the roof. "Okay, Mom. I won't slam it anymore."

"Thank you. Please pick up your room before you go to bed. It looks like a pig sty." She slammed the door on the way out. Not the satisfying loud thunk he'd managed, but enough to make a point. It was her house, and she could do as she wished.

Allen saw his laptop sitting on his desk and pushed himself off of his unmade bed to pick it up, kicking the dirty clothes that littered the floor under the bed. His mother would see the difference, but he wasn't *really* doing what she'd asked. He'd dig out the clothes someday and throw them in the laundry.

He logged on and started to e-mail Dusty about Christmas but pulled out his cell instead.

"Hey, what's up? What'd your Mom say?" Dusty sounded excited, and Allen hated to disappoint him.

"No go, man. I got a lecture on family responsibilities, and she was all 'the grandparents are getting older' and 'they're not going to be here forever' and 'I could give them one week out of my busy, important year.'" Allen built up a good head of steam, telling his best friend all of the things that he wished he could have said to his mother. He continued without allowing Dusty to say a word, "You know what, though? It's not just a week! It's every holiday, every summer. I miss *everything* here while we're in fuckin' Pennsylvania."

Dusty said, "That bites. I'll tell my Mom you can't come. Real sorry, man"

"In less than a year, though, we'll be away at college and won't have to worry about it." He wished that they would be going to the same college, but even if they had been best friends for most of their lives, they had different interests. Dusty would be going to art school while he would be going the University of Virginia to study Chemistry.

"So what do you do up there, anyway?"

“Nothin’ much. We used to go out and play in the snow and build snowmen and all that shit, but there aren’t many kids there anymore. And who wants to build snowmen, anyway? It’s all old people there, and they just sit around and look at old pictures and talk. No broadband. Boring. As. Shit.”

Dusty, ever the optimist, said, “You can always take your laptop and hide in your room and watch movies.”

“Yeah, maybe. Listen, man, tell your Mom thanks for me, okay? I gotta get this paper finished before tomorrow.”

“Sure. Later, man.”

Instead of working on his English paper, Allen logged onto Facebook and checked to see if Greg had added any new pictures. Once part of the group Dusty and Allen had played with when they were younger, Greg had drifted away when they got to Junior High. While Dusty concentrated on art and Allen had set his sights on science and math, Greg had tried out for the football and baseball teams and excelled. He was too busy with his jock friends, college scouts, and local media reporters to spend time with his geeky childhood friends.

Allen clicked on one of the new thumbnails and was so lost in the tanned skin, blue eyes, and blond hair that he almost missed the chat invitation that popped up at the bottom of the screen. Expecting Dusty, he clicked without looking to see who it was.

GregHarmon: Allen, u there?

Allen stared at the tiny picture in the chat window and felt his heart race. Greg. *Did he know that Allen was staring*

at his pictures? How did he know? He stared at the screen and fought the urge to close his laptop and pretend he hadn't seen. Greg really couldn't see that he was looking at his pics, right?

GregHarmon: Hey, Allen, u there?

AllenSchneider: Yeah, what's up?

GregHarmon: Missed Physics today, u have the homework?

Allen was disappointed that it was only a pedestrian request and embarrassed that he had built the tenuous contact of an instant message into something more. He had hoped that maybe—*maybe*—Greg wanted something more personal.

GregHarmon: Still there?

AllenSchneider: Yeah, sorry. No homework. Study chap 16 for a quiz tom.

Allen sent his response and clicked on the next thumbnail, showing Missy—just as perfect and blond as Greg—kissing his cheek as Greg smiled into the camera. Allen had to find a way to get rid of this ridiculous crush and move on.

GregHarmon: :)

Expecting that that would be the end of the conversation, Allen clicked on the next picture and immediately right clicked to save it. Greg was standing in the sun, looking directly into the camera, blue football jersey thrown over one shoulder, freckles just visible over his chest and cheeks.

GregHarmon: So, what're u up to?

AllenSchneider: Nothing much. Family shit.

GregHarmon: Still go to Pennsylvania for Christmas?

AllenSchneider: Yeah. That's the family shit. Wanted to stay home this year.

GregHarmon: Hey, college next year, right? Almost there, bud. Where in PA?

AllenSchneider: Salemville. Your family still go to PA too?

GregHarmon: Yeah, Altoona

AllenSchneider: That's only half an hour away from Salemville

GregHarmon: Yeah? Which way?

AllenSchneider: Go to New Enterprise and take a left. Saw your game last week. Great TD.

GregHarmon: Thanks! The team was great. Makes me look good.

AllenSchneider: Going to play basketball again?

GregHarmon: Yeah. You should try out. You're almost as tall as I am.

AllenSchneider: Takes more than being tall, though. Think I'll stick with Chemistry :)

GregHarmon: Baseball? You used to be pretty good. Our last year, dude! Try out for the team and it'll be like old times.

AllenSchneider: Yeah, maybe.

GregHarmon: Go for it! Hey, I gotta study. What's your cell?

Incredulous, Allen typed out his cell number and signed off. He rolled to his back and ran his hand idly over his chest and belly, his fingers passing over the ridges of his ribs. He wished those ridges were the hard muscles of his abs. Greg was right; he had grown a lot the last year and had passed six feet, but no matter how much he exercised, how much he ate, he couldn't gain any bulk. He looked like a scarecrow with his wide shoulders and skinny limbs.

He closed his eyes and saw the last picture of Greg looking directly at the camera—at him—and moved his hand lower, imagining it was Greg's hand, hovering over the growing bulge in his jeans. Imagining their bodies meeting, grinding together, he rolled his hips and pressed harder, letting it build. He heard the snick of the door just as he was sliding his fingers under the waistband of his jeans and managed to roll over before his mother stuck her head in the door. "Mom! I told you to knock!"

She ignored him and looked around the room. "Not perfect, but better. You didn't add your schedule to the calendar. Are you working tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Sorry, I forgot. I'm working tomorrow and Tuesday."

"We're leaving for Pennsylvania at noon on Wednesday. Did you make sure they know you're not available for the next two weeks?"

Allen rolled his eyes. "Yeah, they know." He paused, "Mom, please reconsider! We'll be going up again in the spring, and I can see everyone then."

She shook her head, “No. Our decision’s final. You’re still part of this family. Like it or not.”

Once she had shut the door, Allen set his alarm clock for early in the morning, undressed, and crawled into bed. Eyes closed, visions of Greg playing across his mind, he moved his hand lower to finish what he had started earlier. His English paper could wait until morning.

THEY were just crossing over the border into West Virginia when Allen’s phone pinged, signaling a text message. He drove for a few more miles, aching to take his phone from his pocket to check to see if it was Greg. His mother was in the passenger seat though, and she would probably take the phone from his hand and throw it out the window if he tried.

When he saw the sign for the welcome center, he turned in, pulling to a stop in front of the rest rooms. “Hey, Mom, maybe you or Christian can drive for a while. I’m kinda tired.”

She looked at him suspiciously, “Are you feeling okay?” She actually put the back of her hand on his forehead.

He pulled away, looking around to see if anyone in the welcome center had seen. “Mom, I’m fine. Just tired.”

His brother, a year younger and anxious to drive any time, interrupted. “Mom, Dad’s let me before. I can drive! Please?”

She nodded her assent, and they all got out of the car. Allen walked directly to the restroom, where he bypassed the

urinals and entered one of the stalls before pulling his phone from his pocket.

GregHarmon: Hey, man. On your way to PA?

He was grinning to himself, trying to think of something wonderfully witty to say, when Allen was startled by someone slapping the stall door with the flat of his hand. His heart was still racing when he saw Christian's shoes under the door.

Allen wrenched the door open to find his brother grinning at him, "Hot text from your girlfriend?"

"Fuck off!"

"Mom says it's time to go."

"Be right there. I'm not finished yet." He slammed the stall door and tried to think of a response, but finally he gave up and left the graffiti-covered stall.

Once in the car, Christian tried to give him a hard time about the text, but gave up once Allen inserted his earbuds and ignored him.

AllenSchneider: What's the key to a good Christmas dinner?

GregHarmon: You're slipping - can see that one coming from a mile away :)

AllenSchneider: So? Waiting for an answer here...

GregHarmon: Okay, I'll play - The turKEY. What do you get if you divide the circumference of a pumpkin by its diameter?

AllenSchneider: Thinking....

AllenSchneider: Still thinking...OK, I give up

GregHarmon: Pumpkin pi

AllenSchneider: *Groan*

GregHarmon: Gotta go. Later?

AllenSchneider: PLEASE! You gotta save me, man!

He fell asleep soon after, waking with a start when he heard his brother yell in triumph. "Perfect! I got the drool and everything!" He was sitting in the passenger seat, and Allen realized he must have slept through a stop to change drivers.

Allen said, "Shut up! I wasn't drooling!" He wiped his mouth just to make sure and sat up straighter to look around. Recognizing the rolling hills of central Pennsylvania, he knew they were close to his grandparents' house.

When they turned into the driveway, he saw his grandmother come out on the porch, and all of his complaining about the visit was forgotten. He ran to the porch to hug her. "Gran!" She hugged him back and he breathed in the warmth and comfort of his childhood. Brown sugar and cinnamon, a cup of hot cocoa after playing outside in the cold. Maybe visiting wasn't that bad after all.

She released him and he opened the screen door before walking into the overly warm air that signaled a day of baking. Allen walked through the living room, through the kitchen, and out onto the closed-in back porch without pausing, his mouth watering in anticipation. There was an impressive array of fudge, fresh bread, and at least a half a dozen painted tins that he knew held home-made cookies. There were no pies yet, but he knew his grandmother would

bake them closer to Christmas day. Until then, there was enough to keep everybody happy. He opened tins at random and pulled a few cookies from each one before stuffing a soft chocolate chip cookie into his mouth and walking back into the kitchen. Ready to defend eating cookies so close to dinner, he waited for his mother to say something, but she ignored him.

The evening was typical for his grandparents' house, relaxed and informal, and full of good food. The collected relatives were scattered everywhere, alternately catching up on the latest news and reading. He never knew which aunts, uncles, and cousins would be visiting, but he knew the house would be packed by Christmas morning.

Disappointed when bedtime came and went without a text from Greg, he finally gave up and followed everyone else upstairs, happy he had a room to himself, at least until everyone else arrived. He undressed and slid between the sheets, pulling the handmade quilt over his shoulders and sinking into the pillow. Sliding his hands idly over his body, he thought about Greg, seeing his blue eyes and wide grin. Why had his old friend started talking to him again? Their high school was so small it would have been impossible not to have some contact over the past few years, but all of the recent texts and phone calls were new. New and exciting.

The soft chirp from his phone came just as he was drifting off, and if it weren't for the possibility that it was Greg, he would have ignored it until morning.

GregHarmon: Still awake?

AllenSchneider: Barely

GregHarmon: Sorry. Missy was here, and I couldn't get rid of her.

AllenSchneider: You wanted to get rid of her?

GregHarmon: Yeah, promised I'd text you.

AllenSchneider: :)

GregHarmon: You have internet access?

AllenSchneider: No :(

GregHarmon: IMs easier than text

AllenSchneider: Sorry

GregHarmon: It's okay. I'm on Google SMS chat. I'll talk, you listen.

AllenSchneider: Good time with Missy? ;)

GregHarmon: Not really

AllenSchneider: ???

GregHarmon: She NEVER shuts up.

AllenSchneider: Dude, thought you'd be too busy to talk.

GregHarmon: She wishes.

AllenSchneider: ???

GregHarmon: We're friends. That's it.

AllenSchneider: Everyone thinks you're a couple.

GregHarmon: Everyone thinks you and Dusty are a couple too.

AllenSchneider: NO! That would be like incest or something.

GregHarmon: But you could be? If you weren't best friends?

GregHarmon: Still there?

GregHarmon: Allen?

AllenSchneider: Dusty's not gay.

Allen knew, even as he pressed send, that he was coming out to Greg, but it took several moments for the panic to set in. His breathing rapid, he held the phone to his chest as he stared unseeing at the ceiling. Had Greg started talking to him again just to find out if he was gay? Would he and his jock friends push his head into a toilet? Beat him up? He didn't want the memories of being bullied to be the last he remembered of his high school years. Being a geek was okay, because he faded into the background except when someone wanted help with homework, but being out? He'd have a target painted on his back.

He vaguely heard the ping of another text but couldn't make himself pick up the phone to look at it. Unable to lie still, he got out of bed and pulled his jeans on, shivering in the cold air of the old farmhouse. Allen walked downstairs, trying to find somewhere far enough away from the bedrooms that he didn't need to risk being overheard, and finally ended up on the back porch.

Still unable to make himself look at Greg's text, he dialed Dusty's number.

"lo?"

Allen whispered, "Dusty, its Allen. You awake?"

"No, it's the middle of the night!"

“You gotta wake up, man! I just came out to Greg.” Dusty was the only one who knew that he was gay, but if Greg was right and everyone assumed that he and Dusty were a couple, they had guessed anyway.

“Greg who?” Dusty mumbled.

“Dusty, you gotta wake up. Just for a minute. I just came out to Greg Harmon.”

Allen could hear rustling and when Dusty spoke again, he sounded more coherent, “Start from the beginning. Aren’t you supposed to be in Pennsylvania?”

Shivering, Allen explained what had happened. “What am I supposed to do?”

“You didn’t tell me what he said.”

“I don’t know! I can’t look.”

Dusty snorted. “Dude, grow a pair already. Read it.”

“Dusty, they think we’re *both* gay.” He ignored Dusty’s suggestion—his order—that he read the text.

“So? I know I’m not. Doesn’t matter what they think. If they think we’re gay and they haven’t shoved us into lockers or screamed at us in the hall, they’re probably not gonna start because Greg Harmon knows for sure. Hang up, read the text, and go from there.”

“You think?” Allen saw the kitchen light come on, “Thanks, man. I gotta go.”

He had just slid his phone into his pocket when his grandmother opened the door to the back porch. She held the knitted afghan from the back of the sofa and didn’t look

surprised to see him standing in the dark, surrounded by her baked goods.

Draping the afghan around his shoulders, she said, “You’ll catch your death of cold standing out here. Why don’t you bring some cookies in, and I’ll make you something hot to drink.” She turned to go to the stove and asked, “Are you too old for cocoa?”

He heard the muffled ping from his phone as he sat at the table and huddled under the afghan. “Cocoa sounds just right, Gran. Thanks.” Allen watched her as she measured old-fashioned cocoa powder and sugar into a pan. When he started to get up to get the milk, she put a hand on his shoulder and pushed him gently back into the chair.

Standing in her pink quilted bathrobe, stirring the cocoa as it heated, she hummed quietly to herself. She had always indulged her grandchildren, letting them build forts out of the dining room chairs and a closet full of bed sheets, allowing them to eat their Christmas candy before breakfast, cooking them all of their favorites. The cocoa steamed, and she poured it into two mismatched cups before carrying them to the table.

Wrapping his hands around the warm cup, Allen huddled deeper into the afghan and closed his eyes, suddenly bone tired.

“Drink up, honey.” She took a sip of her own cocoa and opened the tin of cookies. “What’s got you so tied up in knots that you’re standing on my back porch whispering into that cell phone of yours?”

Allen sipped his cocoa and savored the sweet chocolate that brought back memories of a time when his only worry

was whether there would be snow on Christmas morning. “Nothing.”

“Now, Allen, that wasn’t a ‘nothing’ sort of look on your face when I opened that door. I’ve been raising kids and helping to raise grandkids for fifty years, and there’s nothing that I haven’t seen or heard, nothing that talking won’t help. A trouble shared is a trouble halved.”

Watching her dip a sugar cookie into her cocoa to soften it, he realized that she had come down without her teeth. He smiled and said, “You have a saying for everything, don’t you?”

“That’s what they teach us in grandma school. It makes us look wise, whether we are or not.” Her pale blue eyes twinkled, and he had the absurd urge to climb into her lap like he used to do when he’d skinned his knee.

Allen smiled wanly at her and took a cookie from the tin, more for something to do than because he wanted it. After taking a small bite and forcing himself to swallow, he put the rest down on the yellow tablecloth.

“Did I ever tell you about my youngest brother?”

“Uncle Nick? He’s the one who died before I was born, right?” He was sure Gran had a reason for changing the subject so abruptly, but he was relieved that she wasn’t pressuring him to tell her what was bothering him. She’d get around to the point of her story sooner or later.

She nodded and continued, “He was the sweetest boy, full of life and so handsome. Remind me one day, and I’ll pull the pictures out.” He knew he wouldn’t have to remind her; they came out at every visit. Allen remembered the

picture of his uncle Nick wearing his Marine dress blues, looking tall and straight-backed with very dark hair. “He was drafted in ’64, and it just about broke your great-grandmother’s heart.”

“He went to Vietnam, right?”

“Eventually. He went to basic training, and he seemed so different when he came home on leave before going overseas. Taller, stronger, still our sweet Nick, but reserved and quiet. After he was shipped overseas, we watched the news every night, seeing the fighting in the jungle and Walter Cronkite giving the body counts. Always more of their dead than ours. Such propaganda!” She shook her head, “Such a waste. So many young lives lost, and now there’s a whole new generation....”

“Uncle Nick came home, though, right?”

Nodding again, she continued, “After he was discharged, he moved back home and worked at the Miller’s farm while he tried to figure out what he was going to do. That boy could fix anything: take it apart and put it back together good as new. A couple of months after he was discharged, one of his service buddies—Jerry—was discharged too and came straight here. He was another good looking boy. Man, really. Guess you can’t call someone who just spent four years in the jungle carrying a rifle a boy.”

She was looking off into space, as if she were seeing the events unfold as she spoke. With a wistful sigh, she said, “When Jerry walked through the front door, you’d have thought the sun rose and set on that boy, the way your uncle’s eyes lit up. Jerry’s too. They stood in the living room, just staring at each other for the longest time, and then,

never mind that the whole family was gathered 'round, they were in each other's arms. Just holding on tight.

"I was newly married, with your mama on the way, and I knew that feeling. That feeling when you're with someone you love and you just can't get close enough, no matter how tight you hold on." She stopped and focused on Allen again. "I don't think that anyone else noticed, not then, anyway. Oh, the family saw them hugging, but I don't think that they really *saw*."

Allen whispered, "You mean, they were... gay?"

"Well, I don't know that they'd have used that word, but my, did they love each other. I was living here with your great-grandmother while your Gramps was in the army, and I'd watch them together, see the way they looked at each other, found them kissing in this very kitchen late one night when I couldn't sleep with worrying."

Now sitting on the edge of his chair, completely entranced with his Gran's story, Allen asked, "What happened?"

"Well, it didn't take everyone else very long to catch on to what they meant to each other and most folks just didn't understand. They were so busy worrying about two men being together that they didn't see the love, didn't see how they treated each other and made each other happy. Folks started talking, and they decided that Jerry would go home to Iowa and Nick would join him in a bit."

She stood up and went back to the stove, picking up the pan to refill their cups before taking the pan to the sink. Her usual smile was gone, and she looked older than he had ever seen her.

“Did he go to Iowa?”

Gran shook her head sadly and said, “No, he was killed in a farm accident not long after Jerry left.”

With growing horror, Allen asked, “It really was an accident, wasn’t it? I mean, nobody...?”

“It really *was* just an accident. He was driving an old tractor with those little wheels at the front, and it rolled over. Nobody’s fault.”

“Gran, why did you tell me about Uncle Nick?”

Her smile was back, “Well now, I was thinking that maybe you might be like your uncle Nick, and maybe that had something to do with your phone call and why you were hiding on my back porch in the cold.”

“How did you figure it out, Gran?”

“I could claim magic grandma powers, but I saw you looking at a picture of a young man on your phone, and I could see how you felt about him. Do you want to tell me about it?”

More relieved than he could imagine, he told her about his crush on Greg and their series of texts, amused that he first had to explain what texts were. When he finished his story, she asked, “Did he text you again? Is that what those little beeps have been?”

Allen looked down at his empty cup, “Yeah, I think he’s been texting me. I’ve been too chickenshi—scared to look.”

She pattered around the kitchen, putting things away and cleaning up their cups and cookie crumbs and, on her way upstairs, stood behind him and pulled his hair into a

loose ponytail. “Such pretty hair.” She kissed him on the top of the head and said, “Check your phone, honey. Worrying is like a rocking chair: it gives you something to do, but it gets you nowhere.”

Allen pushed back from the table and folded her in his arms, holding her tight. “Thanks, Gran.”

“It was just a cup of cocoa and a little chat.” She patted him on the cheek and turned to go up the stairs.

Still huddled in the afghan, he walked into the darkened living room and curled up at one corner of the sofa, staring at his phone. Even as he stared at it, he heard another ping. Taking a deep breath, he finally opened the first text.

GregHarmon: Glad you're not a couple :)

Allen couldn't figure out what that meant. Did Greg miss what he had said and think that he and Dusty were both straight? Was he happy because Allan would be available if he wasn't with Dusty? Still confused, he opened the rest of the messages.

GregHarmon: Allen, you there?

GregHarmon: Hey, man, you okay?

GregHarmon: Allen? I'm going to keep texting until I hear from you.

GregHarmon: Getting worried, here. Text me. Call me. Something.

GregHarmon: Allen?

AllenSchneider: Why?

GregHarmon: ALLEN!!! Thought I was going to have to find your grandmother's number and wake everyone up!

AllenSchneider: Sorry, freaked out a little.

GregHarmon: You okay now?

AllenSchneider: Yeah. Why?

GregHarmon: I was worried, thought you fell out of bed and hit your head. :)

AllenSchneider: I'm wiped. Bedtime.

GregHarmon: Night

"ALLEN?" He vaguely heard his name as someone shook his shoulder. "Allen? Go to back to bed. It's still early."

He opened his eyes to see that he was still in the darkened living room. "Gran? What're you doin' up?"

"It's time to get moving, put coal in the furnace, and get the house warm before anyone else gets up." She smoothed his hair with her wrinkled hand as she talked.

Remembering their conversation last night, he sat up abruptly, "Gran! You're not going to tell anyone about... you know?"

"No, that's your job. You'll tell them when you're ready. You're parents are good people, though. They'll be okay."

Snorting, he said, "Yeah, right. They're on my case all of the time."

“Oh, honey. You’re all doing your jobs. Yours is to be annoying, and theirs is to get mad enough at you that they can send you off on your own. It’s the only way a parent can stand to see their babies leave.”

“Yeah, maybe.” He stood up and gave her another brief hug. “I’ll go down and shovel coal, Gran. Just give me a second to go get my shoes.”

“Thanks, honey. Cocoa this morning?”

“No, thanks. Coffee?”

A few minutes later he walked down the narrow basement stairs, remembering to duck at the bottom. The basement looked the same as he remembered, filled with the wringer-washer and rinse tub that she still used for her laundry and the shelves full of home-canned fruits, vegetables, and jam. The low door at the end of the room led to a smaller room that held the furnace and coal bin.

He ducked through the door and discovered he could no longer stand upright in the low room. This room, lit by a single bulb’s glow that didn’t reach the corners, had terrified him when he’d been younger. The furnace was massive, reaching almost to the ceiling, spouting ducts that had reminded him of monstrous arms snaking in different directions before disappearing into the ceiling.

Visiting his grandmother was almost like visiting another time. He could remember her replacing the furnace and choosing another coal furnace over his parents’ objections, liking the “good coal heat”. She liked the old ways and wasn’t interested in updating.

He shook the ashes down and shoveled more coal into the furnace, enjoying the heat in the dark room, promising himself he'd remember to come down later and clean the ashes out for his grandmother. Hoping that they'd have a few more minutes to talk before everyone else got up, he walked back up the stairs to find the kitchen full. Everyone had gotten up and either sat at the table holding cups of coffee or had staked out one of the floor registers, standing over a grate and trapping the warm air under their robes. It was a scene that he'd witnessed every winter while visiting, and it was familiar and comforting.

Breakfast was informal, some making their own, his grandmother making others, most everyone making a mad dash when the single bathroom opened up. Allen, not in a hurry to take a bath, threw yesterday's clothes on to tackle the list of chores his grandmother had for him.

After carrying dusty boxes of Christmas decorations down from the attic and hiking up the side of the mountain to cut a tree, Allen was bored. They wouldn't decorate the tree until Christmas Eve when his father and the rest of the family who hadn't been able to leave work early would arrive. His grandmother was baking, and his mother and Christian had gone into Bedford to do some last-minute shopping. He put his jacket and hat on and went to explore the outbuildings.

The house had been in his family for generations and had originally been part of a working farm, but the land had been sold long ago, leaving only the house, barn, chicken coop, and smoke house. He vaguely remembered chickens running around when he was a toddler, but none of the other buildings had been used for their original purposes in

at least fifty years. They were filled with a wonderful collection of old furniture and appliances, lamps, and the detritus of years of living in the same place. Sifting through the buildings for hidden treasures was one of his favorite things to do.

He avoided the smoke house, which was closest to the house and filled with flower pots and yard tools, in favor of exploring the barn. His grandmother claimed it was unsafe, and he did have to admit that it had begun to lean to one side, but it still felt solid under his feet, even if he could see through the floor in spots to the level below.

One side was little more than an open space with old leather harnesses and other bits of tack left over from the days that there were horses on the farm. That side now held a 1956 Chevy that had once belonged to his uncle Nick. As far as he knew, it hadn't been driven since his uncle's death. After his grandmother's revelations the previous evening, he looked at it more closely. Had his uncle ever kissed another boy on the wide bench seat? Had he buckled to peer pressure and dated girls?

He tried the driver's door, but he couldn't get it to open. Giving up, he went around to the passenger side and was able to pull that door open with a loud screech. The inside of the old car smelled musty and dirty and looked like it had been the host to a small army of mice, but he slid in, ignoring the dust. Closing his eyes, he imagined the car restored to its original glory, with two-toned paint, shiny chrome, and a powerful V-8 engine.

Inexplicably mourning the death of someone who he had never met, Allen wondered what his uncle's life would have

been like if he hadn't been killed. He thought about Jerry and wondered if their love, born out of war, could have survived. Without thinking about it, he pulled his phone from his pocket to text Greg—the first time that he would initiate a conversation.

AllenSchneider: You there?

GregHarmon: Yeah, you okay? You seemed kind of freaked last night

AllenSchneider: I was

GregHarmon: What are you doing?

AllenSchneider: Sitting in a 1956 Chevy.

GregHarmon: Sweet! Restored?

AllenSchneider: Do mice nests count?

GregHarmon: :)

GregHarmon: What are you doing later?

AllenSchneider: Just hanging around with the family, looking for something to do

GregHarmon: I go to New Enterprise and take a left?

AllenSchneider: ?

GregHarmon: I'm in Altoona, want some company?

AllenSchneider: You didn't tell me you were up here!

GregHarmon: Just got here this morning...so?

AllenSchneider: Sounds good. Yellow house on the corner. Can't miss it.

“Shit!” Allen wrenched the door open and ran up the gentle slope to the house, praying no one was in the bathroom. He still wore yesterday’s clothes, covered in dust and grime from rummaging through the attic and the barn.

Relieved to find the bathroom empty, Allen ran water into the claw-foot tub as he peeled his clothes off and looked in the mirror. He had a smudge of dirt on one cheek and a day’s worth of stubble darkening his face. Remembering he’d left his shaving kit and his clothes upstairs, he looked around the bathroom and saw his grandfather’s straight razor and a bright pink razor lying on the ledge above the bathtub. Not brave enough to try either, he gave up on shaving and stepped into the hot water.

A few minutes and a lot of splashing later, he wrapped a towel around his hips and braced himself before opening the bathroom door. He expected a chorus of comments from the family, but he made it to the door at the bottom of the stairs without anyone noticing his nearly nude body. Running lightly up the curved stairs, he wondered again why Greg had contacted him. Whatever the reason, Allen was sure that it wasn't the same thing that he wanted and warned himself not to get too wrapped up in the renewed friendship.

He pulled a pair of black boxer-briefs over his narrow hips and followed them with a pair of jeans. The coal furnace usually kept the house at T-shirt temperature, but with Greg coming over, he pulled a heavy sweater from his duffel to hide his skinny arms. He was just pulling a brush through his long hair, wondering if he should listen to his mother and cut it, when he heard tires on the gravel driveway. Not taking the time to pull it into his usual ponytail, he left his dark hair loose so it brushed his shoulder blades.

Opening the door at the bottom of the stairs, he saw his grandmother pushing the screen door open, revealing Greg grinning confidently on the front porch.

Greg introduced himself to Allen's grandmother. "I hope it's okay to visit. I'm a friend of Allen's from school."

She smiled at him and said, "Of course! He's run out of chores, and I think he's rattling around bored without all of his gadgets. We're pretty old-fashioned around here."

"Well, you'll be prepared when there's a storm, right?"

"We can handle anything! I think that Allen should be down in a minute. Sit down and make yourself comfortable." She turned around and, seeing Allen walking through the door, winked at him.

Trying not to blush, he said, "I'm here, Gran." He looked around the big living room, at its mismatched furniture and worn rug, wondering what Greg thought. His parents were both doctors, and their house had always been a showplace. Mentally shrugging, he said, "Hey, Greg. No trouble finding it?"

"Dude! There can't be more than twenty houses here. I could have just looked for Virginia license plates."

Now that Greg was here, Allen didn't know what to do. There was no Xbox, no PS3, and only two channels on the small TV. He was beginning to think it had been a mistake to invite Greg. "Yeah, it's pretty small. Hey, you wanna go see the old Chevy?"

"Yeah! Dad's been restoring old cars for a few years now. I help him sometimes. I'd love to see your Chevy."

Laughing, Allen pulled his coat on and said, “This one probably should have been sent to the junkyard a long time ago. It’s been sitting there so long it’s probably hopeless.”

As they walked down to the lower end of the yard to the barn, Allen pointed out the buildings and talked about spending summers visiting.

“I remember that you were gone most of the summer when we were younger. We only came up once in a while. What did you do up here?”

“Went fishing, played badminton, ran through the sprinkler to cool off, and helped Gran and Gramps with chores when we got a little older. Sometimes the neighbors’ grandkids were visiting too, and we’d have these huge games of hide-and-seek that took over the whole town. Mostly I think it was a way to give Mom a break from the two of us.” He shrugged, embarrassed at how wholesome and boring it all sounded.

Greg said, “It sounds great.” He glanced over and caught the incredulous look on Allen’s face and added, “Really, Allen. Beats spending the summer with babysitters.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

They reached the barn and walked through the doors Allen had left open in his rush to get cleaned up earlier. Greg walked around the car, running a hand along the rear fins, the fenders, and the hood. Slapping the dust off of his hands, he asked, “Has it always been in here? It doesn’t look like there’s any rust on it at all! Do you know how long it’s been since it was started?”

“It was my uncle Nick’s, and I don’t think that anyone’s driven it since he was killed in the sixties. What’s that, forty years?” Allen pulled the door open, and Greg ducked into the roomy interior and slid across the bench seat to sit behind the steering wheel.

Greg put his hands on the wheel and grinned at Allen, “Wish we could go for a drive in it! You know, my dad would kill to get his hands on this. Garaged forever and in great shape. You know what the engine’s like?”

“No idea. I don’t even think Gran or Gramps knows where the keys are after all this time.” Allen watched Greg lower the visor and lean over to feel under the seat.

Smiling triumphantly, he sat up with a handful of metal. Instead of keys, though, he held a pair of dog tags on a chain. Handing them to Allen, he leaned over again, still searching for the keys.

Allen looked at one of the dog tags and, as he expected, it had his uncle’s name stamped on the metal plate. The second, though it should have been the same, had been stamped, Holt, Jerry M. He closed his hand over the dog tags and felt the same pang of loss he’d had while sitting in the car an hour earlier.

“Hey, I found....” Greg exclaimed, but trailed off when he saw Allen’s face. “You okay?”

“Yeah, Gran was just talking about my uncle last night and it made him seem kinda real, even though I never got to meet him. I wish I had.” He was quiet for a brief moment before changing the subject. “You found the keys?”

Greg looked questioningly at him before answering. “Yeah, I don’t know if it’s safe to try to start or not, though. It might hurt the engine after sitting for so long. Do you think your grandmother would mind if my father asked about buying it?”

“I don’t know. Couldn’t hurt to ask. She can always say no.” He looked across at Greg sitting behind the wheel and remembered his questions about Uncle Nick kissing another boy in this very car. Greg’s blond hair was so light it almost looked white in the weak light streaming through the dusty windshield, his eyebrows and eyelashes almost disappearing against his tanned skin. Those blue eyes focused on his own face and Allen realized that he’d been leaning forward as if he was going to kiss Greg. Panicked, he wrenched the door open for the second time that afternoon and stepped out of the car as he asked, “You wanna see the rest of the place?”

Allen led Greg through the barn, and they spent the afternoon opening trunks, pulling drawers out of old dressers and opening cupboard doors, looking for anything interesting. They were on the second floor in the old hayloft when, after carefully climbing the rickety stairs one at a time, Greg let out a whoop.

“What’d you find?”

“Holy shit! Look at this!” Greg held up an old paperback with yellowed pages and a deep red cover. Allen stepped over a rotted board and took the book from Greg’s now grimy fingers: *The Sex Revolutionary* by D. Royal.

Allen leafed through a few pages and felt himself blush. “I didn’t know they wrote things like that in the old days!” He read a few paragraphs and said, “Had to be Uncle Nick’s. The

only other option is one of the grandparents, and I don't even want to go there!"

Greg took the book back and fell onto an old sofa, stirring up a cloud of dust. "Come on, sit down. We can read it together."

"You're kidding, right?" Allen couldn't imagine reading something that looked like it was one long sex scene with revolving partners of any gender. He felt himself stir at the thought and knew that he'd be hard as a rock before they were finished with the first page.

Greg grabbed Allen's arm and pulled him down to the sofa in another cloud of dust. "Come on, it'll be fun. It was published in"—he opened the cover—"1967. We can see what was so revolutionary forty-three years ago." He flipped to the first chapter and moved closer to Allen.

"Um, I don't think...."

Greg closed the book and laid it on the torn cushion beside him before turning to face Allen. Time slowed as the cluttered, dusty barn disappeared and Greg's face slowly moving toward him was the only thing Allen saw. Greg's intense blue eyes focused first on Allen's lips, then moved to his eyes, seeming to gauge any reaction before moving even closer.

Feeling Greg's breath on his mouth, all thoughts of consequences ignored, he leaned forward to meet Greg's lips. The kiss was soft, tentative, their lips brushing and moving together before opening to feel the barest touch of Greg's tongue against his lower lip. He was vaguely aware of Greg's hand moving through his hair to settle against the back of his neck, pulling him closer as their kiss deepened.

“Allen! You guys in here?”

It was Christian. Allen stood abruptly, breathing heavily, not sure where his brother was. Still trying to process the fact that Greg had just kissed him, he didn’t answer. Christian called again, “Hey, Allen! You here? Gran said that it’s time for dinner. Allen!”

Greg answered for him, “Yeah, we’re up here. We’ll be there in a minute.”

“Greg, Gran set a place for you. Are you staying?”

Raising his eyebrows in question, Greg looked at Allen and waited for his nod before answering, “Yeah, I’m staying.” He pulled Allen in for a quick, hard kiss and pulled back, grinning. “I’m *really* happy that you and Dusty aren’t a couple!”

“But—you and Missy? You and all of the other girls?”

“Just friends.” He pulled Allen by the hand to the top of the stairs, “Go ahead. I’m going to grab the book.”

Allen walked carefully down the stairs holding tightly to the banister, knowing that if the stairs collapsed the banister would go with them, but he was unable to relax. He’d heard too many warnings from his grandmother about the barn. When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he looked through the area that held the old Chevy and through the double doors to the yard beyond. There was at least six inches of snow on the ground, and it was still coming down. The kitchen windows glowed through the falling snow in the grey dusk.

“Greg, it’s snowing!” Allen had moved along side of the car and was standing at the open double doors.

Greg appeared a few seconds later and, as they stood watching the heavy snow fall, took Allen's hand. "Do you have a shovel down here? There's no way we'll get the doors closed without clearing it first."

Allen looked around and answered, "I don't know. I think they're all up in the smoke house." He blurted out, "I have so many questions for you."

"We'll have time later." He grinned and dropped a quick kiss on Allen's cold lips. "Come on, maybe we can kick it away." They attacked the heavy snow with their feet, eventually managing to get the doors closed and latched. By the time that they ran up to the house, their hair was covered in snow and their cheeks were red from the cold.

Entering through the basement door, Allen said, "I want to check the furnace and make sure that it doesn't need coal." Greg followed him and watched as he shook the ashes down and added more coal.

"How often do you have to do that?" Greg held his hands to the heat radiating from the open door.

Allen shrugged, "Depends on how cold it is. Gran knows a lot more about it than I do; she's been heating this way her whole life."

"No thermostat?"

Allen laughed. "No. You feel the temperature start to drop, and you add more coal. You just have to be careful not to add too much, or you'll catch the chimney on fire. Not a good thing. Come on. I'm starved."

"Me, too. D'you know what's for dinner?"

“No idea. Whatever it is, it won’t be fancy, but there’ll be a lot of it, and it’ll taste great.” He looked over his shoulder as he ducked through the door into the main room of the basement. Allen reached the bottom of the stairs and warned Greg about the low beam at the bottom of the stairs.

They walked through the door at the top of the steps and into the short hall leading to the warm, fragrant kitchen. “Hmm, smells like chicken and waffles.”

Greg whispered, “What are chicken and waffles?”

“Think the school’s Chicken á la King but over waffles and about a million times better.” They turned the corner into the main part of the kitchen to see that everyone else was already at the table, Allen’s grandmother with an ancient waffle-maker steaming at her elbow.

“Well, will you look at the two of you? What in the world did you get yourselves into?” She continued without expecting an answer, “Go on and get cleaned up. There’ll be plenty left when you’re done.”

They went into the bathroom and stood side-by-side in front of the pedestal sink and looked into the mirror, seeing their dirt-streaked faces and the snow melting in their hair. Allen looked into Greg’s eyes in the mirror and was thrilled to see admiration and desire. He still didn’t know what had changed, but he was slowly starting to believe that it was real, not part of some elaborate joke.

A few minutes later, reasonably clean and dry, they joined the family at the table. Allen’s grandmother took another steaming waffle from the iron and filled their plates.

Greg took a tentative bite and rolled his eyes in pleasure. "This is great. Can I have about a dozen more?" He ate hungrily, making little sounds of pleasure that Allen felt to his core.

Christian and his mother ate quietly, his brother's sullen look hinting at an earlier disagreement. His grandfather was quiet, happily listening to the conversation around him as usual, and his grandmother looked knowingly between Allen and Greg, her eyes twinkling. "Did you find any treasures in the barn?"

Greg, missing her innuendo, started talking about the car. "The car was amazing! My father's been restoring cars for a few years, and I'm sure he'd love to take a look at it. If you'd be willing to sell it, that is. Do you know what kind of shape the engine is in?"

"I'm sure Allen told you that that was my brother Nick's car. He was an amazing mechanic. I'm sure that it was in perfect condition, but it was more than ten years old when he was killed, and it hasn't been started since. I don't even know where the keys are."

Greg smiled triumphantly and pulled the old key ring from his pocket. "We found them under the front seat. I hope it was okay that we looked at it." He laid them on the table next to her plate. "May I have another waffle? They're really good!"

She slid another waffle onto his plate and passed him the chicken and gravy, "Of course! I was just telling Allen some stories about his uncle last night. I haven't really thought about selling the car. It's been there for so long, like all of the junk down there. If your father wants to look at it,

I'm sure that would be fine. Is he in Pennsylvania for Christmas too?"

"Yeah, he and Mom are in Altoona. We've got to go back the day after Christmas, though. They both have to be back at work on Monday."

She looked suspiciously at him, "Did you let them know you were going to be here for dinner?"

"Yes, ma'am. If it's okay, I'll call Dad after dinner and let him know about the car. Maybe he can look at it before we go back."

She looked doubtful, "You'll be lucky to get back on Sunday. The news said we were supposed to get twelve to sixteen inches, but I think we're going to get at least twice that, the way that it feels out there. That reminds me. After dinner, could you two go down to the smokehouse and bring up the shovels and fill the kerosene lanterns? As heavy as that snow is, we might lose power before morning."

By the time the waffle maker had cooled and the tins of cookies had been opened, Greg was completely charmed by Allen's grandmother and had her giggling like a schoolgirl with his questions about her stories. She pulled the curtain back and looked out the window toward the street light at the corner. "We'd better clean up and get ready for this storm. It's getting bad out there. Greg, I think it would be better if you stayed off of the roads. We've got extra beds. Why don't you call your parents and stay here?"

Christian was pressed into service to clean the table and help with the dishes while Allen and Greg made their way through almost a foot of snow to the smokehouse. Flashlights in hand, they entered the dark building and

found the kerosene lanterns and matches in an old Mason jar. Allen lit one of the lanterns and tucked the flashlight into his pocket. “No electricity in any of the outbuildings.”

“I’d forgotten how great your family is. Your grandmother and all of her old stuff is a trip.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Allen sounded doubtful.

Greg grabbed him by the biceps and said, “I’m serious. Do you know that I go days without seeing my parents? They have patients and hospital shifts that are more important than being home for dinner. We’ve got a great house and lots of stuff, but sitting down with your family like that for dinner? Having a connection to your family’s past? It’s great!”

“Yeah, I guess.” Allen repeated.

Greg smiled. “Well, I love it. Now, let’s get the lanterns and shovels. If we shovel the walk tonight, it’ll be easier to finish it tomorrow when the snow’s over.”

“Sounds good.” Allen turned to reach for the shovel, but felt the heat of Greg’s body against his back a moment before Greg pushed his hair aside. Strong arms circled his body, holding him tight as Greg nuzzled into the back of his neck.

“Hmm, I’ve wanted to do that since the first day of school.” He nuzzled and kissed the skin at the base of Allen’s neck and opened his mouth against the spot between shoulder and neck. Allen arched his back and felt Greg hard against his ass. “I’d sit behind you in physics and English and see those shoulders and all of that hair.” Greg nipped at his neck and groaned. “Then you’d turn around to talk to

Dusty, and I'd see your face and, God, you're gorgeous. I was so fucking jealous."

Afraid to move, afraid to break the spell that he suspected was a dream, he stood still as Greg moved against his back and strong hands slid around his hips to circle his waist. He couldn't suppress a moan as he felt Greg's hips press harder and his warm mouth open against Allen's neck.

Unable to resist, he turned around and pressed against Greg, finally feeling the muscular body he'd dreamed about, fantasized about. He slid his hands against lightly stubbled cheeks to the back of Greg's thick neck to pull him in until their lips met again, open and hungry.

Allen lost himself in the feel of Greg's lips and the taste of his mouth: cinnamon and sugar and heat. He leaned back to rest against the old wood-burning cook stove, feeling the cold metal through his jeans as he spread his knees to allow Greg to slide between his thighs. Gripping lean hips, Allen pulled him in close, aching for contact. Looking for skin, he slid his hands up under Greg's sweater and had the briefest touch of soft skin before Greg yelped and pulled back.

"Shit! Your hands are like ice!"

Breathlessly, Allen said, "Sorry. Got carried away and forgot we were standing in the cold."

Greg pulled him to his feet again, kissing him briefly. "Come on. We need to get the shovels and the lanterns before they think we got lost."

They each grabbed a shovel from the pile of garden spades and hoes leaning against the corner and started clearing the snow from the narrow sidewalk. Allen grinned to

himself as they steadily moved the heavy snow. Greg wanted him! Greg. Wanted. Him.

It only took a few minutes to work their way around to the front of the house. Finished with the walk, they leaned the shovels against the front porch. “We forgot the lanterns. I’ll run down and get them.” Allen was back a few seconds later, and they climbed the few steps to the front porch where they took off their boots and brushed the snow from their shoulders. “I think Gran was right about the snow. The walk outside of the smokehouse is already covered again.”

They walked into the living room, where the older generations were reading, and Christian was stretched out on the floor working on a jigsaw puzzle. They had been working on the same puzzle for years, putting it together on a sheet of Plexiglas they’d found in the barn, sliding it under one of the beds between visits. When they finally finished, Allen expected there would be more than one missing piece, but it gave them something to do during their visits.

As soon as his grandmother saw them walk through the door, she put her book down and headed for the kitchen. “I have cocoa on the stove. You must be frozen.”

“Thanks, Gran. I’m going to go up and change first. Greg, I think I have some sweats that might fit you.”

“Let me call my folks, and I’ll be right up.”

Allen ran up the stairs, unable to stop grinning, turning the lights on as he went so Greg could find his way. He was pulling clothes out of his duffel when he heard footsteps on the stairs. Expecting Greg’s deep voice, he was surprised to hear Christian ask, “So, is he your boyfriend?”

Stalling for time, Allen repeated, “Boyfriend?” His relationship with Christian had never been easy. Being just under a year apart, they could have been close, but they seemed to be rivals most of the time. Allen didn’t know whether Christian was looking for information or ammunition.

“Yeah, I’ve known you were gay forever. You never clear the history on your computer.”

Allen’s heart beat faster. “Yeah, just ‘cause I went to some gay sites doesn’t mean that *I’m* gay. What are you doing on my computer anyway, and how did you get past the password?”

Christian ignored the questions about the computer, and said, “Yeah, maybe not, but the brand new hickey? When you were outside with a guy? Gay.”

Hurrying to the dresser, Allen pulled his sweater aside and tilted his head. Equal parts embarrassed and thrilled, he had to admit that it was impressive.

“I don’t care either way, man. If you’re gay, I don’t have to worry about you stealing my girls. If you don’t want Mom and the grandparents to know, though, you’d better cover it up.” He sat on the edge of one of the three beds crowded into the large bedroom. “Only you would decide you’re gay and land the hottest guy in school.”

Allen threw a T-shirt onto the bed and pulled a high-necked sweater out of the bag. “What the hell’s that supposed to mean? I didn’t just decide to be gay. That’s not the way it works.”

“I know that! I mean, you’ve had gay shit on your computer forever. You get everything you want, though! New computer? Check. New iPod? Check. New boyfriend? Check.” Christian fell back against the bed with a heavy sigh.

Allen pulled his sweater over his head and checked the mirror to make sure it covered the bright red spot on his neck. “You know, Christian, I *work*. I bought the computer and iPod myself. I didn’t even know Greg was gay until today!”

“Yeah, whatever.” Christian stood up and walked out of the room.

Greg appeared at the doorway seconds later and said, “Hey.” His voice was low and breathless.

“Hey.” Allen moved toward Greg, hoping for a repeat of the scene in the smoke house.

Allowing the briefest of kisses, Greg pulled back reluctantly. “Your Gran’s already poured the cocoa. She said that we were supposed to be there before it gets cold.”

“D’you get a hold of your folks?” Allen handed him a pair of grey sweats.

“Yeah. They’re pissed. Tomorrow’s Christmas Eve, and it’s supposed to be family time. Like they ever cared about that before.” Greg unbuttoned his jeans, lowered the zipper, and started to push them down over his hips.

Eyes glued to the flash of white revealed by the open fly, Allen stood and walked toward the door. “Um, I’ll just, um, just see you downstairs.”

Before joining his grandmother in the kitchen, Allen stopped and pulled the dog tags out of his coat pocket. When he sat down at the table, she sat down with him, her own cup in front of her. “You look happy.”

He couldn’t suppress a grin. “Yeah.” Not quite ready to talk about making out with Greg with his grandmother, he changed the subject. “I forgot to give these to you earlier. We found them in the car with the keys.” He held the dog tags out to her.

She took them from him and looked closely at them. “Nick and Jerry. They wore these all of the time, even though they’d been discharged. I didn’t know they’d traded them around. They were missing after Nick died. I wonder why he took them off.”

“Gran, do you know what happened to Jerry?”

She shook her head, still looking at the dog tags. “No, he came back for the funeral, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone grieve as hard as that boy. We stayed in touch for a while, but we trailed off after a time.” She handed the dog tags back to Allen. “Why don’t you keep them, honey.”

Allen slipped them over his head, feeling the cool chain against the heat of his neck where Greg had marked him. “Thanks, Gran.”

They sat quietly for a moment before Greg walked into the kitchen and sat down next to Allen, their knees pressed together under the table. Allen wrapped his cold hands around the cup and stared into the cocoa, overwhelmed by the events of the past twenty-four hours. His grandfather, mother, and Christian filed into the kitchen, where hot drinks were served and tins of cookies were brought in from

the back porch. Allen was grateful for the quiet conversation that went on around him, stories of past storms and happy family memories that had grown and changed until they only vaguely resembled the events that had spawned them.

Allen smiled to himself; three more people knew that he was gay, and the world hadn't come to an end. In fact, nothing had really changed at all. He felt Greg's leg press more tightly against his and acknowledged something *had* changed. Something that felt good, felt right. He answered the pressure and slid his hand under the table to rest tentatively on Greg's thigh. Grinning, he joined the conversation as he felt Greg's hand cover his.

He ached to be alone with Greg, but the rest of the evening was spent as a family, working on the puzzle, talking or reading, and watching the snow fall heavily. It was a quiet, sleepy evening, and Allen and Christian were assigned beds in the dormitory-style bedroom at the back of the house while Greg was assigned one of the other bedrooms.

He grumbled as his mother hustled them off to bed, but he planned on sneaking into Greg's room once everyone went to sleep, telling himself that he just wanted to talk. In the low-ceilinged back bedroom, he stripped down to his boxer briefs, slid between the sheets, and pulled the heavy blankets and quilts up to his chin. Unless someone added coal in the middle of the night, it would be freezing in the morning.

Closing his eyes, he told himself that he would rest until everyone went to sleep, but the lack of sleep the previous night caught up with him, and he drifted off soon after.

ALLEN woke with a start, the events of the previous day flooding back. He was up and dressed in a few seconds, leaving Christian snoring softly in the other bed. He paused outside of the bedroom where Greg was sleeping, wanting to go in and crawl into bed with him, but knowing that he'd never dare—at least not this early in their relationship. *Was it a relationship? Would it be a relationship?* It hadn't even been twenty-four hours yet. Giving up on his fantasy of waking Greg, he ran down the stairs and opened the door into the living room.

He found his grandmother and Greg already up, watching the news and drinking coffee. Calling, "Good morning," he crossed to the bathroom and, finished with the absolute necessities, went to the kitchen for his own coffee, happy that the power hadn't gone out. Gran would have brought out the old percolator and they'd still have had coffee even without power, though.

Greg followed seconds later and stood at Allen's elbow, waiting for him to finish pouring his coffee. "Mornin'." He looked toward the living room and whispered, "Wanna kiss you so bad."

Allen grinned and glanced into the living room himself before leaning in to kiss Greg briefly "I was going to sneak into your room last night, but I fell asleep."

Sliding a hand down Allen's back to settle just above his waist, he said, "You would have had to wake me up. I think I fell asleep right away." They traded soft kisses until they heard footsteps on the stairs. "I called Mom first thing, and she wants me to stay put until we're sure the roads are safe."

I can probably push it until this evening, if you're not tired of me yet."

Waiting until he heard the bathroom door close, Allen pushed Greg against the sink and, bodies aligned, brought their lips together in a hungry kiss. "Not *even* close. Gran'll put you to work if you stay, though."

"Think I can handle that. Come on, let's go find out what's going on."

Back in the living room, he looked out the front window to the road, surprised to find it had already been plowed. It could take days to get the roads cleared at home. "How much did we get?"

His grandmother answered, "The weather man says twenty-six inches, but it looks like they got even more south of here."

"How far south? I wonder if Dad'll be able to make it today." A heavy snow in central Pennsylvania was barely more than a hiccup, but a heavy snow in central Virginia would bring everything to a complete stop for days.

"I don't know, honey. At least through Virginia and into North Carolina. We'll call later this morning. What do you boys want for breakfast?" She put her coffee on the side table and stood to go to the kitchen.

Allen said, "We'll just get something quick so we can get outside and finish shoveling."

"You need a good breakfast! Go on out now, and I'll call you when it's ready. Christian can finish what you don't get to, and then you two can help me in here."

Allen looked questioningly at Greg, who shrugged. “Okay, Gran, but you really don’t have to cook anything.”

“Go on with you, now. You shovel that snow and let me do my job.” She pushed them toward their coats.

Bundled up against the cold, they stood on the front porch and looked out over the thick coating of fresh snow, blinding white in the bright sun. They could smell wood smoke on the faint breeze and hear the scrape of shovels from a distance.

Their work the night before made clearing the sidewalks easy, but the plows had piled snow at the end of the driveway, and they were still trying to clear the packed snow when Allen’s grandmother called them in for breakfast.

The scent of bacon wafted from the front door as they climbed the steps and Greg groaned. “God, that smells good. Wonder what else we’re having.”

“Could be anything. It’ll be good, though.” They washed their hands in the bathroom and found everyone else already seated when they walked into the kitchen. Once again sitting at Greg’s side with their legs pressed together, Allen took a minute to look over the table. Gran had filled the table with platters of eggs, bacon, sausage, scrapple, a bowl of fried potatoes, and a basket of fluffy biscuits.

“Mrs. Brumbaugh, everything looks great. I’m starved!” Greg started to load his plate, “I’m going to have to run ten miles to burn this off, or Coach will kill me when I get back. Um, what’s this?” He prodded a golden rectangle of scrapple with his fork.

Allen reached over and slid a few pieces onto his own plate. “Scrapple. It’s made out of corn meal and all of the left over pieces after they butcher a pig. Headmeat and all of that shi—stuff. It’s great as long as you don’t think too much about what’s in it.”

Greg didn’t say anything, but put the platter back without taking any and watched intently as Allen smothered his in maple syrup.

“Your family’s from around here, don’t they eat scrapple?” Allen speared a bite with his fork and waved it under Greg’s nose. “You don’t know what you’re missing.”

Greg laughed and pushed it away, but Allen tried again, grinning. “Hm, soooo good.” He stopped abruptly when Greg grabbed the hand holding the fork and, looking directly in his eyes, slowly licked the syrup off of the scrapple before taking the fork into his mouth. Allen felt the intensity and sensuality of the brief moment as tendrils of desire moved through his body to settle in his groin.

Grinning wickedly, Greg moaned and said, “Hmm, it is good.” He stabbed another piece off Allen’s plate before reaching for the platter and taking more for himself.

Allen looked around the table quickly to see if anyone had noticed their exchange, but they all appeared busy with their own meals. Relieved, he finished his breakfast quickly as he tried to plot ways to get Greg alone before he had to go back to his own family.

The morning didn’t provide any chances to sneak off as, true to his grandmother’s word, Christian was sent out to finish the shoveling while the rest of the family stayed in the kitchen, drifting away to get ready for the day as the

bathroom became available. Allen's grandmother set Greg up at the kitchen table with a huge enamel basin and three loaves of bread. He looked up at her, confused, and she laughed kindly. "It's for filling. Dressing, stuffing—whatever your family calls it. Just break the bread up into little pieces."

"I never thought about making stuffing. Mom just buys it at the supermarket." He opened the first loaf of bread and started tearing the bread into pieces. "Is this small enough?"

"That's just right." She turned to Allen, "Will you start on the pie crust?"

Allen felt his cheeks grow warm as he walked to the cabinet that held the baking supplies. He hissed at Greg, "You can't tell anyone about this!"

"Why? I think it's great! How did you learn to make pies?"

"I told Gran that I was bored one too many times a few years ago. She found something for me to do and taught me to make the pastry dough for pies. She does the rest, though."

Midmorning found them alone in the kitchen as Allen washed the flour off of his hands and went to stand next to Greg, resting a hand on his wide shoulder. He watched Greg's large hands working at tearing the stale bread into tiny bits and felt a wave of desire as Greg looked up at him with heat and longing in his eyes. Glancing into the living room, Allen took one calloused hand in his and led Greg to the back porch, turning him around and pushing him into the wall as soon as the door was closed.

Pressing their hips together, Allen slipped his hands under Greg's sweater as he looked into brilliant blue eyes for a long moment before their lips met. He allowed his hands to roam, feeling the silky skin over back and sides, the hard abs, and up to a broad chest. The shock of a soft mat of hair under his fingertips sent a jolt of desire through his body strong enough to buckle Allen's knees. As many times as he had fantasized about feeling Greg's body under his hands, that soft hair made it a reality. He had seen the muscles, the planes of his chest, and his wide shoulders, and they all played vividly in his fantasies. The fur on Greg's chest, so pale that it disappeared from a distance, was a reality that fueled his passion.

Allen was so hungry for Greg, so lost in the new sensations of another body against his, that he barely registered hands sliding under his waistband to cup his ass. He gasped against Greg's mouth as those hands gripped his cheeks and pulled him closer, their hard dicks grinding together, separated by layers of cotton.

Greg's heat was gone so quickly that Allen couldn't process the loss, hips snapping against a hardness that was no longer there. Breathing heavily, confused as electric thrills of impending orgasm sparked over his body. Allen gasped, "What's wrong?"

Greg leaned against the table, panting and flushed. "Knock on the door."

Allen groaned. Nobody ever knocked on the back porch door. Had someone opened it and seen them before closing it to announce their presence? Had they guessed what was going on? The possibilities flashed through his mind, none of

them comforting. “Shit.” Allen hurriedly straightened his clothes as he watched Greg do the same, the sight doing nothing to quell the hard-on pushing against his fly.

After a few more deep breaths, Allen opened the door to find Christian standing with his arms crossed over his chest and a self-satisfied smirk on his face. The moment with Greg completely broken, Allen narrowed his eyes as he advanced slowly on his brother. After only two steps, Christian turned and ran as Allen chased him through the house, threatening severe bodily harm.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of chores and phone calls, family calling to let them know whether they were going to be able to travel or would have to stay home because of the snow. There were only a few who wouldn’t be able to make it and, beginning in a few hours, the house would be full. Allen and Greg finished moving the last of the furniture in the living room to make room for the Christmas tree and began pulling the strings of lights from the boxes to test them and replace any bad bulbs. Greg had just plugged the first set in, the white lights brightening the growing gloom of an early winter dusk, when his cell phone chirped in his pocket. “Hello?”

Allen listened to Greg’s side of the conversation and realized that their time together was coming to an end. He watched as Greg stood and looked for his keys and jacket and got up a few seconds later. “Wish you didn’t have to go,” he whispered.

“Me too!” Greg was emphatic. “Hey, Dad was talking about stopping to look at the Chevy on the way back down to

Virginia on Sunday morning; do you think it'll be okay with your Gran?"

"She'll be at church most of the morning, but he could stop and look at it, and they could work out the details later, I guess. Barn's never locked. Let's go check."

They found Allen's grandmother in the kitchen, chopping mounds of celery and onion for the dressing. She agreed to their plan about the old Chevy and asked Greg if he would be coming back for Christmas dinner.

"Thank you, but Mom and Dad'll expect me there. I know that we're eating at different times, but I don't think that even *I* could eat two Christmas dinners in a few hours. Thanks again for letting me stay here last night."

"You're welcome anytime, dear. Thank you for all of your good help." She turned back to her chopping as Allen and Greg walked to the front door.

They stood on the front porch, lingering, unwilling to say good-bye. Allen reached for Greg's hand and wanted nothing more than to kiss him, but standing on the front porch in plain view wasn't the place. He whispered, "Bye. Merry Christmas."

Allen felt Greg squeeze his hand and watched as he walked down the steps and turned toward his car. Greg stood for a moment with his hand on the door, looking back at Allen before turning the key in the lock. Without thinking about what he was doing, Allen ran to Greg and kissed him, a single hard, achingly intense kiss, before returning to the front porch.

ALLEN lay in one of the double beds in the large back bedroom, a single lamp casting a yellow glow over the beds. He ached to slide his hands over his body and under the cotton of his briefs, reliving every kiss, every touch he and Greg had shared, but he knew Christian would be coming up the stairs any minute. Trying to take his mind off of the unfulfilled need in his body, he remembered other Christmas Eves lying in this very bed, wondering about the gifts they'd find in the morning, knowing they *had* to go to sleep but staying awake talking, too excited to close their eyes. Tonight, he wondered vaguely what his parents might have gotten him, but he had already gotten the best gift that he could have imagined: Greg had kissed him. Giving in, he took his leaking shaft in his hand, knowing that it would only take seconds before he came. Well, maybe he *could* imagine something better than Greg kissing him.

He had just thrown the tissue into the trash when Christian opened the door, sniffing the air suspiciously. "Man, didn't you have enough time with Greg earlier?" He pushed his jeans over his hips and slid into the other bed.

"Shut up! We never got a minute alone today!" Allen fell into the old patterns of their relationship: confrontational and hostile.

Christian didn't take the bait this time and asked calmly, "You gonna tell Mom and Dad about Greg?"

"Sometime, I guess. If we keep on—well, you know." Allen turned the light off and rolled over as he heard Christian settling deeper into the other bed.

“They already know you’re gay.”

Allen’s heart raced and any thought of sleep was gone. “What?” He sat up and turned to look in Christian’s direction, seeing a vague lump under the blankets in the dim light of the streetlight.

Christian rose up on an elbow, “Allen, you don’t talk about being gay, but you’re eighteen, and you’ve never been on a date with a girl, even though a lot of them would say yes in a heartbeat. You never clear your browser, you TiVo movies with gay characters.... Is that enough?”

“Yeah, but... maybe... I mean all of that doesn’t....”

“I heard them talking. They sounded like they’re okay with it, but they’re waiting for you to tell them.”

“You’re not just shitting me, right?”

Christian rolled over, giving Allen his back. “You can believe me or not; doesn’t matter. Guess you’ll know when you tell them—if you have the balls.”

Allen stared at the ceiling, watching the shifting patterns of the shadows the walnut tree cast on the sloped ceiling as he replayed his conversation with Christian. Unable to rest, he slid out of bed and, once again, went downstairs wearing only his jeans. He plugged the lights of the newly decorated Christmas tree in, wrapped himself in the afghan, and sat on the sofa, alternately watching the tree and staring at his cell phone. It wasn’t quite midnight yet. Would Greg be awake?

AllenSchneider: hey, you still up?

GregHarmon: yeah. wish I was there

AllenSchneider: :) me 2

GregHarmon: what's up?

AllenSchneider: U out to parents? anyone?

GregHarmon: yeah. parents. some of the team.

AllenSchneider: shit! they ok?

GregHarmon: took a while, but yeah

AllenSchneider: thanks :)

GregHarmon: call me tomorrow?

AllenSchneider: yeah. night.

GregHarmon: night

ALLEN pushed back from the table, sure he'd never eat another bite. The groans from the rest of the family signaled they felt the same after another one of his grandmother's successful Christmas dinners.

It wasn't politically correct, and he knew some of the younger women in the family resented it, but everyone followed their traditional roles: the women staying in the kitchen to wash dishes and the men and boys going into the living room to watch TV or read, many of them falling asleep soon after sitting down. His grandmother remained at the table, directing the cleanup and making sure that all of her pans and dishes were put away in the right places.

Escaping from both groups, Allen went upstairs to call Greg without the risk of being overheard. They'd texted a few

times during the day, but they were both busy with their families, and this would be the first chance to talk.

“Hey, Greg. Now a good time?”

“Yeah, Everyone else is sitting around in a stupor. I can hardly move!”

“Same here. Y’all still coming by tomorrow to look at the Chevy?” Allen held his breath waiting for Greg’s answer. He knew that any time alone or even a stolen kiss would be too much to hope for, but he felt like he would burst if he didn’t see Greg again.

“Yeah, probably around nine? Is that too early?”

Allen closed his eyes, thinking about the long week they still had before going home where he’d be able to see Greg every day. “No, you know after yesterday that everyone gets started early around here.” Sitting up suddenly, Allen asked, “Hey! Why are you going home tomorrow? What’re you doing next week?”

“Mom and Dad both have to be back at the hospital Monday morning. I’ll be sitting around waiting for everyone else to get home.”

Too excited to sit still, Allen stood and paced around the perimeter of the room, ducking from long practice as he reached the lower end of the sloped ceiling. “You can stay here! Your Dad can look at the car, and you can stay here when your folks go back. Mom and Dad both have their cars; there’s room for you to go back with us.”

Greg sounded excited. “You think it’d be okay? I’ll check with my folks.”

“Yeah, but let me go check too. Call you right back.” Allen snapped his phone closed without waiting for Greg’s reply and ran down the stairs to talk to his grandmother. As he expected, he found her still sitting at the table while the women finished the dishes. He saw Christian disappear onto the back porch and reappear with a handful of cookies.

“Dude, didn’t you get enough for dinner?”

“Hey, I get hungry!” He took a bite out of a chocolate chip cookie, and Allen admitted it did look tempting.

Allen sat down next to his grandmother and whispered, “Gran, you said that Greg can come again, right?”

She smiled and nodded. “He seems like a nice boy.”

“He is, Gran.” He took a deep breath and asked, “Can he stay this week? His parents have to go back to work, and he’ll be alone most of the time. He can stay here, and we can do chores and help out.”

“Well, I think that would be fine. Make sure that you check with your Mom and Dad, though.”

Allen groaned, but said, “Okay. If they say yes, his parents will drop him off when his Dad looks at the car tomorrow morning.” He hugged her and ran off.

After brief conversations with his parents, wondering if they really did know that he was gay, he ran up the stairs to call Greg back. He took a bite out of the first of a handful of cookies snagged from the plate on the table and pressed Greg’s speed-dial number.

“What’d your parents say? It’s okay with Gran.”

“Yeah, we’re on!”

Allen answered around another mouthful of cookie, "Great! Can't wait." He swallowed, "I have to warn you though, there *will* be chores involved."

"I can handle some chores if it means being with you." The heat in Greg's voice went straight through Allen's body, and all thoughts of the rest of his cookies were gone. This side of Greg was a revelation: straightforward, direct, not afraid to let anyone know what he was feeling. When Allen had thought about the person that Greg had become as he'd gotten older, he had imagined the strong, repressed athlete, caring only about the next touchdown, the next goal, the next home run. The real Greg, the Greg who had kissed him in the barn, who was silly and romantic, was better than any fantasy. "I've gotta go. See you in the morning."

THE chores started soon after Greg's parents left for Virginia. Greg's father, anticipating that he would be able to come to some sort of agreement to buy the car, asked them to shovel enough snow so the flatbed could get to the barn. The temperature had dropped after the snowstorm, and there was no hope of the snow melting before the week was over to make their job easier.

Christian, ever the pain in Allen's ass, helped them all morning and succeeded in his apparent goal to keep them from any chance to be alone. With the three of them working, though, they finished just as they were called for a lunch of Christmas dinner leftovers.

Greg took a tentative bite of the homemade dressing and made appreciative noises. "Tastes good. Better than the kind from the box. Doesn't have anything weird in it, like head meat, right?" He smiled at Allen's grandmother.

"Seems like you liked the scrapple pretty well, as I recall." She smiled back at him, knowing that he was teasing her. "How would you boys like to run an errand for me after lunch?"

Allen and Greg both nodded. "I need some more butter and eggs. Would you go down to the Miller's and pick some up?"

Christian looked excited. "I'll come along too."

"The ash buckets are full and I need you to empty them." Christian looked disappointed, but he didn't argue with his grandmother.

Allen couldn't help giving his brother a triumphant smile as he began eating faster, anxious for a break from the press of family and craving time with Greg. In a hurry, they skipped dessert and were soon driving down the narrow country road, Allen pointing out his favorite fishing spots and the place where he had flown over the handle bars of his bike and landed on his head. "I still have the bump. Never went down."

Greg reached across the seat and traced his fingers over Allen's hairline before smoothing his hand over Allen's hair to rest at the base of his neck. "How long do we have before we get to the store?"

“It’s not exactly a store, but we’ll be there in just a minute.” He glanced at Greg and grinned. “Didn’t believe me about the bump?”

His calloused fingers tracing the skin at Allen’s nape, Greg said, “I believed you. Just wanted an excuse to touch you.”

Enjoying the open flirting, Allen pressed back against Greg’s touch and slid a hand over a hard thigh. “Don’t need an excuse, you know.” Allen turned into the small driveway and pulled to a stop.

“I’ll remember that.” He looked around and asked, “Where are we?”

“We’re here.” Allen nodded at the incongruous sight of a refrigerator sitting next to the mailbox. “Come on.”

They got out of the car and walked past piled snow to the old refrigerator. Allen reached into his pocket and pulled out the dollar bills his grandmother had given him as Greg looked on in fascination.

“How does it work?” Greg opened the refrigerator door and peered in, a hand-written sign taped to the inside of the door with a few dozen eggs and irregular lumps of butter wrapped in waxed paper sitting on the top shelf. The sign announced fresh cheese, but there didn’t appear to be any in the refrigerator at the time.

Allen reached in and pulled out a plastic margarine tub from the crisper drawer and dropped the bills into the container before replacing the lid. “You take what you need and leave the money. I didn’t know that they did this in the winter. I wonder how they keep everything from freezing

when it gets really cold.” He handed Greg two dozen eggs and reached in to get the butter.

“You just leave the money? On the side of the road?”

Allen shrugged, “Yeah. That’s it. Come on, let’s go.”

Greg walked back to the car, still staring at the refrigerator. “Nobody takes the money? Or takes the stuff and doesn’t leave the money?”

“Guess not, or they wouldn’t keep doing it.” Allen saw this part of his life through Greg’s eyes and wondered if Greg thought it was completely ridiculous. Suddenly embarrassed, he backed out of the driveway, carefully avoiding looking at Greg.

Greg was quiet for a long moment before sliding his hand over Allen’s thigh. “It’s amazing. Kinda like stepping back in time. You’re lucky to have a chance to see all of this.”

Relieved Greg didn’t think that his life at his grandmother’s was completely lame, Allen answered, “Gets pretty old after a month of it in the summer, though.”

“I’d like the chance to see. Maybe I could come with you next summer.” Greg’s hand was a warm weight on Allen’s thigh and arousal, never far from the surface when Greg was close, shot through his body, nearly taking his breath away. He steered the car toward the mountain road, planning on parking near the reservoir deep in the woods, but the snow hadn’t been cleared past the last house on the steep road.

With a low groan of frustration, Allen turned the car around and drove back down the mountain, searching for a place that he could park the car. Going back to Gran’s

wasn't an option; if he didn't get a chance to touch Greg, to kiss him, to feel their bodies come together, he'd burst. At the stop sign, he glanced over at Greg, partially turned on the bench seat, open hunger on his face. Even more determined than before, he turned down a single lane road, knowing that there was at least one old house on the road that had been abandoned long before.

"I can't believe it." Allen stopped the car at the end of the driveway of the abandoned house and stared at the snow filling the unused driveway. "There's got to be someplace!"

Greg slid across the seat as he tugged on Allen's thigh, bringing them closer. His voice was husky, his breath soft on Allen's neck. "Put it in park." Allen complied, moving the steering column gearshift even as he felt Greg's lips on his jaw.

Turning his head, Allen met Greg's lips, open and hungry, losing himself in the taste and warmth. He touched desperately, hands moving under the sweater covering the muscular chest, anxious to feel that mat of soft hair again.

Greg pulled and tugged until Allen found himself nearly in Greg's lap, one leg thrown over a muscular thigh and finally—*finally*—Greg's hand moved over the bulge in his jeans. He arched his back, pressing harder against that hand, seeking pressure, needing *more*. With a strangled cry, he tore his mouth away and fumbled at Greg's waistband.

They both jumped when they heard a loud horn sound behind the car. Before Allen fell back into the driver's seat, still breathing rapidly, the horn blasted again. "Shit, I don't think he can get around." With regret, he put the car in gear

and with one last glance at Greg, cheeks flushed and lips swollen, drove off ahead of the snowplow.

Straightening on his side of the bench seat, Greg slid his hand onto Allen's thigh and said, "Think we can lose Christian and spend some time in the barn?" There was an edge of desperation in his voice.

Covering Greg's hand with his own, Allen squeezed, still unable to believe that Greg wanted him—*him*—as he pressed harder on the gas pedal and steered the car toward his grandparents' home. He pulled into the driveway a few minutes later and groaned when he saw it was filled with cars. "Looks like the Altoona relatives are here."

They grabbed the eggs and butter and walked to the screen door, which was foggy with condensation, the front door standing open behind it. "Gramps must have done the furnace. He always makes it too hot. You ready to meet more relatives?" He left any comment about their planned trip to the barn unspoken.

They walked through the crowded living room to put the butter and eggs in the refrigerator and to hang their coats on the hooks in the hallway leading to the basement before returning to the gathered relatives for a new round of introductions. With Greg at his side, Allen hugged aunts, shook hands with uncles, renewed his acquaintance with older cousins, and was introduced to two new babies. He thought that they might be second cousins—or was that first cousins once removed?

Joey, one of the little cousins, pulled Allen by the hand until he dropped to the floor, putting him at eye level with the excited little boy. "Allen, look what Santa brought me! It's

a fire truck!” He glanced shyly at Greg, who had also folded his long legs to sit on the floor and asked Allen in a loud whisper, “Who’s that?”

“That’s Greg, a friend of mine from school.” Allen looked at Greg apologetically, and mouthed, “I’m sorry,” not sure whether he was apologizing for their unexpected change in plans or for his introduction.

As they played cars and trucks with the little boys, Allen remembered playing the same game with Greg when they were in kindergarten, and Greg played with the same enthusiasm now, making *brrmm-brrmm* noises with abandon as he pushed the tiny cars around the imaginary road. Smiling, Allen admired his boyfriend’s ease in dealing with anything from babies to grandparents to throwing touchdowns.

Allen felt Joey tugging on his sleeve and started playing again, noticing two of his aunts sitting close together on the sofa watching them and whispering. Fear stabbed through his chest; were they talking about him? Had they guessed? Glancing up again, he saw that they were still whispering and looking his way. Handing the little blue car back to Joey, he told Greg that he’d be back in a minute and headed into the bathroom.

Leaning on the sink, he stared at himself in the mirror and tried to figure out who was looking back at him. Was he Greg’s boyfriend? His parent’s child? The geeky kid in school? Every time he talked with someone, he felt as if he had to censor himself, and now with so much of his extended family around, it was making his head spin. He splashed water on his face and, taking a deep breath,

opened the bathroom door. Instead of returning to the living room, though, he turned toward the kitchen to avoid having to face his family.

He sat at the table and pulled a plate of cookies and fudge toward him and savagely bit the head off of a Santa Claus-shaped sugar cookie. Closing his eyes as he chewed, he enjoyed the brief respite from the noise and the press of his family.

“Hey, you okay?” Allen felt instantly better as he felt Greg’s hand slide over his shoulder to rest on the back of his neck.

“Yeah, just tired of everything. Feeling kinda... crowded, I guess.”

Greg leaned in until he was only inches from Allen’s ear, his breath warm as he whispered. “Wish we could be alone. Can’t wait until we get home.”

Desire warred with the questions that Allen hadn’t yet dared to ask. He knew that there was no chance to sneak away, so asked softly, “What happens when we get home?”

Blue eyes twinkling, Greg answered, “Sleepovers? Like when we were little?” Before Allen could respond, Greg continued, “You mean with school and family and shit?”

“Yeah. Do we go back to never talking? Do we text and IM and meet in secret?” With pain evident in his voice, he added, “Forget this happened?”

Stroking the back of Allen’s neck, Greg asked, “What do you want to happen?”

Allen grinned and said softly, "Sleepovers. God, I want sleepovers so bad." He stood up and walked to the basement door, knowing that Greg would follow. Once at the bottom of the stairs, he turned and let Greg walk into his body, aligned from chest to knee. Their lips met in a brief, intense kiss, but Allen pulled away.

"I *do* want sleepovers, but I don't want to be different. I want what everyone else has! Dates and movies and making out after school. Holding hands and prom and not having to 'come out' to everyone. I don't want to have to worry about what people are whispering about when we're together or about being shoved into a locker." Allen rested his forehead against Greg's, eyes closed, afraid to hear Greg's answer to his outburst.

Allen felt Greg's arms tighten as he asked, "Does Christian have a girlfriend?"

"Huh?"

"Did he ever bring a girl over?" Greg's lips moved over Allen's face as he spoke.

Confused, Allen answered, "Well, yeah. Sure."

"Did he sit your parents down and tell them that he was straight?" Greg didn't wait for Allen's response, but continued, "It doesn't have to be a big scene. Just do what you want, and let them figure it out."

Allen pulled away and walked toward the old refrigerator, opening the door and staring, unseeing, at the Christmas leftovers stacked on the shelves. "You make it sound so easy."

Hands on Allen's waist, chin resting on a wide shoulder, Greg kissed the tender spot beneath Allen's ear and said, "I know it's not that easy. Hiding's not easy either."

"You'd come out? What about the team? Your scholarship to Tech?"

"You ever read *Outsports*? More guys are coming out in high school and college all the time. Anyway, I want to be a vet, not play football. The school started a gay-straight alliance last year; I don't think we'll be shoved into any lockers."

Turning in Greg's arms, Allen smiled and said, "Another Dr. Harmon?"

"Yeah, but my patients'll be furry."

Pushing Greg against the refrigerator, Allen closed his lips over Greg's, arousal flaring quickly. He ground against Greg's erection as he explored the warmth of his boyfriend's mouth. Denied release earlier, Allen knew that he was moments away from coming in his jeans but was beyond caring.

Allen stilled when he heard the door at the top of the stairs open, hoping that it was just his grandmother reaching for something on the pantry shelves on the landing. As he heard footsteps on the stairs, he leaned his forehead briefly against Greg's. "Don't fuckin' believe this. Think I'm gonna die."

Jeans-clad legs showed it was Christian walking down the stairs. As he reached the bottom, Allen was ready to throw him bodily out into the snow but Joey, following and

taking the stairs one at a time, quelled Allen's thoughts of violence.

Christian grinned knowingly as he said, "Not interrupting, are we? Gran sent us down to get some corn from the freezer."

Glaring at his brother, Allen eased himself in his jeans and walked to the stairs, hearing Joey ask the first of what Allen knew would be a long series of questions.

ROLLING over to avoid the bright sunlight streaming in the window, Allen saw that Christian's bed was empty. He lay with his eyes closed, listening for the sounds of his family in the kitchen below, but he heard nothing. The week had been a non-stop stream of family and neighbors, more snow, and now today—New Year's Eve—would be their last day in Pennsylvania before leaving for home the following morning.

Wondering where everyone was, he slid out of bed and pulled his flannel sleep pants over his hips before running downstairs to use the bathroom. He opened the bathroom door a few minutes later to find Greg holding a cup of coffee and grinning. "Everyone else just left to go shopping. We're finally alone." He waggled his nearly invisible eyebrows.

Allen took the cup and set it on the end table next to the bathroom door. "Everyone? Why didn't you come wake me?" Allen pushed Greg up against the wall. He'd lost track of how many interrupted moments that they'd had, never managing more than kisses stolen in brief moments alone. Who knew

that having a boyfriend would leave him more frustrated than being alone?

Greg nodded. "Was on my way. They just left." He broke from Allen's grasp and pulled him toward the sofa.

Laughing, Allen fell backward onto the soft cushions, pulling Greg down after him. Feeling Greg's weight, his heat, Allen ran his hands down Greg's sides to cup his ass, drawing him even closer. He whispered against Greg's lips, "I keep expecting someone to walk in."

"I know, right? Thought we were gonna have to wait 'til we got home." He rolled his hips, scraping his dick along Allen's hip.

With a groan of frustration, Allen wriggled under Greg, searching for the hardness that matched his own. Finally slotting against each other, they kissed and touched and moved together, a week of missed opportunities forgotten. Giving in to his body's need, Allen surged upward, looking for the last bit of pressure that would send him over the edge, but Greg was moving away. "What? What's wrong?"

Flushed and panting, Greg leaned down to drop a quick, hard kiss on Allen's swollen lips. "Wait." He hooked his fingers in the elastic of the sleep pants and pushed the offending flannel down to Allen's thighs before they both helped Greg push his own sweats down.

Allen felt the head of Greg's dick press hard against the base of his shaft and slide upward as Greg lowered himself slowly until their bodies met without the barrier of their clothes. He heard Greg's high-pitched whine of pure need as their lips met again and he thrilled that Greg wanted him.

Him.

They slid together, skin meeting skin, hands roaming as bodies pressed more tightly. Lips pressed together in a frantic, never-ending kiss, they rocked in perfect rhythm. With a gasp, Allen pulled away. “God, so close. So close.”

Greg pushed harder, faster. “Let go. Wanna feel.”

Those words were enough to send Allen over the edge, and he felt the surge of his release between their bellies. Seconds later, he watched Greg’s flushed face contort as he came too. Greg’s face in orgasm was the most beautiful sight Allen had ever seen.

THE rest of the day passed as the last week had: in the press of family. His grandmother had made her traditional New Year’s Day meal of pork and sauerkraut, reasoning that since they wouldn’t be there on the actual day, she didn’t want them to risk bad luck by missing it altogether.

The pictures Allen had dreaded all week were pulled out, and the family spent the last evening of the year sitting around the table looking at old photos. He was alternately embarrassed by the pictures of himself as a toddler and newly fascinated by pictures of his uncle Nick. There was one picture of his uncle with another man, their arms draped loosely over each other’s shoulders, standing in front of the old Chevy.

Allen, sitting next to his grandmother, asked quietly, “Jerry?”

She took the picture and nodded before handing it back. “Why don’t you keep it, honey?” She looked up at the

sunflower-shaped clock and pushed back from the table. “The ball will be dropping soon.”

Leaving the pictures scattered on the table, they all went in to the living room. Allen’s mother and father sat close together on one end of the sofa, his grandparents sitting in their matching recliners holding hands, and Christian stretched out on the floor in front of the small TV.

Allen paused, unsure where to sit. His conversation with Greg about hiding and coming out had been on his mind all week. He hadn’t been completely open, but he’d stopped pulling away from Greg when someone walked into the room, prompting knowing looks between his parents but no conversation.

Taking a deep breath, he walked to an overstuffed chair, pulling Greg along after him. As his grandfather flipped back and forth between the two available channels, Allen fell into the chair and Greg settled on the wide arm, one leg draped over Allen’s knees. Eyes glued to the TV to avoid seeing his family’s reaction, he rested one hand on Greg’s thigh.

His grandmother chattered about the number of people in Times Square, the young cookie-cutter starlets that were bundled into heavy coats and gloves while speaking into their microphones, and lamented the loss of Guy Lombardo.

Greg leaned over to whisper, “Guy Lombardo?”

Thrilling as Greg’s lips brushed over his ear, Allen shrugged and turned back to the TV. The camera was focused on the lighted ball as it started to drop slowly, and he looked away to scan the faces of his family, their attention focused on the TV. His mother looked at him briefly, smiling before moving closer to his father.

Allen grinned as everyone on TV and in the living room counted down to mark the end of the year. With a burst of confetti, couples in Times Square started the new year with a kiss, their action mirrored in the tiny village of Salemville as Allen's parents kissed and his grandparents stretched across the arms of their recliners for a little peck.

Turning to Greg, Allen slid a hand along his boyfriend's cheek to the back of his neck to pull him closer. Greg smiled as he said, "Happy New Year," and brought their lips together.



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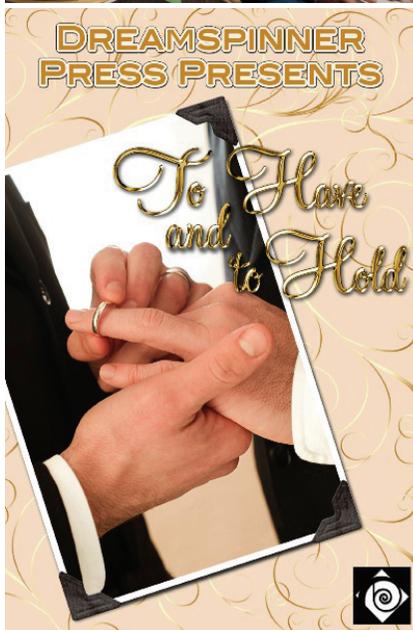
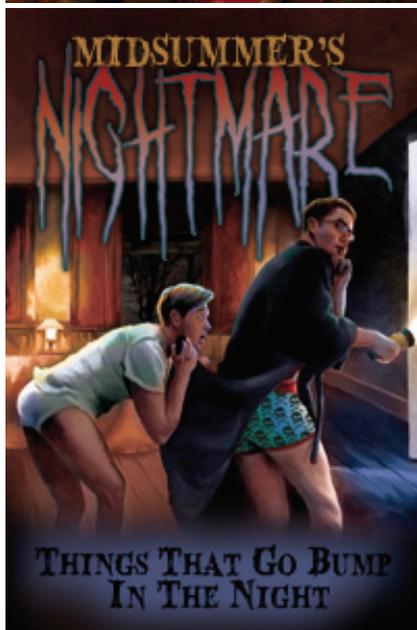
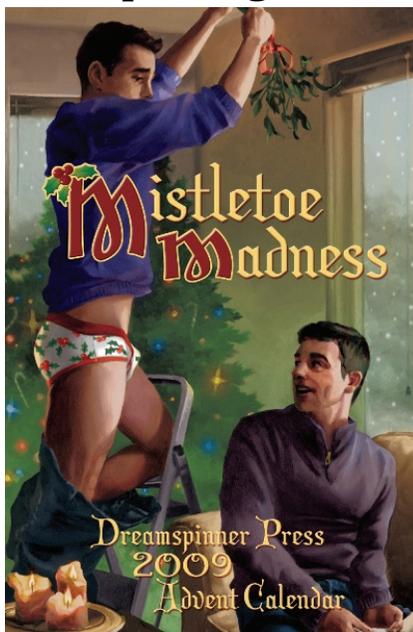
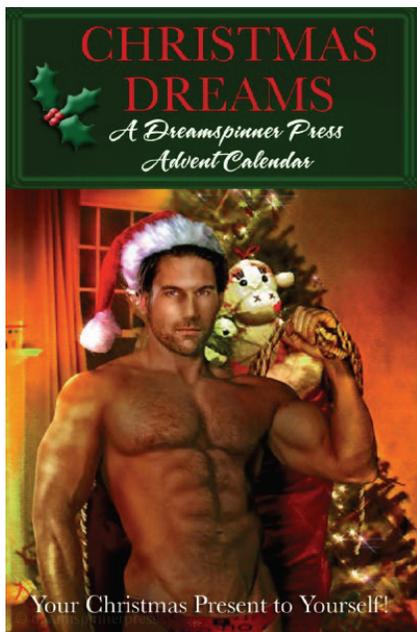
ANDY EISENBERG, a lifelong avid reader, writes as an escape from her career as a microbiologist. She has more interests than time, enjoying everything from building furniture to needlework. A cancer survivor, she has spent the time since her recovery in more quiet pursuits and has concentrated on writing—one of those things that she always wanted to do but put off until there was more time.

Her husband, her own personal happy-ever-after, provides the background music to her writing in the form of his PS3 and XBox360. Andy and her husband are both transplanted Yankees who now make their home in Virginia at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains. They live with two large dogs, three cats, and assorted fish and houseplants and enjoy watching baseball and football together.

Visit Andy's blog at <http://andy-eisenberg.livejournal.com/>.

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