

Excerpted from *A Nice Man*  
by  
Padgett Gerler

## What Does Love Sound Like?

Virginia Mae lay in the unfamiliar bed, clutching her sides for comfort. But the clutching did little to alleviate the gut-wrenching pain she was feeling. She needed her Charlie, but Charlie was the reason for the pain. She didn't need the Charlie who had just died and left her alone; she hadn't needed that Charlie for quite some time. She needed the Charlie of years ago. She needed the Charlie who could touch her skin and heal her soul. Her soul heaved with anguish. If only she could spoon with Charlie in that strange bed. That would calm the heaving. She could feel Charlie touching and caressing her and whispering sweet things in her ear as she buried her face in the pillow to muffle her sobs.

Charlie and Virginia Mae had been virgins on their wedding night. They were clumsy and playful, but they were never embarrassed or awkward when it came to their sexuality, their intimacy. They were eager to explore one another's bodies,

*A Nice Man*

anxious to engage in love making with abandon. They trusted each other completely and were always willing to try new things in bed. Some things made them giggle uncontrollably, but even the giggling added to the fullness of the experience. They had had a wonderful, rich sex life...until Charlie had banished their only child.

But on that night while Virginia Mae lay clutching, she remembered only the good times—the caressing, the tenderness, the longing, the love.

That's when she heard it—those sounds she remembered from so long ago. They were sounds of love, those same sounds she and Charlie had made for most of the years of their life together. But where were the sounds of love coming from? Were they just in her head? Then she realized they were coming from the other side of the wall, the wall that connected her to Eric and Tony's bedroom.

When Virginia Mae had thought of homosexual sex—though she hadn't allowed herself to think of it much at all—she thought of aggression. She couldn't tell you why, but that's just the way it seemed in her mind. She thought it was probably rough and loud and forceful. But she had been wrong. Her son and his partner sounded just like she and Charlie had sounded. Eric and Tony sounded like two people in love.

Virginia Mae buried her face deeper in the pillow and clutched her sides harder as she wept for the loss of her Charlie and for the understanding of her child and the man he loved.

When Virginia Mae woke the following morning, she smelled coffee. She tried to get out of bed but found that her body ached from the clutching and sobbing and the understanding of the night before. She moved slowly to the bathroom. When she looked into the vanity mirror, she saw that she had cried her eyes into puffy slits. She turned on the shower, slid out of her nightgown, and stepped into the steaming stream of water. She stood motionless while the shower resurrected her. Once she felt human, Virginia Mae stepped out, towed herself dry, and wrapped herself in her terry cloth robe. She moisturized her face, brushed her teeth, ran a comb through her hair, and headed for the kitchen.

There she found Eric and Tony, side by side, preparing breakfast and smiling at one another. Virginia Mae approached Eric, as usual, and gave him a big hug and a peck on the cheek. Tony stood aside as he always did, a little uncomfortable and self conscience, and gave mother and son their space and their time together. Then Virginia Mae turned, put her arms around Tony's neck, gave him a gentle hug and a kiss on his cheek. Tony's response was awkward and not very responsive at all. He was stunned by Virginia Mae's embrace. Virginia Mae had expected Tony to be taken aback and wasn't expecting much in return. She was confident, though, that their comfortable embraces would come in time. She'd give their relationship all the room it needed to grow.