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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ LGBT FICTION

## Without One Plea

**Ben Mitchell**
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Imagine a world where two people in love must hide their relationship, even from their best friends and family members, may never speak of their love except behind closed doors, must refrain from expressing affection for their beloved in public, and must lie about their living situation and whereabouts in order to avoid discovery. This is the world into which Chet Monroe and his partner of thirteen years, Drew Weatherly, move when they leave their high-powered jobs and friends in New York City to move to Mission Springs, Mississippi.

Chet grew up in Mission Springs as the cherished "golden boy" of the town. But coming home again—in part to accept a position as law professor at the University of Mississippi, and in part to help care for his elderly mother—Chet finds himself entangled in a Baptist preacher's machinations to maintain control over the minds of the townspeople by falsely accusing him of raping a teen boy. Forced to defend himself in court, it takes all of his skill, and a good deal of luck, for Chet to present his case.

Author Ben Mitchell grew up in Duck Hill, Mississippi. He served as special assistant attorney general for the state, and now lives with his partner in Dallas, Texas. Mitchell paints a very accurate picture of small-town Southern life—from neighborly "drop-ins" that carry the day's gossip from house to house, to the sweltering heat of a Mississippi summer—and manages to use the small and common happenings of everyday life to create almost unbearable tension.

Mitchell's understanding of, and empathy for, his characters is obvious: the strong and loving Southern matriarch facing her declining years; the rebellious and liberal daughter; the younger son entrenched in a bigoted mindset; the pulpit-pounding, hell-and-damnation-spouting preacher—all are real and natural. Chet is intelligent, competitive, and strong-willed, but he is also an eternal little boy looking for the comfort of his mother's arms, and he easily falls into the role of self-centered drama queen. Drew is the lover who seems willing to sacrifice all, even his own good sense, to make his partner's dream of living in his home town again come true, only to find that to do so would be to live a lie.

LGBT readers will welcome this new addition to the literature, although they might find that the author lacks trust in the reader's ability to make the connection between an event and its implied meaning—one of reading's greatest pleasures. In spite of this, Mitchell has created a warm-hearted, engaging, and suspenseful tale of two men in love confronting the bigotry that is still, sadly, alive and well in twenty-first century America.
(October 30, 2009)

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