

## CALL BACK OUR YESTERDAYS

### CHAPTER ONE

**M**ICHAEL O'BRIAN PACED OUT SUNLIT SQUARES of kitchen tile, waiting for Jeff to answer the phone. He knew the boy was at home. Since the sixteen-year-old got his license a month ago, Jeff didn't go anywhere on foot if he could drive—even the thousand feet that separated the two ranch houses. And through his window, Michael saw Jeff's blue pickup truck parked in the driveway next door.

As Michael listened to the phone ring, that strange prickly sensation he felt all morning long ran down his spine again.

*Kachinas* dancing on his grave, his mother would call the troublesome itch. The feeling wasn't new, a milder version of it tickled him at the beginning of every laboratory trial of a new drug, or when he chaired the annual stockholders' meeting. But it hadn't been this strong in years—not since Ecuador. Not since the day he ran out on Laura in Quito.

"All right, all right, I'm here!" An exasperated young tenor voice shouted in Michael's ear.

"Jeff! What in the hell took you so long? I was just going to hang up."

"Well, Mike, it's Murphy's Law. If you want the phone to ring, just get in the shower, or go to the toi—"

"OK, OK, I get the picture," Michael chuckled. "Say, Jeff, I wanted to find out exactly when you're going to leave on that fishing trip tomorrow. I know you'll be here to feed the horses for me this afternoon. But just in case something comes up at the conference, and I have to stay overnight in San Francisco, will you be able to take care of them again tomorrow morning?"

"Sure—no problem," came the swift reply. "Todd and his folks aren't picking me up until ten or so. You'll be back for sure by tomorrow night, won't you?"

"Of course, even if I'm stuck there this evening, I'll be home before noon."

Michael closed his eyes in disgust at the sound of his glib assurance. He was playing mental games with himself. Why? Only forty miles separated his home from San Francisco. After he gave the keynote speech at the American Chemists' Society annual conference, he had no reason to stay the night at the Sir Francis Drake Hotel.

He really didn't want to take advantage of Kattie's absence to call one of his former acquaintances in the city. He broke off with them over five months ago, when Jeff's mother agreed to let him "court" her as she put it.

So, what if he'd been without a woman in all that time? He respected Kattie's wishes not to rush their relationship. His mind skidded away from the reasons why *he* hadn't pushed to share her bed.

Kattie was on vacation now from her job as a hospital pediatric nurse. She had taken her three youngest children to visit their grandmother in the hills of Arkansas for a couple of weeks. It was the first time Kattie had been back to her birthplace in sixteen years.

Suddenly realizing that Jeff patiently waited on the other end of the line, Michael tried to get his thoughts back in order.

“Your mom left a message on my answering machine saying that she’d reached Tanner’s Creek safely yesterday. Did she also call you?”

“Yeah, and you should have heard her!” The teenager related a pithy description of what his mother found in the hills and “hollers” of her youth.

“The last outhouse in America, huh?” Michael chuckled. “Well, I’m sure there are a few more around, but won’t little Amy have a lot to share during show and tell when she gets back to school in the fall?”

“I’m glad my summer job starts Monday, and I couldn’t go with them,” Jeff said fervently. “Be my luck to find a snapping turtle in one of those things.”

Michael laughed, and then checked his watch. “Well, I’ve got to go, Jeff. Have a good time on your trip and I’ll see you Sunday when you get back. Don’t break any fingers.”

“Ah, Mike, you’re beginning to sound just like Mom. Don’t worry, I don’t want to arrive at Juilliard in September with my hands in a cast. Although maybe that would start a whole new style of piano playing.”

Even when he finally cradled the receiver, Michael’s smile didn’t die. Jeff was a great kid. And he mentally heard Kattie speaking in that soft accent of hers, going on about the hillbilly existence she escaped from sixteen years earlier. Her cheerful, pretty face formed in his mind’s eye. She was a delight. Her children—all four of them—were equally wonderful.

No, he wouldn’t be staying in San Francisco after the conference tonight. Only a fool would jeopardize what might be his last chance at happiness by giving in to the male hormones coursing through his body.

And fool was not a word that Michael used to describe himself these days. He hadn’t merited *that* label in over eighteen years, not since his Peace Corps days and his service in a small South American country.

An unexpected flash of remembrance jolted Michael, as he suddenly saw the tall, skinny kid he had been at twenty-one.

Pushing the image away, he checked his watch again, and then went into the den. Michael retrieved his briefcase from the top of the desk, and opened it to make sure his speech was inside. Satisfied that all was in order, he grabbed the leather handle and swung the case off the oak surface. Yet, even as he turned to go, his head swiveled back, and his eyes drifted to the locked bottom drawer of the desk.

He hadn’t opened it in five months. That was another thing he stopped doing since making up his mind about Kattie. He didn’t read the letters or look at Laura’s picture in all that time. He should burn the contents of that drawer, the keepsakes of his Peace Corps service. He would do it—soon.

As he put his briefcase in the trunk of his car and climbed into the Mercedes, Michael had another disturbing recollection of his younger self. This time, the boy he had been was sitting in an airport lounge, waiting for his flight to be called.

Shaking his head, Michael made a vain attempt to stem the vivid memories of that important day. But the mental pictures wouldn’t stop. Even as he pulled onto the freeway, and even when he guided the car over the Bay Bridge into San Francisco, he couldn’t shut down the ancient film that ran in his mind.

Instead of seeing the striking city skyline, or looking at the Golden Gate Bridge to the north, Michael O’Brian relived the day he left New Mexico for his Peace Corps training.

He had been called by a different name then.



“We came to wish you a safe journey to Ecuador, son.”

Miguel O’Brian’s dark head snapped up from the chemistry book he had been reading. His hybrid eyes narrowed in surprise, focusing on the small delegation his family made in front of him. They were all there—his mother, his three half-sisters, and Will Montoya, his stepfather. They must have started out from the Pueblo de Taos reservation at four in the morning to make it to Albuquerque before his eight o’clock flight left.

Carefully placing the textbook on the leather seat next to him, he slowly got to his feet, once again conscious of towering over everybody when he straightened. Miguel took a step forward and enclosed his mother in the hug she

wanted, but never would initiate. After the brief embrace, he held his hand out to his stepfather. Calloused palms firmly reestablished the truce that had been worked out between them only a few years ago.

Miguel looked back and forth between the two high-cheek-boned faces. "Mama, Will, I'm really glad to see you. But—didn't you get my last letter? I won't be leaving for Ecuador until my Peace Corps training is over, two months from now."

"Of course, we got the letter," his stepfather answered, "or we wouldn't have known that you were flying to Maryland this morning. But it wasn't clear whether or not you would be going straight to South America after your training. So, since the co-op just finished a large order of pottery for the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center here, and I had to come down anyway—"

"I'm sorry about the confusion." Miguel broke in before the irritation in Will's voice degenerated into open hostility. "I thought I wrote that I'd be home sometime in late August, no matter if I get through training or not."

But Miguel really didn't believe he would wash out. His skills would be needed too much. How many chemistry majors, fluent in Spanish, could the Peace Corps have recruited to teach in Ecuadorian high schools?

"Anyway, the successful volunteers get a two-week leave to buy clothing and generally put their affairs in order before they leave the United States," he explained.

"Two weeks? And then we won't see you for two years." Elena O'Brian Montoya spoke for the first time. Her tone was flat, unemotional, but the hazel eyes that revealed her own mixed heritage conveyed the censure her voice lacked. Not that her son blamed her for being angry, it had been almost a year since he had been back to Taos.

"Ka—Mother, I had to work every vacation, and you know the study load I was taking—"

"Of course, of course, I understand. That's why I brought the girls with me today, so that you could see them before their weddings."

A rare smile softened the still beautiful face, as she drew her daughters forward. At three, six, and twelve, it would be a few years before any wedding plans were made, but Miguel's wry grin acknowledged that his mother's gentle barb had hit its target. He looked down on the girls, and realized he barely recognized them.

Paula was no longer a babe in arms. Graciela's shy smile revealed missing front teeth. It was Sara, however, who had changed the most. Her intelligent little face had thinned out. She was inches taller than he remembered—probably near to her adult height. And there were unmistakable signs that she had reached the beginnings of adolescence. But her eyes were altered most of all. Her large, dark irises held none of the exuberant affection she always bestowed upon her older brother in the past. In its place was a hostile glare and a barely concealed accusation.

The younger girls returned his hugs and kisses, but Sara shook him off.

"Nina, what's wrong? Did you have to get up too early this morning? You always were a slugabed."

Sara would not allow him to tease her out of her anger. "Why are you going to South America?" she challenged. "You were supposed to come home for good after you got your master's degree. You promised us, Miguel, you promised."

"Sara, don't cry. I know that I said I'd be back this year, but don't you understand that there are a lot of people who need help in Ecuador? I just can't turn my back on them."

"What about all the people on the reservation? They need help, too. Oh, you just don't want to come back, do you?" she wailed. "Well, see if I care! See if I write you one measly letter." Sara turned to hide her face in her father's shirt.

Over her head, Will nodded. "She's right. There's plenty of good work for you to do at home. We really need somebody with your chemistry background to research the old ways, to find out how they got the colors so bright and how they made them adhere to the pottery so well. Also, I don't have to tell you that Celia has been counting the days for you to get back. Her mother has been very sick, or she would have come along with us this morning to convince you to come home."

Will was smiling now, but Miguel couldn't match his grin. Celia Ochoa? The girl everyone expected him to marry, although he never proposed to her. Home? The ultra-conservative Pueblo Indian reservation, which banned electricity and running water.

Still, looking at the faces of his only living relatives, Miguel didn't have the heart to tell his family how he really felt. He'd have to reassure them again—to lie to them again. Fortunately, the announcement calling his flight saved him from adding yet another sin to his tally.

“Good-bye, my son,” his mother whispered. “I’ll pray that the *Kachinas* weave well for you and bring you safely home.”

When Miguel fastened his seatbelt a few minutes later, he remembered his mother’s benediction and shook his head. Even if the ancient Pueblo gods existed, they’d never weave on their celestial loom for him. He refused to be initiated into the tribe.

Oh, he wanted to belong; as a child, he yearned to belong, especially after his father died. But he had been too different. Different beyond his height, different beyond the eyes he inherited from the Mexican-Irish-man, Ramon O’Brian.

No, the reason he rebelled as he grew older was because he couldn’t live by the old ways. He questioned, he doubted. He wanted to soar into the future, not be bound by the past. Well, he would have two years to figure out how to break away from that past without hurting his family or Celia.

As the plane lifted off and banked sharply, Miguel looked down at the receding ground. His eyes widened when he suddenly recognized the ancient wood-slatted co-op truck pulling onto the Pan American Freeway. A tiny figure in the flatbed was holding onto the top rail with one hand and waving madly with the other.

Sara—finally relenting—even though she had seen through his excuses about joining the Peace Corps, excuses that he almost believed himself, until this morning.

Oh, he’d be needed in Ecuador all right, and he’d do his very best to represent his country. But twenty-one-year-old Miguel Enrique Vincente O’Brian was well aware that by going to South America, he really would accomplish what he threatened to do on his eighth birthday.

He was running away from home.