



NIGHT
WATCH

A STORY OF THE TELLING

EDEN WINTERS

Warning

This ebook contains adult language and themes, including graphic descriptions of sexual acts which some may find offensive, particularly, of the male/male variety. It is intended for mature readers only, of legal age to possess such material in their area.

This is a work of fiction. And resemblance to actual people, places, or events is purely coincidental.

Night Watch

© 2010 by Eden Winters

Cover art by Jared Rackler

All rights reserved. No part of this ebook may be reproduced without written permission of the author, except as brief quotations as in the case of reviews.

Many thanks to Pam for the story idea and proofing skills, to Meg for her invaluable input, and to Bruce for friendship and lending his expertise in what life can be like for a survivor of war. Thanks also go to Jared for the cover that brought tears to my eyes. Hugs and a debt of gratitude I could never repay go to Lynda, who taught me about grounding.

This story is dedicated to anyone who's ever hidden in a closet on the Fourth of July, or has wanted to.

Night Watch – *A Story of The Telling*

Eden Winters

Javier Ortiz, better known to his friends as Jay, pulled canned drinks from a case, pushing them down into a tin tub full of ice. The chill was a nice contrast to the heat and humidity that plastered his hair to his forehead and T-shirt to his back. He wiped an ice-cold hand across his sweaty brow, reveling in the cool water that ran down his face. All around him booths sprouted, mushroom-like, on the football field, amid the rasps and thuds of saws and hammers. Giant, inflatable kids' amusements rose from the grass like a herd of plastic beasts. Already the scent of hotdogs and popcorn wafted on the breeze, making his stomach growl. In a few hours the area would be packed with people, children riding the carousel ponies and munching on candy apples and funnel cakes.

His cell phone rang, and he dried his damp hands off on his T-shirt before answering. "Hi, Michael." Jay could well imagine how sappy his grin must have looked. He had it bad, knew it, and wouldn't dream of hiding it.

He listened to the slow, southern drawl that drifted over his cell phone's tiny speaker. "What time do you think you'll be home? Want me to cook something?"

"I'll get there around 5:30," Jay replied. "No need to cook. I'll take a quick shower, and then I want to take you someplace special."

"I'll be ready. Can hardly wait." There was a brief pause, and then, "I love you."

Jay knew Michael loved him, even if that fact wasn't often articulated. Those words, when they were said, were all the more special because they meant something; Michael never uttered them lightly or spoke them from force of habit, all mushed together, like some people did.

"Yeah, love you, too. See you soon." Jay hung up and tucked the phone into his shorts pocket before turning to face his best friend, Angie.

"You really love my brother, don't you?" she asked, the gleam in her eyes and the approving smile on her heavily glossed lips saying she already knew the answer – and didn't mind at all.

If possible, his grin grew wider. He'd gladly crow to anyone who'd listen about the man he had waiting at home, thanks to her. "More than I've ever loved anyone. You should be proud, since it was your meddling, prodding, and scheming that brought us together to begin with." He gave her a mock-stern expression.

It didn't have the desired effect. Angie threw back her head and laughed. "And you are eternally in my debt for that, aren't you?"

While he couldn't see it, he was very familiar with how his lovesick, smitten look felt sliding into place. "Yeah, I am," he admitted.

A sharp *pop* sounded nearby and they both jumped as a celebrant got an early start on the fireworks. Angie's smile fell. "Where are you taking him tonight?" Jay knew she wasn't being nosy, she was genuinely concerned. Although Michael was younger than his sister in age, four years of war had left him older, wiser, and with scars that may never heal – scars that could reopen tonight.

"I thought I'd start by taking him to Mama's Italian, then go on from

there to the double feature at the cinema."

Angie nodded her approval. "Yeah, they're both inside the mall. That ought to be safe enough. When does the second movie end?"

"Just about midnight." They exchanged a look. *After most of the fireworks displays have finished* didn't need to be said aloud.

While Jay and Michael were watching movies, Angie would be selling drinks here in the booth, the proceeds benefiting the college she and Jay had both graduated from. Those efforts meant that future students, who wouldn't otherwise have the funds for college, would get that chance; just like Jay and Angie had through scholarships.

A banner that read, "Welcome to Avery University's 23rd Annual Fourth of July Celebration," whipped and snapped overhead in the breeze. It was the first time since moving to Alabama that Jay wouldn't be helping with concessions or staying to watch the show. Ever since he was a little kid, he'd loved settling on the grass or a blanket at this time of year, surrounded by family and friends, to experience the extravagant, noisy displays streaking the night sky with splashes of color. The air would be peppered with "ohhs" and "ahhhs" of wonder after every brilliant burst. How could anyone not enjoy such an awesome sight? A rude awakening to different points of view the previous year inspired Jay to miss the festivities this time. Having made other plans that didn't involve loud noises and pyrotechnics, his contribution this year was limited to ferrying supplies in Angie's truck all afternoon, and he no longer looked forward to sundown.

Angie's brother Michael was an army veteran recently returned from Iraq, and plagued by post-traumatic stress. That stress manifested as agoraphobia. Michael found being out of doors unnerving enough without the blasts and rumbles that would no doubt remind him of things best forgotten. Neither Angie nor Jay wanted to witness what the fireworks displays would do to him, the reason Jay had planned indoor

activities until the danger passed. Last New Year's Eve had left a lasting impression. Jay would never dream of telling the man that's why they were going out, or mention that hellish night. The poor guy found his condition humiliating enough as it was.

A handsome blond man strolled up to the booth, and Angie stepped behind a half-finished counter, donning a friendly smile. "Can I help you?" A tool belt and hard hat gave evidence that this was one of the construction crew, possibly a student, donating a day's work for a worthy cause. Angie had a thing for construction workers. And truck drivers. And firemen. And cops. If they wore a uniform, they were sure to attract the redhead's attention. Unfortunately, she seemed to be a "catch and release" kind of gal, always finding some major flaw within a few weeks of dating. She called it "being picky." Jay called it "being defensive."

Angie's smile was answered in kind, and Jay couldn't help noticing the flare of attraction between the two. It looked like construction worker was on tonight's menu. "Well, sis," he said, ensuring the guy knew he wasn't a rival even though, with his dark, Hispanic looks, he didn't favor the pale skinned, redheaded Angie. If gay marriage were legal in Alabama, however, she'd probably be his sister-in-law one day. "If you can take care of the rest, I think I'll be heading off now." As expected, the new arrival jumped in, offering his assistance with finishing the booth. Angie wasn't the only one capable of a little matchmaking. Now if she could only stop chasing men off and find herself a keeper.

She turned away from the prospective suitor for a brief moment, worried eyes meeting Jay's. "Take care of him, and if you need me, call. Okay?" Lines formed on her forehead and she nibbled at the gloss on her lower lip. "I could still get Charlene to take over here for me."

Jay snorted. "And if we both descend on the apartment like the cavalry, Michael will say we're babying him and won't thank us for it. He's already complained about us calling every few minutes to check on him."

Next time we need to coordinate, so we're not so obvious." They had to learn how to pull off being protective without making Michael feel even more helpless than he already did. They didn't seem to be doing a good job of it currently.

Jay pulled his friend into a quick, sisterly hug. "It'll be fine. Trust me." He wished he was as confident as he pretended to be. With his partner's sanity and well-being on the line, failure on this mission was not an option.

He left Angie and the construction worker to their flirting, silently wishing them all the best. Since landing in a meaningful relationship, he privately hoped all his friends could do the same, for he'd never been so happy, despite a few obstacles. Angie, with deep scars of her own, deserved a little happiness too, in his opinion, if she'd just let her guard down long enough to find it.

His live-in partner was wonderful, but their relationship was filled with challenges that other couples he knew didn't have to face. Michael had so many dark memories.

On the outside, the blue-eyed country boy looked like any other garden variety college freshman, happy and carefree, quick with a joke and even quicker to offer a helping hand to those who needed it. On the inside, however; he was an unarmed soldier facing a constant horde of relentless demons – demons that Jay was determined to help him overcome.

Jay squeezed into his Toyota Tercel, thinking how nice it would be to abandon it in favor of something a bit roomier. At over six feet each, neither Jay nor Michael were very comfortable in his high school graduation present, already well used when he'd gotten it. It was time to hand it down to the younger sister who'd been hinting since Christmas.

Out of college and making decent money now, Jay could afford a bigger,

more solid vehicle, one that might make Michael feel safer. The Hummer or Jeep that Jay had dreamed of were out of the question, though. Lately, a lot of decisions hinged on avoiding potential triggers to Michael's condition. Not that Jay minded, it was just something always to be considered, like asking for tables away from the windows in restaurants, and discretely suggesting to friends that perhaps the barbeque at their summer party was best eaten indoors — to avoid mosquitoes, of course. It had nothing to do with Michael's fear of open spaces, nothing at all.

He'd no sooner pulled out onto the interstate when traffic slowed to a crawl, finally stopping altogether. It was only five miles to his exit, and traveling this bit of blacktop was faster than taking the back roads, usually. It looked like that wouldn't be the case today. Stuck in the right lane, there was no way to do a U-turn and exit the highway, either. Jay looked at his watch. It was only 5:15, unless there was something major going on up ahead he had plenty of time to secure his lover away from the noise and flashing lights that might trigger a panic attack. The largest displays wouldn't start before dark.

He drummed his hand against the steering wheel in frustration as the minutes ticked away. The frantic beat of Latino music, supplied by the Spanish station in Atlanta, got on his nerves, and he turned the radio off rather than hunt for an alternative with a more soothing play list. Five minutes passed. The air conditioner fought a losing battle with the summer heat, and he finally gave up and rolled down the window.

From between the rows of stalled cars a man was running, dressed in the monogrammed red T-shirt of a local volunteer firefighter. "Does anyone know Spanish?" the he called, pausing between cars.

Without thinking twice, Jay hollered to be heard over the noise of honking vehicles, "I do!" He pulled the Tercel to the side of the road and followed the man at a trot. They reached the reason for the backlogged traffic: a tractor trailer jackknifed in the road, blocking both lanes.

Several ambulances and patrol cars were on the scene, parked away from the wreck. Lights were flashing, and a uniformed man Jay assumed was the truck's driver was being attended by a paramedic.

Jay's escort grabbed him by the arm, dragging him closer to the scene. "I found someone," he shouted. The hood of a small car was wedged underneath the trailer. It looked as though the shiny silver tanker truck had tried to eat the tiny blue Ford Focus.

"Thank God!" one of the officers cried, rushing over. Jay recognized him as one of Angie's former boyfriends. A beefy arm draped his shoulders and he was guided closer to the wreck. "Damn, Ortiz, you have no idea how glad I am to see you here. There's a family in there," he pointed toward the car, "and they won't let us get them out. I don't think they understand English."

The scent of gasoline stung Jay's nose. Liquid pooled from underneath the car that he hoped was just water from a busted radiator. If it was gas, one spark and... "Hey, Steve. What's the problem?" he asked.

"The woman is out cold and the kids are afraid and won't unlock the doors. We have to get them out! We don't want to use force if we don't have to." Sergeant Steve Bledsoe, a big bear of a man, was probably the wrong choice to send to deal with a bunch of frightened kids. He'd towered over the tiny Angie. Hell, he towered over Jay, and had presented a scary vision the first time the door had opened to reveal his uniform-clad self filling the doorway of the house Jay and Angie shared with a handful of other students. Small wonder that the kids were frightened. "The car is registered to a Theresa Martinez over in Hanley," Officer Steve added.

That was all Jay needed to know. There was a large immigrant population there, and Angie, a registered nurse at Mercy General in Hanley, had called upon him as a translator more than once. He eased toward the car door so as not to spook the kids, deciding on the passenger side

instead of the driver's where a woman lay slumped against the steering wheel. Her face was hidden, but blood marred her hair. Jay crossed himself and said a prayer. Three boys, ranging in ages from approximately ten to four, stared back at him. The terror reflected in their dark eyes momentarily reminded him of Michael, waking from a nightmare. May these kids never have to know that kind of fear.

All three were yelling at once, the two younger ones in the backseat nearly hysterical. Their older brother, in front in the passenger seat, was trying to comfort them, but was too frightened himself to have much effect.

"Mamá! Mamá!" the youngest screamed. As calmly as he could, Jay approached, keeping to the patches of dry asphalt, wary eyes alert to the encroaching pool of what could be water, gasoline, or a mix. Like before with Angie, his own doubts couldn't be allowed to show. He must appear cool, confident, and in control if he was to win the kids over.

He pasted on what he hoped passed for friendly smile. "Hello," he said, tapping at the window beside the oldest boy. "I'm Javier Ortiz. What's your name?" A baleful glare was his only response. His second attempt was in Spanish.

The kids began rattling away, all talking at once. It took a few moments for Jay to convince them to let the oldest talk.

"I'm Miguel," the boy said in Spanish. Based on his accent, Jay would guess he came from somewhere near Chihuahua. "Those are my brothers, Mario and Juan-Carlos."

Jay forced another wide display of teeth. "Juan-Carlos? Really? My father's name is Juan-Carlos, and I have a cousin named Mario." Two cousins, truth be told.

Miguel's shoulders relaxed slightly and the boys in the back settled.

Being able to understand what was being said probably had a lot to do with that, in Jay's opinion. Steve, standing off the side, hissed, "We need to hurry."

"I know," Jay whispered from the side of his mouth through his faked smile. "As long as they're scared they won't cooperate." A half-dozen younger sisters had taught him that.

Miguel's suspicion-filled eyes narrowed at the cop. "He wants to take my brothers away." His growl was amazingly fierce for so small a guy.

Jay's instincts were screaming at him to yank the kids from the car and run as far away as he could. If only they'd unlock the doors! He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled, willing the boys not to see his fear. He had to gain their trust, and fast. "No, he wants to take you, your brothers, and your *mamá*, to safety. It's not safe here. Your mother is hurt, and needs to see a doctor."

The boy glanced at his mother, his expression softening. It hardened when he turned back to Jay. "*Mamá* doesn't like doctors," he said. His eyes were cold and hard, his mind made up.

Jay would just have to unmake it -- time was running out. "But she needs a doctor," he said, trying to maintain a casual tone.

"She doesn't like them," Miguel repeated. When the boy folded his arms across his chest and poked his lower lip out, Jay knew he'd have to think of another tactic. Once again, he thought of six younger sisters and all the lessons in patience he'd learned while trying to reason with them.

"Miguel, your *mamá* has blood on her hair. Band-aids won't stick to hair, and she may have a cut. If it's not cleaned properly it could get infected. Those men and woman," he pointed toward the paramedics, "can help her."

The boy unfolded his arms, his open defiance fading into uncertainty. "What about me and my brothers? What will they do with us?"

"Do you have family nearby? Is there someone you can call?" Jay hoped there was, for the boys' sakes and their mother's. A traumatic event such as this was not a good time to be all alone in the world.

The boy's brows knitted together, and his dark eyes appeared thoughtful. He nodded and answered, "I have an aunt."

"What's her number?" Jay pulled his cell phone from his pocket, breath catching when he recalled an incident on the evening news involving a cell phone and a gas pump. It took all his self control not to fling it across the road. What if it rang while he was enveloped in gas fumes?

Miguel rattled off a phone number but Jay shook his head. "We need to go over there to call," he said, nodding toward a waiting ambulance. "I can't do it here."

Settling back into the seat, Miguel swiveled his gaze to his mother and back at Jay again. "No signal?" he asked.

"Something like that," was all Jay would admit to.

He was starting to lose hope, growing annoyed at Steve's tapping foot, when the boy asked, "You promise they won't take us away?"

What had happened in this *muchacho's* life to give him such a worry? Then again, with undocumented immigrants living in his community, people he knew had probably been taken away in police cruisers and never returned. Hopefully, the boy and his family weren't in the country illegally. If the car was properly registered, then that shouldn't be the case. "If you come with me, I'll call your aunt." Sadly, that's the only promise he could give at this point.

Miguel, fast becoming a pro at negotiations, threw in, "Will you stay with us until she gets here?"

Jay studied his watch, knowing the deal was off if he said no. With any luck, there'd still be time to get to Michael before the sun went down and the fireworks started in earnest, so he gave another promise he stood a chance of keeping. "I will."

He and Miguel stared at each other through the car's window for what seemed a small eternity. Just when he thought he'd crack under the tension, a loud *click* announced the release of the door locks. The officer wasted no time scrambling around the car to reach the injured woman. A two-man paramedic team ran forward with a gurney.

With one last look at his mother, Miguel opened the door and stepped out. In the back seat a child of about six was struggling with the door. Miguel opened it from the outside. "Child lock," he explained, as the youngest of the boys crawled over the other brother to launch himself at Jay, tears streaming from swollen eyes.

Clutching the child, Jay took the hand of the other small boy. Miguel fell into step beside him, bringing to mind someone much older. Perhaps big brother was used to taking care of younger siblings, as Jay was. He felt a kinship to the kid who'd stepped into the authoritative role in his mother's place.

Jay guided the brothers toward the waiting paramedics, who rushed forward and hustled them away from the immediate danger. Jay said another prayer for the woman. With all the fumes surrounding the vehicle, one little spark could be disastrous, to the remaining occupant of the car, the officer and paramedics, and the tanker holding it in place.

He held his breath when the paramedics wheeling the gurney passed, letting it out in a relieved sigh when he saw the steady rise and fall of the mother's chest. Her eyes were open, and she was muttering a litany

under her breath. At Steve's urging, Jay spoke to her, taking it as a positive sign that she could answer coherently. He stayed with the family, translating the officers' and paramedics' questions. The boys were checked out and, luckily, had only sustained a few minor bruises and scrapes. Juan-Carlos held out an arm to show Jay a Superman Band-aid. Their mother needed more care than the on-site paramedics could give, and was loaded into an ambulance. The children were placed into Steve's squad car to follow.

They refused to go without Jay, and the pleading look in Steve's eyes added its voice. From what Jay could remember, Steve wasn't very comfortable around children, which didn't sit well with Angie, a pediatric nurse who planned to someday have a few kids of her own. The boys seemed to sense Steve's lack of child-dealing skills, appearing stiff and uncomfortable whenever the officer approached. With one more look at his watch, Jay climbed into the back seat beside Juan-Carlos. Mario, the youngest, curled into his side. Miguel was strapped into the front seat beside Steve. When Jay pulled out his cell phone to call Michael he remembered the boys' aunt.

He called on the way to the hospital, answering a steady stream of rapid-fire questions, and then passed the phone around to each boy so their aunt could see for herself that they were all right.

Miguel handed it back. "It's beeping," he said.

Jay had just enough time to register the message, "Low Battery" before the screen faded out. Shit! He'd forgotten to charge it last night. He'd just have to wait until he got to the hospital to call home.

Steve, the boys' official baby sitter until their aunt arrived, sprawled his large frame in a chair in the Emergency waiting room, intent on paperwork. Jay kept the boys entertained with stories of his family back in Texas, hoping their mom wouldn't mind them drinking soda and eating vending machine crackers. His own mother would have had a fit, but it

was past dinnertime and the boys were hungry. The aunt arrived at the hospital nearly an hour after they did. Jay was exhausted. "Sorry, so sorry, late; many, many cars. *Muchas gra...umm...thank you, thank you!*" she said in faltering English, grabbing and squeezing the breath out of Jay before doing the same to the boys.

Steve stood, yawning and stretching. The woman ran fearful eyes over his massive frame. "Are you Yadira Sanchez?" he asked, hope in his eyes.

"Sí"

Steve handed over a clipboard and had her sign a form, then, with a nod toward Jay and the kids, fled. His sigh of relief was unmistakable, even in the crowded, noisy waiting room.

When Jay addressed the woman in Spanish she reverted to the language she appeared more comfortable with. "Those poor boys!" she exclaimed. "What would we have done without you? You're an angel!" The children were chattering, their tales of what happened growing more far-fetched and exaggerated with each telling.

Several more minutes passed before the doctor came out, and Jay helped explain Theresa's condition, and that she wouldn't be released until morning. The aunt said she'd take her nephews with her for the night, and return to care for her sister tomorrow.

All three youngsters hugged Jay goodbye. "Is it okay if I call in few days, to see how the boys and your sister are doing?"

The woman smiled, patting Jay's cheek. "Your *mamá* must be so proud of you," she said, jotting her phone number on a scrape of paper. "I'm sure the boys will be thrilled to hear from you." Her nephews trailed behind her when she left. They didn't stop waving to Jay until they'd passed through the glass doors of the hospital's Emergency exit.

All Jay's change that hadn't found a new home in the vending machines was dropped into a pay phone. He sincerely hoped Michael wouldn't be upset about his being late without calling sooner. Jay only received a busy signal when he dialed the home phone. That was odd. They had call waiting. The call to Michael's cell phone went directly to voice mail.

He accepted a ride in a patrol car back to his vehicle, eyes flashing to his watch every few minutes, accompanied by an impatient, "*Huff.*"

"You got a hot date or something?" the officer asked. While Steve knew Jay was gay, this guy may not.

Jay tried to play it cool. "Something like that."

That earned him a grin. "Well, if I wasn't fighting all the traffic trying to get over to Avery, you'd be with your woman a whole lot sooner."

Jay didn't reply, just clenched and unclenched his fists, fighting the urge to jump out and run. In this gridlocked traffic, a rarity for this small town, it would probably get him there a whole lot faster.

"Thanks, man," he said when they reached his car and he climbed out. The officer smiled and waved, then eased the cruiser back into traffic.

Time had slipped away. This close to the beginning of the central time line, even in July it started getting dark at eight. According to his watch, it was now seven forty-five. Back home in Brownsville, Texas, sundown wouldn't happen for nearly another hour. It was only when the first fireworks lit the sky from the direction of the university that he realized how late it truly was, figuratively. It took a few precious moments, but he located a car charger under the seat and plugged his phone in, chanting, "C'mon, c'mon", as it powered on. Three missed calls were displayed – all from Michael. Oh, shit!! He hit redial. The phone never even rang before a recorded message said, "Hi, this is Michael, I can't take your call right now... Jay pressed "End." He pulled onto the now-

cleared road, desperate to reach his exit.

He tried calling Angie to no avail; she was probably busy with the concession stand, or unable to hear her phone over all the noise. She was farther away, with no hope of fighting the college traffic to reach the apartment, but may have at least talked to Michael.

Scrolling through his phone listing, he selected "Sarah" Michael's mom, then immediately disconnected. Sarah was in Atlanta for the weekend tending a sick friend. Next, he scrolled to the listing for Michael's grandparents. Before he could dial, he thought better of it. Worrying them wouldn't help matters.

One after another of Jay and Michael's friends were considered as reinforcements, at least until Jay arrived, and each was promptly rejected when they didn't answer their phones. More than likely they were at the Avery's celebration or private parties.

He exited the interstate, negotiating the series of back roads that led into Cookesville. The Toyota was barely parked when he leaped out, running across the road to the bookstore over which he and Michael lived. Michael's car was in the parking lot, but that didn't mean anything. Whenever possible, Michael preferred to ride with someone else, rather than drive. The sun was setting when Jay pounded up the stairs, taking them two at a time, unsurprised that the apartment door was locked. His hand trembled with the keys and he had trouble getting them into the lock. There was no time for a shower. The new plan was to rush in, grab Michael, and make it to the movies as fast as they could. Thank goodness the mall was in the opposite direction from the campus.

"Michael?" Jay called, entering the seemingly deserted apartment. *Please be home, please be all right.* No answer. Where could he have gone? Had he left with someone else? Jay searched the countertop for a note and checked his phone again. No texts, no messages.

Whistling and sharp, cracking sounds drew his attention to the living room window. Down below, a group of teens were laughing, popping firecrackers on the sidewalk. The noise was frightfully loud. How much more so was it for Michael? It was too late to get him to the safety of the mall; they'd just have to batten the hatches and ride out the storm in the apartment. That is, if Michael was even there. Every light in the apartment looked to be on, but there were no other signs that anyone was home.

"Michael?" Jay yelled again. Then he heard it, a slow, steady pounding coming from the bedroom. He ran inside, following the noise. It seemed to be coming from the closet. "Michael?"

Raff, Michael's counselor, had warned Jay to be cautious when approaching during moments of anxiety, because Michael might not be entirely in control of his actions. *Thump, thump, thump*, continued from behind the partially closed closet door. Jay eased into the opening. "Michael? Oh...Michael..."

Sitting in the dark, long legs splayed in front of him and bare feet poking out the door, was Jay's lover, rocking back and forth. The back of his head bumped the wall on every backward swing, the source of the rhythmic knocking. His eyes were tightly closed and tears streamed down his face. "Oh, *Querido*," Jay murmured, crawling into the cramped space. He shoved a hand behind Michael's head, protecting it from the next impact. "Don't do that. You might hurt yourself."

Michael opened one eye. Heartbreaking agony dwelled in its blue depths. His piteous pleading of, "Make it stop; please, make it stop," had Jay wishing, if only for a moment, that he'd abandoned the Hispanic family and gotten home faster. Right now he and Michael could be laughing their butts off while nestled together in a double-seat at the movies, comfortably full of Italian food. But, no, he couldn't have left that family in need, either. Why had he had to make such a choice tonight of all nights?

From outside, chaser fireworks whistled and whined. In Michael's mind they were probably morphing into missiles. His big body began to shake.

"Did you take your pills?" Even without Michael's disgusted snort Jay knew the answer was no. Michael despised what he called "my fucking weakness," the words spat with clenched-teeth hatred, and taking the medication designed to control it would mean acknowledging the problem existed. They'd made such headway in the past year of therapy that Michael wanted to believe he was cured. That is, until he suffered another episode.

From all Jay had learned of post-traumatic stress disorder, "manageable" was about all they could hope for at this point. There were good days when Michael smiled and laughed, seemingly unhaunted by the past. Then there were bad days, like today. At least with therapy there were more good days than bad now.

Well, if he couldn't lead the horse to water or make it drink – or, more accurately, make it take a pill – they'd have to do this the old fashioned way. Jay would just have to talk him down. "I'll be right back," he said.

"No! Don't leave!" Michael hung onto Jay's arm, clinging tighter than the frightened child had earlier.

"Shh... Just for a few minutes, then I'll be right back." Michael relaxed his hold, wiping his face with the back of his hand and nodding. Jay darted into the living room. He clicked the TV on, setting the volume all the way up, and then turned on the stereo, snapping Michael's iPod into the docking station. Shit, that was loud! When he'd read an article on the Internet of how other war veterans dealt with the Fourth of July and the inevitable fireworks, so reminiscent of gunfire and grenades, it seemed like a good idea. But damn! If he weren't doing this for Michael, he wouldn't be able to stand it!

If it was just him, he'd be yanking cords out of walls in short order. Some

of the other articles had mentioned resorting to drugs and alcohol. No way were they going that route. He'd deal with the noise.

Returning to the bedroom, Jay tuned out the racket and snatched the comforter off the bed. When he draped it over the curtain rod it slipped off. He put it back, it slipped again. In desperation, he ran into the tiny kitchen area, rummaging through the junk drawer and coming up with a roll of duct tape.

Ripping off long strips and cutting the tape with his teeth, he secured the heavy quilt over the window. It looked tacky as hell, but would definitely help muffle the noise and block the flashes. He returned to the closet, pulling the still rocking Michael against his chest. "I'm here now, Michael, I'm here." His lover remained rigid for a moment and then relaxed, but only slightly. "I'm so sorry I was late. There was an accident and I was needed to interpret. A Hispanic family hit an eighteen wheeler." Jay knew from experience that the words were probably falling on deaf ears. He and Michael were close enough to touch physically, but right now a huge gulf separated them emotionally – a gulf consisting of flames, bullets, explosions, and fallen comrades. Time to close that gap and get Michael back on the right side of the chasm. But where to start?

Michael wrapped him in a squeezing hold, making Jay work for each breath. Jay wasn't about to complain. His neck became a hiding place for Michael's face, and tears seeped under the collar of his shirt. Inspiration hit. "Michael?" No response. "Michael!" Jay tried again, louder this time. "Remember that exercise Raff uses?"

A muffled grunt was his answer. "It's dark in here, so we'll have to skip the first part, but tell me five things that you hear."

For a moment he thought he hadn't been heard, and then Michael mumbled, "TV... stereo... you... "

"No, Michael. Listen closer. Focus." Clipped, one-word answers were

not a good sign.

A few more moments passed before, "Weatherman says gonna rain tomorrow." The softly spoken words were a welcome gift. If Michael concentrated on things in the here and now, maybe he could be pulled from the prison of his own mind.

Though Michael couldn't possibly see it, Jay smiled. He was breaking through. "And?"

"Hank Williams' so lonesome he could cry."

While Jay didn't particularly like country music, he'd just been converted if it helped Michael get through the night. "What else?"

Michael snuggled his head lower, resting it against Jay's chest. "Your heart going a mile a minute."

Jay leaned back to make more room, brushing the clothes hanging overhead and making the hangers rattle.

"Clothes hangers clanging together."

"Good, now one more thing."

Michael lifted his head, turning it this way and that. "I *don't* hear fireworks."

Ahhh... now they were getting somewhere. "Okay, name five things that you feel." He brushed his lips against Michael's nape.

"You kissing me." He paused. "Your arms around me." Jay stilled, letting Michael find his ground. "Your breath on my neck, your leg under mine, your shoulder against mine. You, Jay. I feel you." There was wonder in his voice.

Next came the hard part. "Do you trust me?"

"You know that I do."

"Enough to come with me?"

"Where are we going?" Fear leeches into the words.

"Just to the bed. Can you do that for me?" There wasn't enough room in the closet for the two of them to be comfortable, and the air was stuffy, smelling of shoes and sweat. Jay felt a nod against his chest, even while Michael's body tensed. What wouldn't cause a second thought for anyone else was going to take an act of courage for Michael.

Jay took his time rising from the floor, holding out one hand, a reminder of when he'd done the same over a year ago when he'd offered to help Michael from another closet – a figurative one. And just like that long ago night, Michael took the leap of faith necessary to place his hand in Jay's. Jay's heart swelled to be trusted so much, and he vowed to be worthy of that trust. They would get through this – together.

They'd made it halfway to the bed when a sharp *BOOM!* sounded outside; loud enough to be heard over the planned chaos Jay had created in the apartment. Michael recoiled, tensing to flee. Jay grasped his chin, lifting until their eyes met. "Look at me, Michael," he commanded, voice firm. "What do you see?"

Frightened eyes perused the room, falling on the nightstand. "Book," he said.

"Focus," Jay prodded. "Stay with me, Michael. I want whole sentences."

"Book you read last night."

Close enough. "Four more things."

Michael's eyes shot to the window. "Umm... Grandma's quilt duct taped over the window? Why... "

Jay cut him off. "Name three more things." It appeared the grounding exercise was working, distracting Michael from what was going on outside.

"The tennis shoe I threw out of the closet when it poked my butt."

Jay nearly snorted at the image of the neat and tidy Michael throwing things, but managed to rein it in. "Two more."

Michael's eyes fell on Jay's neck. "Your crucifix. You got the chain fixed."

"Uh-huh, one more."

"A hairbrush," he said, eyes straying to the dresser, "that belongs in the bathroom." If Michael could chide Jay about his slovenly ways, then maybe he was going to be all right. Sadly, another *pop, pop, pop*, threatened to destroy their progress. Michael jumped toward the closet.

Jay's hand on his arm stopped him. He was frantic now to keep Michael from going back in there. If that happened, the man may never come out again. A defeat of that magnitude, when they were doing so well, would be a huge setback. This was a battle they had to win. Like with the boys earlier, Jay squashed down the tremor in his voice, attempting to portray only confidence. "It's not real, Michael. Nothing outside this room exists. It's just you and me, and I would never, ever let anything happen to you. You believe that, don't you?"

Michael stared, wide-eyed, and said nothing.

Again Jay prodded, voice softer, cajoling. "You believe me, don't you, *Querido?*"

It was nearly imperceptible, but Michael's chin dipped slightly and then rose. Jay smashed their mouths together, seeking something, anything that would make Michael forget all that had happened in Iraq. If that wasn't an option, he'd settle for providing a distraction from what was going on outside the bedroom window. He slid one hand under the back of Michael's T-shirt, the other up the front, stroking, caressing, attempting to sooth the man's obviously jangled nerves, while inching them closer toward the bed. All the while his tongue stroked Michael's. Hope soared when he got a response.

Jay eased Michael's shirt up and over his head, then pressed a firm hand on Michael's chest that had him sinking down onto the mattress. Jay's mouth grazed over a day-old growth of beard, down a chiseled jaw, and onto the salty skin of Michael's neck. Michael inclined his head to give Jay more room, letting out a low moan.

Straddling Michael's body, Jay pumped his hips and pushed their groins together. Michael answered in kind, thrusting up so their hardening flesh connected, separated by several frustrating layers of material.

Michael's breath came in a series of harsh pants and his hand slid down the back of Jay's cargo shorts, squeezing a glute and using the handful of flesh as leverage to pull Jay more firmly against his body.

Jay sat back, unfastening Michael's belt, while trailing open-mouth kisses down his lover's lightly furred chest. When he reached a tantalizing pleasure trail, he paused to remove Michael's jeans before returning his mouth to a quivering abdomen. He worked his way steadily lower, mouthing Michael's cock through a pair of cotton boxers.

Being with Michael like this was always exciting, but Jay held back, wanting to go slow. He refused to take advantage of another's vulnerability. This wasn't about sex, this was about pulling the former soldier back from the abyss that occasionally threatened to swallow him whole.

Michael's cock was fully hard now, the dampness on the front of his boxers not entirely due to Jay's mouth. One strong hand kneaded Jay's shoulders, silently communicating urgency, while the other tugged at Jay's shirt. "Off!" Michael ordered.

Jay barely caught himself before replying, "Yes, sir." Now was not the time to remind Michael of taking orders from superiors or anything else remotely connected to the army. His shorts came off in record time, along with the T-shirt and both his and Michael's boxers. Next, his flip-flops dropped to the floor with a thud when he kicked them across the room. Jay and Michael slithered, skin to skin, cocks sliding against each other's.

Mouth to mouth, Jay ran his hands over every bit of skin within reach, pushing his hips against Michael's, mimicking the act he was frantic to fulfill. He worked his way down Michael's body, pausing to lick at a pair of stiff nipples. A "wheeeee... pop, pop, pop, pop, pop!" from outside made Michael jump; Jay bit a nipple lightly as a distraction. The muscles of Michael's belly tightened and Jay teased them with his teeth before working still lower.

He licked away the drop of fluid clinging to the end of Michael's cock. They both moaned. "Like that?" he asked, engulfing the flesh in his mouth without waiting for a reply.

"Ahhhh..." Michael's back arched off the bed and his fingers dug into Jay's scalp. A double-handful of hair provided leverage for his pumping. He stilled. "Sorry."

Jay released his mouthful long enough to say, "You need rough? Be rough."

"Sure?" The uncertainty in that voice nearly broke Jay's heart. Michael should never be uncertain about anything that happened between them.

He answered by being a little rough himself. Michael gasped, then groaned, fingers resuming their tugging on a fistful of wavy locks. While it ached a little, it did amazing things to Jay's libido. They'd been lovers for over a year, and for a big, tough, linebacker-looking guy, Michael wasn't often aggressive in bed, relying on Jay to take control. Tonight, Michael was definitely the one in the driver's seat, and it was sexy as hell, the reason notwithstanding.

With so much commotion in the background from the TV and stereo, the normally reserved Michael also didn't seem to care how much noise he made, groaning and swearing, "Damn! Shit! Ohhhhhh! So good!" Jay rolled Michael's balls with one hand, holding his mouth still while Michael fucked his face. Jay humped the mattress, his free hand on Michael's ass, feeling the muscles bunching with each thrust.

Michael grabbed Jay by the shoulders and pulled until they were lying face to face, with Jay sprawled on top. Their mouths met again before Michael growled, "I wanna fuck you." The commanding tone sent shivers down Jay's spine.

While he'd originally only planned to hold the man and talk him through the terror, Jay was more than willing to give whatever was needed. He rolled off Michael, stretching to reach the nightstand where they kept the lube.

He never made it. Michael pounced, full weight smashing Jay onto the bed crosswise, to the sound of pops and sputters from the other side of the window.

Michael was always a thoughtful, considerate lover, too thoughtful and considerate at times, because he always seemed to be holding back. Tonight, he gave his all. The finger that wormed inside of Jay wasn't dry, so Michael must be using spit. After a cursory preparation, Jay felt the burn as Michael slid inside of him, not forcefully enough to injure, but enough to threaten soreness come morning.

Michael grunted and shoved, working his way inside. Once fully sheathed, he paused just a moment, nipping Jay's neck and shoulders with his teeth. He pushed in hard before establishing a fast and furious pace. The bed screeched and squealed, the headboard beating the wall with a sharp *rap, rap rap*. Flesh slapped against flesh and Jay grabbed the edge of the mattress to stop a slide into the floor.

Michael paused long enough to grab his shoulders and pull him back onto the bed. There was a good chance Jay might be walking funny tomorrow, but that was tomorrow, and not worth thinking about today. And it was a small price to pay to free Michael from hell.

Whenever Jay grunted, Michael pounded harder, adding his own pants and moans to their lustful harmony. With all the ruckus they were making, Jay was grateful that they lived in a business district, with no close neighbors, and the store beneath them closed for the night.

Michael pulled out without warning, flipping Jay over as though he weighed nothing. Jay's feet landed over Michael's shoulders, and Michael paused to add more spit before reentering. Once more a frantic pace was set, Michael's weight balanced on bulging arms. His eyes darted back and forth behind closed lids.

Jay wrapped a hand around his cock, working it in time with Michael's thrusts.

Michael threw his head back, chanting, "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck." The muscles in his arms and belly tensed. "Ah, ah, ah..." An expression that could either mean excruciating pain or intense pleasure possessed Michael's face. The primal look, that raw sexuality, triggered Jay's own orgasm. Michael collapsed in a heap on Jay's come-spattered stomach.

They lay panting, neither saying a word. When Michael rolled to the side, Jay got up, wiping them both off with a pair of discarded boxers. He tugged on the mattress, pulling it back onto the box spring, then

tucked the sheets underneath it as best he could with Michael lying on it. The bed looked like a tornado had hit it. Actually, a tornado of sorts had hit it; a tornado made of bullets, screams, and bad memories.

He began to worry when Michael didn't move. Then, finally, the blond eased onto his back, worry and regret in his eyes. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, *Querido*, you would never hurt me." Jay crawled onto the mattress, hiding a wince. He lay on top of the covers next to Michael, too hot to climb beneath.

"What kept you?" Michael said, inching close enough to rest his head on Jay's chest.

With all that had transpired, and given his state of mind at the time, it was little wonder that Michael didn't remember being told earlier. "I was on my way home, and a car had run under a semi on the interstate. The family didn't speak English and I was needed to translate."

"Was it bad? Are they okay?" Bless Michael. As deeply as he was hurting, he could still worry for others.

"The woman was banged up, but last I heard she'd be okay. The biggest danger was..." Jay trailed off, catching himself before mentioning the fire hazard. Almost of their own accord, his fingers sought out a small, circular spot on Michael's wrist, where he'd been struck by burning debris the day the enemy had ambushed the convoy he'd ridden in.

Jay pulled Michael closer, thoughts of what could have happened today, and what nearly happening in Iraq, creating visions he didn't want to see. "I'd rather have been here with you," Jay slurred against Michael's hair.

"You did what you had to do." Jay recognized those words. Raff often used them to explain the horrors of war, and the decisions, actions, and events that led to Michael's condition. "I wish you'd have been here, but

I'm proud of you for helping that family."

They clung to each other, Jay's hand leaving the burn mark to work up Michael's chest. Deep, even breaths against his skin made him think that Michael had fallen asleep. Then, a softly spoken, "How can you possibly want me when I'm so broken?" could barely be made out over the caterwauling from the living room.

"Oh, Michael," Jay said, running his hand through a thatch of blond hair that was much longer than it had been when he'd first met former Army Corporal Ritter just over a year ago. Michael had only ended his service the previous day. "You're not broken."

"Yes, I am. Even after all this time I still don't feel comfortable walking down the street in my own hometown, I wake you up with my screaming in the middle of the night, and a car's backfire leaves me nervous for days."

"And I wake you up with my snoring, leave half-full cups of coffee on the counter, squeeze the toothpaste the wrong way, and receive at least three phone calls a day from my family." His lips followed his hand across Michael's forehead. "Oh, not to mention that you have to move junk out of the way whenever you get into my car, I leave my hairbrush on the dresser, and my clothes on the floor. Nobody's perfect. That's what a relationship is all about; loving someone for who they are, big ears and all."

The reference to Jay's large ears brought a smile to Michael's face, a faint one, but a smile nonetheless. There wasn't much Jay wouldn't do just to see that smile.

"They're not that big." Michael reached up to trace the rim of one with his finger, then squirmed a bit, getting comfortable. The let down from an adrenaline rush always left him drained. Jay, pretty cozy himself, could have stayed there forever, perfectly content. Well, if not for all the

noise.

As if reading his thoughts, Michael said, "You can turn off the TV and stereo now; I think I'm going to be all right."

Thank heaven! Jay raced to the living room, clicking off the TV and putting a soft jazz CD on the stereo, a compromise between Jay's favorite Latin rhythms and Michael's choice of classic country tunes. The stereo was turned down low. When he returned to the bedroom, Michael was fast asleep.

Outside the chaos had been reduced to an occasional pop in the distance, but instead of curling up and falling asleep, Jay left the lights on, fixing a pot of coffee and a sandwich, worrying if Michael had eaten.

Thinking of his own shortcomings, resigned to do better, he washed up the handful of dishes in the sink before locking up. He prepared a small tray of snacks in case Michael woke up hungry, adding his cup of coffee and returning to the bedroom. Next, he emptied the pockets of his and Michael's clothes, then placed the garments in the bathroom hamper, something he did all too rarely. He'd have to work harder on that. The lights were left on purposely.

He settled on the bed with the book from the nightstand, waiting. Soon the phantom soldiers would appear, Michael's fallen comrades, followed by a visit from a dead friend that, thanks to therapy, no longer blamed Michael, just asked him to watch over loved ones left behind.

Jay sighed, sipping coffee to stay awake. This wasn't the first time, and likely wouldn't be the last, that some trigger erased time, placing Michael back in the middle of a firefight – a firefight that had cost him a friend, some of his hearing and, very nearly, his life. It had definitely stolen his innocence and confidence.

Once more, as he'd occasionally done over the past year, Jay considered how much easier life would be with a less traumatized partner, feeling immediate guilt for those thoughts. It wasn't Michael's fault, and there was no way he'd let a friend, much less a lover, deal with that kind of pain on his own. Besides, Jay'd had "easy" before, and it couldn't compare to now. No matter how tough the nights could be, they were worth it. Michael was worth it.

Tonight he'd been called upon, and would be called upon again, to wipe away tears, hold a trembling form, and whisper reassurances. He'd repeat the words, "It's all right, Michael; I'm here. It's all right," over and over again, until they were believed. Afterward, he'd sing Spanish lullabies until heavy lids closed over those blue, blue eyes, and Michael fell asleep again. He'd give all his worldly possessions to take the burden away, make Michael's life something closer to normal, but would the man still be the same? Would they have even gotten together? Tomorrow Jay would be bleary-eyed and Michael would be apologetic. Next week they'd both be in the therapist's office, providing details and begging for answers.

Gazing down at the still form that, for now, was peacefully asleep, Jay knew that, even if he had to stay awake every single night of his life and go to therapy with Michael every day, he'd gladly do it. He'd be there through the aftermath.

He reached into the nightstand drawer, pulling out a picture taken five years ago, when Michael had first been inducted into the military. The recruit in the photo appeared so young, so untainted by doubt and self-recriminations; just another teen, leaving home for the first time. Though Michael refused to look at the picture, Jay cherished it, having fallen in love with its subject years before meeting the man in person.

At a time in his life when he'd been depressed and lonely, Jay had found this picture, or rather, been given it by Angie, adopting the soldier within as friend and confidant. He ran a hand over this earlier version

of the man who now lay beside him. When he'd first seen this image he never would have believed that, four years later, Michael would fill those roles in truth. Dog-eared and frayed from excessive handling, now protected in a glass frame, this photo had brought Jay comfort even before he'd had a chance to return the favor. He replaced the precious keepsake in the drawer.

His resumed reading the book on PTSD that he'd hidden beneath the cover of an engineering manual. He studied all he could find on the subject, attended counseling sessions with Michael, and did everything else he could think of to be loving and supportive. All the while he knew that, never having been to war, he could never fully understand what Michael had endured, and was still enduring. If he couldn't *understand*, at least he could be *understanding*.

"I promised once to give you whatever you needed. I meant it then, and I mean it now. I'll always mean it." He leaned in and brushed his lips against Michael's forehead. "*Te amo, Querido; y buenas noches*. I am here. You don't have to face this alone."

In his sleep Michael wrapped his arms around Jay, muttering, "Love you."

And that, in Jay's eyes, was what made it all worthwhile. What he and his partner shared was worth fighting for. Michael wasn't broken, merely dented by war.

Michael had been the soldier on duty on the battlefields of Iraq; tonight, on the battlefield of bitter memories, the watch belonged to Jay.

