

Chapter Eleven

NEW LOVE/OLD LOVE

"Hello John?"

"Brian, is that you? It's good to hear from you after...what's it been, three months since I last saw you? How are you?"

"Great, life is pretty good from where I'm standing," Brian said.

"Would you like to get together this week? It's been a slow summer for me thus far. How about you come here to my place of work?"

"You're up North Charles, did I remember that right?" Brian asked.

"Right you are, and there's a bus stop right in front of the school. You can't miss it because our school sign is right across the street. When are you free?"

"Uh, say Wednesday afternoon, is that ok?" Brian asked.

"Sure, I'll have tea and cakes brought over by the housekeeper," John said. "Very civilized, you know."

"Uh, John...can I bring a friend?"

"Sean...no, it isn't Sean is it?" John asked.

"No, his name is Adam," Brian said.

He could almost see John smiling through his beard as he replied, "Sure, I'd love to meet him."

"Good, John. See you Wednesday and ...thanks, he means a lot to me."

"And I can't wait to find out why, Brian. Good-bye for now," John said.

"Bye, John."

He had wanted to blurt out everything in one breath. So far the summer had been filled with such monumental discoveries and he didn't want it to end. But Adam would be eighteen in a few short weeks and after that Brian would cross the line into his seventeenth year.

Whereas age had defined his life until now, emotion had taken its place. Like a summer storm ripping up the Patapsco and thundering its greeting from across the Bay, Adam had taken over his life. And the change had been most welcome.

The nurturing side of Adam had come tumbling out after that ruinous fight in Virginia. Brian's self criticism had been pushed aside in favor of Adam's desire to learn all that he knew of the sport. Hell, he had been at it for almost two years, did he know that much already? Adam seemed to think so and that was all that mattered.

But Adam didn't want to do it alone, and with the support of Mr. Wayne, they both kept after Brian, pulling him back into the game. And Brian returned with a passion and the determination to make himself everything Adam needed. Their partnership was forged with sweat and blood mingled on the floor of the boxing ring.

To preserve that partnership, Brian felt the need to come clean with Adam about everything in his life. It was a lot like a conversation with John, a purge of the thoughts and emotions involved in his life. Adam listened intently, but without comment.

Gabriel, Sean, Pullman, God, Pat, angels, sex...just about anything that had affected his young life came tumbling out. Brian was exhausted when he was done but Adam's eyes still shown bright and clear.

Brian paused when Adam smiled, what was the boy thinking?

"It's no wonder we found each other," Adam said, "we're so much alike."

"I'm glad you think so. I always thought myself to be weak and helpless. I couldn't control those things when they happened," Brian said.

Adam shook his head. "Do you know how they make steel so strong?" Brian looked puzzled at the question. Adam smiled. "They heat the raw metal until its white hot and then they beat it over and over again, forcing the molecules to line up under the pressure. The heat and the pounding make it the strongest material on earth. It's just like us, we have seen so much heat and pain, but the pounding has only made us stronger. We're just alike...it's why I can't help but love you."

The sentiment was so sweet Brian felt he could cry from the joy he felt inside. But that was the old self, the one who was weak and helpless. Adam had banished that person the moment they fell in love. No, their relationship was based upon courage and that was nothing to cry about.

But even as Brian pushed aside the tears, he marveled at the innocence Adam had brought into his life. It made him feel responsible, for the boy was experiencing all this for the very first time. He drew strength from that charge; he would not fail this time.

The only note of sadness Brian allowed himself to feel came when Sean finally understood that Adam was his replacement. He had remained Brian's best friend despite the end of their bedroom antics. Ever the little brat, Sean would always encourage Brian's wild side.

They had shared too many things in life to abandon one another. And in many ways Brian knew Sean was relieved of his burden. But he was a handsome boy and his growing reputation in the Bay as a fighter meant he had his own admirers of the female persuasion. He wouldn't suffer too badly.

Since the Virginia tournament, they had fought against teams from Pennsylvania, New Jersey and another Maryland team from out west. New competition had been good for all of them, and Sean had come out a real winner. There were three trophies adorning the mantel in his parent's living room, and he was the golden boy of the moment, scoring ahead of Brian in the latest round of points.

Brian was proud to be his friend, just as Sean was proud to be his confidant. It was as if nothing had changed between them, except that Brian and Adam spent the weekends together. Sean never said an unkind word about his choice. He and Adam got along quite well, except in the ring.

Adam had come far enough and fast enough, under Brian's guidance, to spar with the big boys. Sean took it upon himself to teach Adam that the ring was a world apart from locker room friendships. They both seemed to enjoy the give and take.

Brian stood on the floor watching them slug it out. Really he was watching to see if Sean was holding back for Adam's sake or his for that matter. But Adam didn't hold back anything and Sean needed to use his practiced skill to stay ahead of the novice.

"Damn, what have you been teaching him?" Sean laughed after his first real bout with the boy. "It's as if I'm in the ring with another you, Brian, and that's scary."

"He pays a lot of attention when we practice," Brian said. "He'll really get scary when he starts developing his own style."

"Ah, the great unknown. Remember when Hanson used to scare us with that phrase?"

"Someday you'll have nightmares about a great unknown boxer who beats your ass so bad you'll fall right out of the ring," Brian said, "Oh, I remember." And then they

laughed. It had all been part of Hanson's attempt to keep the boys from thinking they were something special. A dose of humble pie everyone had to choke down at some point. And both of them had been there.

Sean had missed the Virginia massacre but had received a broken nose injury at the following tournament in Pennsylvania. He knew what it meant to hurt and his slightly disfigured nose proved it. But he had kept on fighting and won the match on points. Brian knew that particular trophy meant the world to him. He also thought the crooked nose was endearing, and so did the ladies.

Adam may have developed the courage to fight like Brian but he still held on to a few old phobias. He had a distrust of doctors, especially those of the psychiatric persuasion. Adam was convinced if they found out about the molestations he had endured that they were required by law to report it. Maybe that was true, but John wasn't likely to reveal any of their secrets to the world. With that in mind they took the bus trip uptown.

They caught the 64 bus on the corner of Church and Pennington and sat in the broad back seat. It had been a long time since Brian's last visit to the city's downtown area. The ride up through Brooklyn, Cherry Hill and Westport took almost an hour before they reached the transfer stop at Calvert and North.

Here the streets looked much like they did in southern reaches of the city. A vast number of boarded up buildings and closed businesses lined the wide sidewalks of North Avenue. Brian stood close beside Adam as the local residents seemed to think two young white boys were a curiosity in the middle of the day. This was no place to be after dark, they both knew that.

The 11 bus arrived and they hurried on, glad to be off the street. Brian watched the city change as the bus sped north on Calvert Street. The houses here didn't look at all like those in the Bay. The row houses had given way to the suburbs where the residents preferred their own individual homes with a large front yard.

The bus turned north on Charles and Brian started looking for the big Notre Dame sign. And then he saw it and motioned Adam towards the door. After the air conditioning on the bus, both of them felt the heat as they stepped down on the sidewalk.

This whole trip had seemed like a great adventure to Brian. He was going to see John again, and that always made him feel good. But this time it had special meaning because Adam was with him.

"Brian...Brian, over here."

Brian turned to see John waving from the doorway of a shop just down the block from the bus stop. The boys walked down to meet him.

Brian began with, "John this is Adam."

"Adam, a pleasure to meet you," John said, shaking the boy's hand. "Well, I got us some nice scones to have with our tea this afternoon. Have you boys had lunch?"

"No, I forgot all about it," Brian said. "It took us almost two hours to get here."

"So long? But that's just fine, I haven't eaten either," John said. "You boys like Chinese food?"

"Never had it," Adam said.

"I did, once," Brian admitted, "but that was a long time ago."

"My treat then. I know a nice little place just around the corner, they make wonderful spring rolls," John said.

He ordered the rolls and some noodle dish with chicken, telling them both he'd been looking forward to the visit. Interesting smells and a clatter of pots and pans from the kitchen filled the tiny dining room as they sat down at a table. Without prompting, Brian began to explain how Adam had come into his life.

John smiled and nodded, his glance occasionally straying to look at Adam.

"And, Adam, I expect you are quite the up and coming boxer," John finally said.

"Brian has been a great teacher," Adam replied. "I wouldn't have had the patience."

His eyes were on Brian as he spoke and John couldn't help but notice the flow of energy between them. But if he could see it so could others.

"Have you boys encountered any problems with the relationship? Does anyone know?" John asked.

"Only Sean...and maybe this girl I know named Liz, I told you about her," Brian said.

"The fan club, yes, I remember. Is that going to be a problem?"

"I don't think so," Brian replied. "She's a pretty smart person, and I think we respect each other a great deal. I suppose if she ever asks I'll just tell her the truth."

"You would?" Adam said.

"Not if you don't want me to, but I don't think she'd want to hurt us."

"This is all so new to you both, but I can tell the relationship has become a great part of your young lives," John said. "Ah, here comes the food."

The spring rolls were great and the noodle dish just as fine. Both boys both refused sodas and asked for water instead. "In training," Brian said by way of explanation.

"Sugar is bad for my complexion," Adam said.

"You both look fit and strong. Boxing must agree with you quite well," John said.

Brian told him about the fights, the wins and losses, including the feelings he experienced when he had finally lost a fight.

"The human spirit often learns more from adversity, Brian. But it seems you already know that from past experience. If you face every day as a new adventure in learning about life, the rewards will be endless. Just look at what you have accomplished so far."

John lay his fork down across his plate and wiped his lips with a paper napkin. His eyes moved from Brian to Adam.

"I remember a very different Brian than the one you know now," he said. Adam looked puzzled and John chuckled.

"He's been through some changes, Adam, but he's the same person. I have been both amazed and pleased at his progress, and so should you. It isn't every choir boy that can throw a good right hook."

Brian laughed at the image and knew John was right...he was always right.

"I've never heard him sing," Adam said.

It was John's turn to be puzzled. "You are still singing, aren't you, Brian?"

"Yes, it just that so much has been happening; Adam hasn't had a chance to come see me at church."

"Oh, you must encourage him to go," John said. "He needs to know what inspires you. And I believe it will give him a better understanding of who you are."

They ended lunch with a walk across the school campus to John's office. Brian thought the place looked pretty old and the buildings reminded him a lot of their church. He looked around at the file cabinets, bookshelves and assorted stacks of papers which

filled John's work space. John cleared some clutter from a small couch for the boys to sit on and they sat down to discuss problems.

"Anything on the top of your list, besides the boxing?" John asked. "This is just friends talking, Adam. Brian and I have become familiar with one another by talking about things, a great many things."

Brian looked over at Adam, knowing it was probably too soon for him to be open with John but... "Do you feel like telling him, Adam? I don't have all the answers you need and I don't want it to come between us."

"If you feel comfortable, please, Adam. I'm a good listener," John said.

"I don't know where to start. Ok, a friend of my father's named Robert molested me when I was six. He kept doing it until I was about ten years old, only by then it was more serious stuff." Adam sighed and Brian knew this was hard for him to talk about. "My mother finally caught him doing things with me and damn near killed him. The cops got involved and I had to tell them all the things he'd done. It was so scary, I was embarrassed."

"And you were afraid it was your fault, is that what I'm hearing?" John asked.

"Yeah. I hated it at first but then I got used to the feeling of his hands on me. But it scared me when he started...well, he wanted to fuck me. Sorry, I don't know how else to explain it. I hated him when he tried that, it hurt and I begged him not to do it."

Adam paused, searching for the words he wanted to say. "So we reached an agreement of sorts. It didn't seem to matter what we did long as he got off, that was what it was all about for him."

Adam was blushing now, the feelings of embarrassment returning. "He used to play with my penis but I was too young to know what it meant until I was about ten. It started to feel really good about then and I didn't mind that, but then he began the fucking thing all over again. It's hard to describe how I felt."

"Did you have a close relationship with your parents?" John asked.

"My father did heavy drugs back then. He stopped for a while when my mother caught Robert with his pants down and threw them both out. My parents were divorced by the time I was eleven. My father is back on drugs, but he swears he didn't have a clue what Robert was doing to me. It was a terrible mess. Then she died from cancer when I was thirteen, and now I live with my dad."

Brian put his arm on Adam's shoulder and the boy leaned against him. The gesture was not lost on John.

"And now along comes Brian, someone with whom you can share these feelings and the emotions of that time. Do you think of yourself as gay?"

"Yes...I do now. Before, I just couldn't think about it. What Robert did only confused me."

"Tell him about your brother," Brian suggested.

"Yeah, my brother. He was there when all the crap hit the fan over Robert. Being four years older I was surprised that Robert never made any moves on him," Adam said.

"That you know of," John said.

"I guess, but Steve said the guy never touched him. He got into drugs about that time and when he was high he used to beat me up. All I got from him was that I was the little faggot who broke up our parent's marriage. I was the cause of all his pain. He's in

jail now for possession, the third time and they gave him ten years. He won't be out until I'm twenty-two and Brian knows, he better not mess with me then."

"So boxing is a way of defending yourself from your brother?" John asked.

"At first, I thought it would be a good reason to learn fighting, but not now. Brian said I should just walk away if that's all I was after, and he was right. I love the way it makes me feel. I'm stronger now and I think better. And then I met Brian, he's been the best thing that ever happened to me."

The moment seemed to stretch out, leaving each of them with their thoughts on what Adam had just said. John could see that the boys were in love even though he was sure they didn't understand how complicated this would make their lives. But it was nothing short of a miracle that they had found one another under these circumstances. John addressed himself to Adam.

"There is nothing in your story that makes me feel anything but positive about your relationship with Brian. You both have needs and it seems that someone upstairs is looking out for the both of you.

"Now as for your brother, I would guess that Robert did things to him too. Things that he cannot resolve in his own mind, so he took it out on you. Often when there is a case like this, both boys in a family are molested until the man finds out which one will satisfy his twisted desires. Your brother buried his feelings in drugs and violence. He is an object of pity in my mind. There are no easy solutions to his self loathing at this point. I doubt if prison will help matters either.

"But you have moved forward, Adam. Amazing, isn't it? I'm sure your father isn't an obstacle to you anymore, I'll bet he's pretty contrite."

"He leaves me alone most of the time. Since I started boxing, he doesn't try and run my life anymore," Adam said.

"And there's another issue," John said. "Young men need guidance; they need assurance that what they are doing is the right thing and you aren't getting that from him. But I'll bet that Brian is a better role model, even if he is a bit younger. Love does wonderful things for the human spirit."

"I had feelings about him the moment we first met," Adam said. "I haven't told him about that, but he was just so amazingly confident and sure of himself. I watched the other boys on the team look up to him and I felt so special when Coach Hanson assigned me to train with him."

Brian was blushing now and John laughed. "Feels good to hear that, doesn't it?" he said.

"I...I don't know what to say, Adam. I thought you were pretty special too."

"'Love speaks not with the eyes, but with the mind,' Shakespeare once wrote. I think he was very correct. Our emotions are rarely satisfied and the feelings you both share are special. It gives me hope for the future," John said. "And so how are you two getting along?"

"We haven't done it yet," Brian said. "Is that what you're asking?"

John laughed, "If that's what you want to talk about, ok, but I was thinking more about everyday life. What you do in the bedroom is something I have no doubt will be as successful as the rest of your activities."

"I just think that with all he went through as a kid I should sit back and wait until he's ready to go exploring," Brian said. "But he is a great kisser."

It was Adam's turn to blush, his cheeks turning bright red. "And Brian loves to embarrass me, can't you tell? It's his finest quality," Adam said. "But I need his affection and I love to hug him. It gives me something I need. After my mother died that was something missing in my life."

"He's really affectionate," Brian said. "I think we're both happy with that."

"Exactly," Adam said. "Sorry, but I was supposed to remind you we have to catch the bus by six or we won't be home before dark."

"It's only four," John said. "I'll drive you home if you like. Please, just stay a while longer and have tea with me. I enjoy your company."

Coming here was just what the both of them had needed, John thought to himself. And none of them wanted it to end. Having the freedom to express their feelings with him made this time together so valuable. All too soon they would be forced back into the reality of life. A place where image required them to hide their true feelings or suffer the consequences.

It was a terrible thing for two people in love. Shameful and unnecessary when all they wanted was the ability to be in love and share that openly. But he could see that each gave the other something and from that need their love was given wings. It would be his role to strengthen that bond.

"Brian, I've been keeping something from you, but I think we need to talk about it privately," John said.

"Oh? I haven't kept any secrets from Adam, what is it?" Brian asked.

John scratched his beard. "I'll just say a word and see if you want to continue talking about it." He paused, looking at Brian's face for a reaction. "Pullman," John said.

He watched as the color left Brian's face, but the boy slowly nodded in assent. "I haven't thought about him in a while, but I got in the habit of being with someone all the time because of him."

"Pullman...that's the cop, right?" Adam said.

"I had to tell Adam," Brian said. "Since we spend so much time together I figured he needed to know how dangerous the guy can be."

"Yes, but there are some important people aware of him now," John said.

"So Hanson called you about that, I should have known," Brian said.

"You haven't seen him since he came to the boxing practice, have you?" John asked.

"Yes, I have. He stopped me on the street a few months back and I told him to fuck off. Really, I think I scared him. But I would have beat his ass if he'd touched me...and I haven't seen him since."

"Good. Let's hope you don't before they catch him in the act."

"What did you do to him?" Brian asked.

John smiled. "I've met a lot of people over the years, many of them parents of my own students. Let's just say Pullman found himself reassigned to the Eastern District on the other side of town and he's been kept very busy over there. But if he follows the classic profile of a pedophile it won't matter where he's assigned, he will follow through on his urges and when he does he will get caught."

"It's a shame that the authorities can't just lock him up but they need evidence of his abhorrent behavior first. Give him time; Pullman is his own worst enemy. At least now he's being watched."

Brian felt a rush of relief sweep through his mind just knowing that John had become involved.

"I'm sorry, John...I should have told you about him a long time ago," Brian said.

"Yes, you should. But you told Claude and that was the right thing to do. Just be sure and stick to your plan of keeping someone close at hand, at least until this idiot is off the streets for good."

"I will, you can be sure of that," Brian said looking over at Adam.

The afternoon sunlight streaming through the window gave pause to their conversation.

"So when is he going to hear you sing?" John finally asked.

"Adam is a Methodist, I sing in a Catholic church," Brian said.

Adam laughed. "I think he's shy about it."

"Well, he wasn't shy last Christmas," John said. "I was so impressed that I almost converted."

"What religion do you follow?" Adam asked.

"None at the moment, but that doesn't shake my belief in a higher power. Just looking at the two of you makes me understand that something is guiding our destiny."

John had tea brought in by the housekeeping staff and he laid out his box of scones. Brian thought they were the most curious little cakes, or were they cookies? He liked them better when John promised there wasn't more than a shovel full of sugar in each one.

With his kids all grown, Brian knew John missed being a father to his children. His compassion and guidance had proven that time and time again. Around six they went out to the parking lot and John cranked over his old Volvo.

"Never seen a car like this," Adam said.

"I traded in my dinosaur to get one," John said. "She'll run forever I'm told. Guess you can tell cars are not my thing."

"It's...nice," Adam said and John roared with laughter.

John got them home by seven o'clock and on the ride there Adam decided he wanted to spend the night.

"You boys be careful. If I can see the love in your eyes then so can others. It would be best if you get to decide when to talk about the relationship with your parents. I don't think having them discover it by accident will do either of you any good, not now anyway. In time, as you grow, it may become necessary to tell them, but it is still too soon."

"So don't get caught with your pants down? Is that what you're saying?" Brian asked.

"Yes, you need to control your actions," John said.

"I'll keep an eye on him," Adam said.

"I'm sure you will," John replied.

They said good-bye to John and they both hugged him. Brian knew he especially enjoyed the hugs. Brian promised to call again soon and John drove off in a roar while the boys walked up the steps into Brian's house.

His mother greeted them at the door on her way out. Wednesday was her bingo night at the church. She said hello to Adam and reminded them that there was a chicken casserole warming in the oven. His father was still at work and would be home late.

Brian's parents had been puzzled when he first brought Adam home to meet them. The age difference aside, they didn't know Adam's family from church until told that the boy was Methodist.

The boxing club connection was enough of a credential for Brian's father who proudly pointed out the awards on top of the piano. Adam scored all the points he would ever need with Mrs. Mahoney when he told her about the piano lessons he had taken as a child. Even Brian hadn't known about that talent.

They stood in the quiet living room and hugged.

"You're so lucky to have John as a friend, he understands you so much," Adam said.

"He's my guardian angel," Brian said. And he truly believed that now.

"I wish you would sing for me," Adam said and Brian looked over at the piano.

"You still play?" he asked.

"Yeah, but it's been a while," Adam replied. "You want me to play something?"

"Yes, please."

Adam pulled out the bench and opened the lid over the keyboard. His fingers ran across the keys making a few runs up and down the scales. "It's been a long time, but it still feels right. My hands aren't used to this anymore, so forgive the mistakes."

He played a song Brian didn't recognize, but he played it so well. He finished with a flourish but his fingers seemed to get tangled up at the end and he laughed.

"Told you it's been a while. My hands seem so big and clumsy now. See, I can stretch an octave and a half. I started lessons when I was eight and we were living up north. The piano didn't make the trip here with us, my mother had lost interest by then and she sold it."

"Sorry, you play really well, what song was that?"

"Uh, just something I made up years ago, I even wrote words for it, but I don't remember them all. What can you sing? Do you have any sheet music that I can follow?" Adam asked.

"You read music? I can't even do that."

"Then how do you sing?" he asked.

"I listen to the piano play and I copy the notes."

"You have anything here?"

"Uh, I suppose, but it might be Christmas carols or nothing," Brian said.

He searched in the piano bench and came up with the score to Silent Night.

"I know that one, let me see," Adam said.

"Will you sing it with me," Brian asked.

"I am not much of a singer, I'm afraid, but I'll try."

He started to play and they began to sing together. After the first bar Adam stopped singing and Brian sang on alone. With Adam playing the music, Brian filled the room with his voice. And it didn't make him feel uncomfortable at all.

There was something about Adam's presence. His left hand played the chords gently, lovingly. Brian felt as if the expression in those hands was directly connected to the sound of his voice. It was just like the feelings he got when they hugged. This was just another way of expressing himself, and he loved the moving piece of music.

The song ended and Adam looked up, his eyes filled with tears. Brian sat down beside him and put his arms around Adam's neck.

"Everything about you is so beautiful," Adam said. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to cry, but you make me so happy."

"This is only the beginning, I want to spend every day making you happy," Brian said.

Adam shut the lid quietly and smiled. His face turned to Brian and he grinned. "Can we go to your room?"

Brian led the way upstairs until finally they stood in the center of the tiny bedroom at the back of the house. They were alone in the house but Brian still locked the door before pulling off his shirt.

Adam was like a big teddy bear in Brian's arms as they lay down together. This bed had served many purposes in his life, but Brian knew this time it would be different. These were no longer childish times and the kisses they shared said all that and more.

Adam looked in Brian's eyes. "Where do we go from here?" He asked.

"Am I always going to be the coach?" Brian replied.

"Until you teach me what you love the most," Adam said.

"Right now you could beat me with a skillet and I would die happy," Brian said.

"I'm not afraid anymore, we can do anything you want," Adam said.

What Brian wanted was to feel the power of Adam inside of him, but again he hesitated. The boy had been through so much and if this first attempt at love failed it would be because Brian had pushed too hard. Sean had been sex, great sex, but Adam was in love with him while Sean had loved the sex.

No, he had to do this the right way. Adam was going to be with him a long time, there was no hurry. If anything their sexual innocence was part of the charm. And the moment would come when they shared the same level of passion. When that moment occurred, they would rock the world together.

It was enough to lay naked in love's arms, exploring the depth of their passion without satisfying it completely. Adam seemed perfectly happy just lying there together and suddenly Brian gained a new understanding of their relationship.

Somehow he understood their future together. Someday Adam would be the one to make all the glory Brian felt in the boxing ring seem like nothing. He was the truly strong one here and yet Adam could only use that power to please. At that moment Brian knew he was willing to make any sacrifice to keep their love alive.

There would be a time of change and Brian felt a little moment of doubt enter his mind. It was hard to give someone such control over his life...his emotions. But even as he questioned those thoughts within himself, Adam pushed them aside.

He smiled down and said, "I love you, Brian Mahoney. You're the best thing that ever happened to me."

It was just what needed to be said. Maybe they should take that last step into the abyss...but at that moment the doorbell rang twice and then twice again. If only it had been Sean's ring Brian would have ignored the plea, but he knew it was Liz, she always sounded the bell that way.

"Liz is at the door, should we answer it?" Brian asked.

Adam laughed. "You're going to let a girl come between us at this moment?"

And Brian knew it was going to be ok between them, even if the spell was broken and she was invited in.

"A guest for dinner maybe?" Adam said as they threw their clothes back on.

"I didn't know she was coming over or I would have said something."

"Don't be angry with her. I'm staying here tonight," Adam said. The meaning clearly written on his face.

A quick kiss and Brian ran down the stairs, pulling a T-shirt on over his head. The bell started that familiar ring again as he opened the door.

"Liz. Hi, I was just about to call you," he said.

"Well, I was at church and thought I would stop in and say hello."

"Good, come in. Are you hungry? We have dinner ready if you are."

"I could eat something, if it's not any trouble. I saw your mom at bingo, where's your dad?"

"Working late..." Adam said as he came down the stairs and Liz smiled. "Hi, Adam."

"I just discovered something new in the boy wonder here, he plays piano," Brian said.

"Really, that's cool. Did you take lessons?" Liz asked.

They went into the living room while Brian pulled the casserole out of the oven and set the table for three. He heard the sounds of Adam playing that unfamiliar song and considered maybe it was the only one he knew by heart.

"He plays really well," Liz said as Brian joined them.

"Brian sang for me earlier," Adam told her, and Brian wished he hadn't.

"Really, I thought he didn't sing out of church? At least that's what he told me," she said.

"I lied," Brian said, "I'm a committed liar."

"Liar," Liz said.

"See, I told you." And to change the subject, he asked, "You hungry yet? I'm starved."

Adam and Liz followed him into the kitchen, anything to get away from that piano for a while. She chose a seat at the table, leaving the boys sitting across from one another. Brian spooned out the casserole and when Adam asked for water he got up and filled three glasses before returning to the table.

"What did you do today?" Liz asked.

"We took the bus into town and saw my friend John. He bought us Chinese food for lunch," Brian said.

"I made a cake for the bake sale at church tomorrow. Did you remember about that?" Liz asked.

No, Brian hadn't. Wasn't he supposed to get his mom to make something too?

"You forgot, didn't you?" she said. "How are we going to raise money for the trip to the Soldier's Home if you don't help out?"

"I sing, Liz. Do I have to bake too?"

"You're going to the Soldier's Home? What's happening there?" Adam asked.

"The choir is going to sing for them and Father Dominic put me in charge of a bake sale so we can rent a bus for the trip. Brian promised to bake something, even a batch of cookies would help out." Liz was on a roll and he was helpless to stop her.

"Do you know how to bake?" Adam asked.

"Cookies, that's easy," Brian said. "I just forgot."

"Do you have the ingredients?" Liz asked.

"Yeah, my mom bought all that stuff you told me to get, it's in the pantry."

"So let's bake us some cookies," Adam said. "I might even eat one, but only one, we're in training."

Their first night alone and they were going to bake cookies with a girl, how bad can this get? Liz and Adam sorted out the ingredients and pulled down the necessary utensils while Brian picked up from dinner. She set the oven to three hundred fifty degrees and started mixing the ingredients.

"Which batch first, the chocolate chip or the oatmeal-raisin?" Brian asked.

"Oh, oh, chocolate chip...please," Adam said.

"The boy wonder wants the chips," Brian said.

"Why do you call him that?" Liz asked.

"Brian says he wonders about me sometimes, it's like a burn or something," Adam said. "It's funny."

"You're both crazy," Liz said.

"Got that right," Brian agreed.

Adam mixed the chips into the batter Liz had whipped up, folding the little chocolate treats into the mix without breaking them all apart.

"You do that very well," Liz said.

"I wanted to be a great chef someday," Adam said, "but boxing gloves don't allow me to hold a spoon."

Brian laughed at the joke and that only encouraged him. They greased up several cookie sheets and Liz spooned out the cookie mix. Adam made a puppy dog face and panted like a dog.

"You want the bowl, is that it?" Liz asked. Adam barked in reply. She laughed and handed him the remains of the batter.

"Loads of sugar in that stuff," Brian said.

"Aw, just this once, please," Adam said, "See, I'll even share."

With that he put a dab of the mix on the end of Brian's nose to make Liz laugh. Adam laughed too as Brian tried to reach the blob with his tongue.

"You'd need a dog's tongue to reach that," he said, "let me." And with that he licked the batter off Brian's nose.

"Ew, you never know where that nose has been," Liz said.

"And maybe his tongue has been licking his balls all day long," Brian said. "Dogs do that, you know."

"Boys can be so gross," Liz said.

"I don't think so," Adam said. And before Brian could dodge the bullet, Adam gave him a kiss on the lips. Then he realized what he had done...afterwards. Afterwards, when it was too late to take it back.

"Did he just kiss you?" Liz asked.

"Sure looks like it, way to go, boy wonder," Brian said. But there was no laughing it off now.

"He kissed you...oh my," Liz said as she sat down at the table.

"At least he didn't lick my balls," Brian said. But she wasn't buying any nonsense.

"Are you guys like...are you gay?" she asked.

Brian looked at her and only saw shock, not dismay. Maybe it was time to come clean.

"I've always been gay," he said. "It just seemed too personal to tell you."

"I'm gay too," Adam said, "and I'm Brian's boyfriend."

Brian smiled at him. It was the first time Adam had put it into words.

"Oh my...oh my," Liz said. "This explains a lot."

"I never tried to lead you on..." Brian said.

"Oh, no, Brian. It's ok. I mean I'm not mad or anything, it's just a shock."

Adam sat down and she stared into his face for a moment. "You love him, don't you?"

"He's everything to me," Adam said in reply. Then he looked across the table at Brian. "I really mean that."

"I know, I love you too, remember?"

"This is just so amazing," Liz said, "I didn't know any gay boys until just now."

"You're the only one that knows, Liz," Brian said.

"Oh, I won't tell. I keep my promises. I told you that when we first talked at Mary's party. I mean it...your secret is safe with me."

"I don't think it would go over well with a lot of other people. I should have known you would understand. Sorry I didn't tell you before this," he said.

She looked over at Adam. "Let me see your left hand," she asked.

Adam hesitated but put his hand out. Liz turned it over and looked at his palm. For a moment she sat silently and then smiled. "It's all good, see for yourself," she said.

Brian looked down at Adam's palm and saw the long lifeline. There was only one intersecting line. "It's the same as yours," she said. And then she had to explain it all to Adam while Brian put the cookies in the oven.

Brian's father came home at nine to find them playing cards at the kitchen table and eating fresh baked cookies.

"This looks like a party, don't let me interrupt," he said.

"Adam is staying over tonight," Brian told him.

"That's fine," he replied.

"Would you like a cookie, Mr. Mahoney?" Adam asked.

"Yeah, I would, and some milk too if there's any left."

Mom came home during the sixth batch of cookies while they were all playing cards. She didn't know what to make of it. It was late so Adam and Brian walked Liz home. She kissed them both and then as a final gesture made the zipper motion across her lips before closing the door.

"I like her," Adam said. "What a cool friend. I'm sorry if I spilled the beans, Brian."

"No foul. Seems like she's on our side," Brian said.

"She loves you," Adam said.

"I'm afraid so, but I love you and the better man won."

"I think so too," he said. It was going to be a great night.