



The image is a promotional poster for the TV show 'The Russos'. It features three men in the upper half, set against a blue background with some abstract light patterns. The man on the left is in the foreground, wearing a white tank top and looking directly at the camera. Behind him are two other men, one in a grey shirt and one in a patterned shirt, both looking slightly away from the camera. The bottom half of the image shows a large, out-of-focus crowd of people in a warm, orange-yellow light, suggesting a concert or event. The title 'The Russos' is written in a large, stylized blue font with a white outline and a black drop shadow, positioned over the middle of the image. Below the title, the name 'D.J. MANLY' is written in a smaller, black, serif font. At the very bottom, the text 'Episode One' is written in a black, serif font.

The Russos

D.J. MANLY

Episode One

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The Russos: Episode One

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Dedication:

To my readers.

***The Russos:
Episode One***

By noon, the news of what had happened was everywhere.

Tony Newton's friends heard it on their ghetto blaster radios, and the central news broadcasting corporation in the United States had interrupted regularly scheduled programming in order to provide minute-by-minute coverage. The Canadian news was a little more conservative; they chose to interrupt programming only whenever there was truly any new development in the situation.

When the lunch hour was finished, Tony's grade twelve math teacher knew she was facing a classroom full of agitated and excited adolescents who had spent the previous hour speculating on what exactly had happened to two of the members of their favorite rock group. She tried to refocus them but gave up eventually, instead instructing them to work quietly on their math problems in chapter three.

Evelyn Sanborn sat down at her desk and looked around the room at her students. She had heard about the incident on her lunch break. She always went home for lunch to watch her soap while she ate the sandwiches she had prepared in the morning.

But there was to be no love in the afternoon today. The American news network was broadcasting over almost every channel, showing helicopter shots of Drake Russo's Los Angeles home. She had lived through the O.J. Simpson thing, and now some other craziness was happening in the States.

Initially, she really didn't want to know about it.

These celebrities were a whole different breed, and if they changed the type of cereal they ate, the media made a big deal out of it. But then as she was more or less forced to listen to what had happened, she was frozen to the spot. She couldn't believe it.

Drake Russo had shot his younger brother Johnny. What made this such a sensational case was not only the high profile of the Russo Brothers Band, but the fact that Johnny was actually shot by his brother. The trademark of the Russo Brothers was that they were brothers, the epitome of familial harmony. Aside from being good musicians, the fact that they always appeared to be so happy together was a large part of their appeal. Sure, there was gossip about them, but it was always what you'd expect from rock stars; drugs, sex, lashing out at journalists, former lovers revealing secrets, things that rock stars were allowed to get away with simply because they were rock stars.

She understood the kids in her class who were crazy about the Russo Brothers would be disturbed by the news, and were anxious to sit in front of the television sets at home to hear more.

And there were no bigger fans of the Band in her classroom than Tony Newton and his buddy Sam Ashman, who had even started a fan club at the high school. Newton and Ashman had stood outside in the rain for ten hours last year to get tickets to their Toronto concert, only to be told they were all sold out.

She noticed how upset they looked when they came back into the classroom this afternoon and had considered bringing the subject up, letting the kids

talk about it, but decided against it. It might make matters worse to give it too much importance. After all, they *were* rock stars. Crazy things happened to rock stars.

When the bell rang for the students to change classrooms, Evelyn Sanborn headed home early and switched on her set.

* * * * *

When the final bell sounded, signaling the end of the day, Tony and Sam sprang out of their seats only to be told by Mr. Foreman, their English teacher, to sit back down. "I haven't dismissed you yet," he barked in a severe voice, wiping his hand across his greasy, balding head. "I want you to finish reading 'For Whom the Bell Tolls' over the weekend, please. The American news coverage on the Russo thing will break once in a while. You can read in between interviews."

There were groans.

Mr. Foreman mawkishly lifted both hands, indicating that they could leave. "Quietly...and in a civil manner, please," he emphasized, but his words were lost to most of the students, who were already halfway out the door.

Tony Newton was a handsome boy for his seventeen years, with his sherry-colored eyes and shoulder-length curly brown hair. He was very popular at Champlain High, not only because he was handsome, but because he had a sensitive soul. He

was outgoing and smart, but he treated everyone with kindness and respect.

Tony Newton had been Sam Ashman's best friend since grade school. Even though Tony came from a more prestigious family than his, he never flaunted it.

Tony's parents, Sandra and Tom, were great people. Sandra owned a woman's bookstore, and Tom was a pediatrician with his own practice. They had always treated Sam like a second son, and for years he had called them Sandra and Tom. The Newtons were in their mid-thirties, younger than his own parents and far less uptight. Tom was handsome and wore an earring in his ear, and Sandra was a gorgeous blonde.

Sam loved spending time there. When Tony and he wanted to smoke a joint once when they were fourteen, the Newtons sat down and smoked with them. He laughed every time he thought of that. He couldn't imagine his own parents, Sally and Ed Ashman, who worked shifts at the local paper mill, smoking dope with him. He even went on vacation to Florida with the Newtons last summer and they paid for everything.

But it wasn't the Newtons or the Ashmans Sam and Tony were discussing as they hurried along the tree-lined sidewalks in small-town Dunville, Ontario. Neither one had brought a radio to school, so they could only guess at the details. They knew this much: Johnny Russo was apparently in critical condition in some private hospital in Los Angeles, and Drake Russo was in jail.

"It makes no sense." Sam shook his short-cropped silvery blond head. With his large blue eyes, he looked quite Nordic, and older than seventeen. "Why would Drake shoot his brother?"

Tony sighed. "Shit happens. Maybe they were fighting over some music thing, but I don't believe Drake meant to hurt Johnny." Tony kicked some of the dying leaves that lay on the sidewalk as he walked past Tom Hagg's corner store. He raised a hand to him in the window, and Hagg stuck his tongue out at them. He had always been a character. Tony and Sam had known him since they were kids.

They were both strangely silent as they made their way down Main Street to Maple Avenue, where Tony lived. Sam often came home with Tony after school, and they would eat treats Sandra Newton made and watch reruns of 'Happy Days'. On certain nights of the week, he would stay for supper, nights when the Ashmans were working shifts and weren't home.

Tony knew what they were both thinking, but neither one wanted to actually put voice to it.

When they were just small boys, they had done the blood brothers thing. They had just watched a special show on television that profiled the Russo Brothers Band. Drake, Johnny, Pepi and their drummer and long-time friend Mac Hayes were briefly interviewed on camera. It was exciting, because it was rare that they appeared on television.

That evening, Tony stayed over. The show came on at ten, which was a little late on a school night, but Sandra allowed the boys to stay up, providing they

agreed to go right to sleep after it ended.

At nine-twenty, they both snuggled down on the sofa under a blanket in their pajamas, anticipating the pleasure of seeing the members of their favorite rock group. Tony remembered how they both squealed when the show started and Drake Russo smiled at them behind the television screen. He was so handsome. Both Sam and Tony were crazy about him even then, the little-boy crush they had on him having little to do with sexuality one way or another.

When the brothers sang and played, he and Sam both got up and hopped around the room. When they were interviewed, they hung on every word. But it was something Johnny said when the interviewer asked them what the secret was to their immense popularity that stuck in Tony's thoughts.

Johnny Russo, sitting beside his older brother, looked at him with such love in his eyes. There was no mistaking the sentiment. "First of all," Johnny had said, "My brother is one of the most talented musicians around. He's a wonderful composer, and my other brother, Pepi," he turned to him, "is a wizard on the keyboards. But the secret to our success is not just the music, it's that we have such incredible love for one another. That love creates the chemistry onstage, and it's what makes the Russo Brothers what it is." Again, Johnny had looked at Drake. "We are the closest of brothers for all time."

Tony remembered feeling quite shaken by Johnny's expression of love for Drake. He had looked over at Sam, and decided that they would be brothers

too. He had always wanted a brother. During the sharing of blood the next afternoon after school as Tony and Sam ground their thumbs together, Tony actually repeated Johnny's words verbatim. "We are the closest of brothers for all time," he said. "Just like Johnny and Drake, nothing will ever change that."

As boys, they used to pretend that they were the Russo brothers. Tony would be Johnny, and Sam would be Drake. They would put the music on and dance around, and imagine the crowd roaring with applause.

But it seemed that nothing would be the same for Johnny and Drake ever again, and the dreams of two little boys imagining their perfect musical heroes standing side by side as brothers had been shattered along with everything else. It was this that hurt the most.

As Tony walked into the three bedroom bungalow with its polished beams and natural wood floors, it appeared deserted, although Sandra Newton's car was in the driveway, the door was unlocked and the television was on full blast. Tony gave his friend a confused look, closed the door behind him and called to his mother.

Sandra Newton, who usually closed her bookstore at three in the afternoon except on Saturdays because she wanted to be home for her son after school, was not in the house.

"That's weird, Mom doesn't usually leave the television on and the door unlocked," he mumbled, calling out to her again as he walked into the

stainless-steel kitchen and dropped his books on the counter.

"Maybe she was in a hurry and had to get something at the store," Sam called as he walked to the living room, with its cranberry rug and brown velvet easy chairs.

Tony shrugged as if it didn't matter and followed his friend into the living room. He threw himself onto the tan velvet sofa, focusing on what the reporter was saying. He was talking about the past history of the group, recalling how Johnny Russo had spent some time in rehab years ago for a coke addiction and the several occasions that Drake Russo had been accused of getting rough with reporters and waiters at hotels.

"Drake Russo has always had a violent temper," some correspondent for a popular music magazine was speaking now. "It's been only through the diplomatic tactics of the band's manager, Frank Carr, that Drake has managed to stay out of jail thus far."

"That's not fair!" Tony cried out. "They've already convicted him. They're making him out to be some crazed madman. Remember, Sam, that time a few years back when Drake hit that reporter who was hounding him all the time about Johnny's coke addiction? I would have hit the guy too. I mean, shit, there are circumstances, it must be a lot of pressure all the time...you know?"

Sam nodded. "Ya, of course, but news is news. They're going to dig up all the dirt now. And Tony, you do know that a lot of stuff goes on behind closed doors that..."

"Of course I know that, but Drake and Johnny care about each other, and they can't tell me any different," Tony replied stubbornly.

The guy on TV kept talking. "Drake and Johnny have had their difficulties in spite of their apparent closeness. They are both high profile musicians; both play guitar. They have egos, and I think there might have been some professional jealousy roused when Drake won that guitar award last spring.

"Many people don't know that Drake almost left the group several times, in '96 and also in '97. Drake and Johnny have had their fights. Just before a concert in New York City, Johnny gave Drake a black eye backstage, for example. The show was held back three hours. They almost didn't go on, and a makeup man for the band told our magazine that it took a whole container of pancake makeup to cover up Drake's eye. Now whatever happened last night at Drake's twenty-two room mansion in L.A. is anyone's guess."

Tony sighed in frustration. "They don't get it. Drake might have almost left the band, Sam, but he didn't leave, did he?"

Sam shook his head, focused on what the two men on the television were saying.

"Do we have any details at all of what actually took place last night, Chris?" the reporter was asking now.

"We know very little, Don. The police, of course, are investigating, but are being closed-mouthed about it all. We do know this; the band was throwing a party for Mac Hayes' birthday. He turned thirty-five

yesterday. Johnny showed up around ten, according to some of the staff hired to look after the food and drinks. He brought some studio musician people with him."

"Was he intoxicated, stoned, maybe?"

"No one knows. Sources close to Johnny claim that he has been on the wagon from coke for years, but who knows what he was smoking. Apparently Drake was upset with him, and they were snipping at each other all evening. At least this is what I was told by one of the waiters. The staff was sent home at midnight and the shooting occurred at two-ten in the morning, so we have no more information about that at this time. Apparently Pepi Russo as well as Mac Hayes was present during the shooting, but we have been unable to get any comments from them. They have barricaded themselves at the hospital where Johnny is being cared for. The chief of police—you heard his statement earlier—told the press that Drake Russo arrived at the police station number twelve at four in the morning. Apparently he had been walking for close to two hours. He told the sergeant at the desk that he had shot his brother and to arrest him, which of course they did immediately."

"Has the district attorneys' office charged Drake with anything yet, Chris?"

"They are expected to do that sometime late this afternoon or early tomorrow morning. I am told—and this is not certain—that Drake Russo has so far refused bail or legal counsel, so I assume the DA is waiting to see what develops there before going

ahead."

"It will be interesting to see what the actual charge will be," the reporter mused. "Attempted murder, do you think?"

"I assume attempted murder, but that depends on the circumstances surrounding the shooting as well as whether Johnny Russo pulls through this or not. We are all anxiously awaiting a statement from the Santa Rosa Hospital. A team of doctors is supposed to be addressing the media sometime today."

Both Tony and Sam were quiet as the reporter said goodbye to the magazine guy. They were to hear the details of those events several times over the next few hours.

"God, he could really die," Tony murmured.

Sam sighed. "Ya, and Drake would go to prison for murder."

"I'm telling you, Sam, Drake didn't shoot Johnny deliberately. I know it." Tony protested, then fell silent. This could be the end of the Russo Brothers. He loved that group. It greatly distressed him.

"Tony," Sam said after a few moments, just to change the subject, "I didn't know anyone in your house smoked."

"They don't." Tony replied, surprised. "Oh, my mom used to, but she quit years ago."

Sam picked up something beside him and held it out to his friend. "Ya, well, where did this come from, then?" he asked. In his hand was an expensive crystal cut ashtray, filled to the brim with lipstick-stained cigarette butts.

* * * * *

Janet swore and ripped off her second pair of pantyhose. She had snagged them again. To hell with it, she'd wear pants. She pushed her honey-blond hair out of her eyes and searched around her vanity for a cigarette. She needed to calm down.

She peered at herself in the mirror and wondered how in hell she was going to cover up her swollen, puffy eyes. God, what if she ended up being accosted by the media before she could get into the hospital?

She slammed her elbow down on top of the vanity table and placed a trembling hand over her face. She told herself she'd feel much better once Angelo got home. He could always calm her down. God, she had missed him so much.

She had been opposed to this crazy idea from the beginning of letting her son wander around Europe on his own like some kind of Bohemian for a year. She had argued with his father about it for months, but he had talked her into letting him go.

"Jan, Angelo is going to go whether you approve or not, so why not just give him your blessing?" Drake had told her. "He wants to see the world. He traveled a great deal with me and the guys when he was growing up, you know that. It whet his appetite to see what else is out there. He wants to see it on his own now, in his own way."

"It's all your fault, anyway," she had accused in a half-teasing voice. "He's a mirror copy of you in all

ways. Not bad enough he has to look like you, he acts like you, too. All that boy wants to do is play music."

The sound of the phone ringing jolted her out of her daydream, startling her suddenly. A shiver went up her spine. She glared at the phone. She didn't want to answer it. When she had picked it up this morning, it had been Pepi with news that had shaken her world. Her ex-husband was in jail and he had confessed to shooting his brother, who was lying near death in the hospital. She couldn't take any more bad news right now. She had turned off the answering machine a few minutes ago when members of the press had started calling. Perhaps she should have left it on, but then again, no, did she really want to hear something devastating over an answering machine?

She needed to get to the hospital to find out how Johnny was. She was having such a hard time pulling herself together. The phone was still ringing. Shit. She should pick it up. How much worse could it get? Besides, it could be Angelo. She held her breath and slowly lifted the phone.

"Yes?"

She closed her eyes. It was Pepi again. "Please, don't tell me that anything has happened to Johnny," she whispered.

"Nothing has changed," Pepi replied, "but I wanted to let you know that he has just come out of surgery. They won't tell us anything. I also called to tell you that Frank has arranged for extra security at the hospital. They'll be on the lookout for you. Come in by the ambulance entrance, okay?"

"Okay. I'll be there soon, Pep, I just can't..." She started shaking again. "Can't seem to pull myself together. I need to have a stiff drink, I think."

"I know the feeling. Has Angelo called yet?"

"No, and I'm worried, Pepi. Chances are high he's going to learn about this from the news. How would you like to hear that your dad's in prison for shooting your uncle on the goddamned news? If only I could reach him. Problem is, Pep, I really don't know where he is. The last postcard I got from him was from Amsterdam in July, imagine. God knows where he is now. Did you get anything after that from him?"

"No, but Jan, I know he'll come home as soon as he hears about it," Pepi replied. "Depending where he is, you have to account for the time change and stuff...it might be night where he is." He stopped. He was babbling.

There was a pause, then, "Have you seen Drake at all?" Jan inquired, her voice sounding weak.

"I tried this morning. He doesn't want to see anyone. The warden is having him watched pretty closely. I want to arrange for bail, but..."

"He just needs some time to himself now, Pep, really. He's got to be okay. He did ask to see Johnny, didn't he?"

"Yes, but I doubt they're going to allow it." Pepi didn't want to talk about Drake right now, she could tell. "Jan, want me to send the limo? You might not be in shape to drive, and..."

"No. My car is less conspicuous. I saw on the T.V. this morning tons of people hanging around outside

the hospital, not to mention the press.”

“Don’t watch television, Jan. They’re saying some stuff that’s just not true. Don’t listen to it.”

“I won’t,” she sniffed, wiping her nose with the back of her hand.

“I got to go. See you then,” Pepi told her and hung up.

After a few seconds, Janet replaced the phone and stood up. She walked over to the small room that served as her closet and searched for a pair of jeans. She had little trouble locating them. There were at least twenty pairs of designer jeans hanging perfectly on hangers, one after another, in various sizes. She had once been a perfect size eight, now it felt more like a ten. She took a faded pair off a hanger and began to pull them on.

When her marriage to Drake was over, he had not been stingy with the divorce settlement. He had given her everything; bought her a beautiful house in Malibu close to his own and given her an overly generous living allowance, which was separate from the support for Angelo. She and her son had never wanted for anything. Her mom had told her it was guilt money. Maybe it was. Anyhow, in exchange, she had gladly shared custody with him, letting her son spend most of the summers with his dad and uncles.

After the initial bitterness over the divorce left her, she decided that getting along with Drake was essential to the well-being of their son. Drake Junior, who preferred to be called by his middle name, Angelo, was not going to be made to pay for his

parent's mistake. Gradually, she and Drake became friends. Although she would always be in love with him, she had come to accept the fact that he would never be hers. It worked out nicely.

They found that as parents, they were almost always in agreement about their son's upbringing. Both wanted him to be protected from the glare of the media when he was growing up so he could lead as normal a life as possible. Drake agreed that his son should use her family name rather than his in school, and most people never suspected that Angelo Smith was really Drake Russo's son. As Angelo got older, however, his father wanted him to understand how he lived, so Janet allowed him to spend the summers on tour with his father and uncles, flying in every so often to see him and sometimes attending a concert herself, which she still enjoyed.

They were both extremely proud of Angelo. He wasn't full of himself, they hadn't spoiled him, and he seemed happy. He was pretty typical for a young man of his age and he had done well in school. She just hoped that when he returned from his wanderings, he'd want to go to college instead of just hanging around clubs playing guitar with local rock groups.

Finally, after an hour and a half of changing her mind about what to wear, Janet was dressed. Anyone who knew her well would have taken one look at her and surmised that something was wrong. Janet usually wouldn't be caught dead without any makeup on and her hair, which was always

beautifully styled, had been hastily tied back with an elastic band. Her usual dress was tailored suits with matching accessories. Today she had thrown one of her son's T-shirts over jeans and covered it with a grey angora sweater.

She took one last look at her eyes in the mirror, still red from crying, and then quickly pushed in the security code for the burglar alarm. She grabbed her purse, made sure she had the keys to her '97 New Yorker and left by way of her parking garage, checking first to make sure there were no journalists around. So far, so good, but she knew it was only a matter of time. She could have bet next month's allowance that the lawn would be covered with reporters by the time she came home.

She unlocked her car and slid inside, finally lighting that cigarette she'd wanted an hour ago. She leaned her head back into the headrest and took a generous puff. She knew she should give up smoking. Her son had nagged her often about the effects on her health, and her doctor often shook his head at her like she was a naughty child. She made a face and stubbed it out, vowing to give up the nasty habit if she could only get through this crisis, but she vaguely remembered promising that before.

Ah, hell, now was not the time to worry about it. She slapped down the visor and pressed the button for the automatic door opener. The door cranked upwards. She put the key in the ignition and hit the gas, still nervously checking her mirrors for the press. She resisted the temptation to turn on the radio

because she knew what she would hear. She tapped her fingers impatiently on the steering wheel, waiting for the traffic light to change at the corner of her street.

What if Johnny died? What if this went to court and everything came out into the open? There were things that lay buried deep inside, things she knew but was too frightened to talk about, things they all knew. If they finally spoke these things—if it was acknowledged, accepted for what it was—it would be like a huge tidal wave sweeping in on all of them, carrying them away. All the heartache, tragedy, the lies and pain, what was it all for?

No, she thought, there were things that could never be spoken. There were things meant to remain in silence, ghosts that haunt, but never truly come into the light. If the ghosts showed themselves, the pain would destroy them all. But it has stayed in the shadows, a voice inside her head whispered, and still Johnny has been shot. Drake was in jail. Maybe it was just too much to stay hidden, just too damned much.

* * * * *

When Frank called him on the cell phone and told him that Drake finally wanted to see him, Pepi felt like crying with relief. He shut down his phone and walked over to Mac, who had been sitting in the exact same spot in the waiting room since two or so that morning.

“Drake is going to see me. I’m meeting Frank at the

police station where they're holding him."

Mac looked up at Pepi and swallowed. "I'll stay here. If the doctors come out and say anything at all, I'll call you on your cell phone right away, okay?"

"Thanks, Mac, you do that."

"Is Drake all right?" Mac looked up at Pepi, squinting his tired eyes.

"I don't know."

"If he wants me, let me know. I'll come right over," Mac said, his voice was strained.

Pepi nodded, squeezed his shoulder and walked to the elevator. He placed the code card in the slot and the elevator went directly to the underground parking where Carter, their limo driver, waited. As Pepi walked across the parking lot toward the limo, he spotted several navy blue sedans scattered around. Sitting inside them were straight-faced men who Frank had hired from an elite private security firm. To him, they all looked like they hadn't had a good shit in a while. The thought made him smile for a moment.

"Sir," Carter said, nodding at him. He opened the door of the long white limo with the smoked windows and bulletproof glass, and Pepi slipped inside. He then closed the door, and the locks clicked down. Carter glanced at his passenger a couple of times, but remained quiet. He knew that Carter was probably just as anxious as everyone else to know what was going on, but Pepi didn't feel like talking. He had a headache, and being inside the limo made him think of his brothers and the times they had

riding back and forth to concerts in this very vehicle.

Carter was an excellent driver, and sped out of the parking lot past the screaming hordes of people and swerved smoothly onto the freeway.

Pepi closed his eyes. Poor Mac. He had had a hell of a birthday this year, hadn't he? First Johnny didn't show up to his party until after ten, and then he and Drake got into it like when they were kids. Then of course, after Johnny was shot, Mac ended up spending the rest of the night at the hospital with Frank and himself and a host of other party guests, who eventually had to be told to leave. He knew Mac was taking this as hard as he was. Mac, Drake and Johnny began jamming together as boys, and he had always been one of them. Mac loved them all, and they loved him back.

Suddenly Carter was speaking to him. "Your mother, sir, at what time am I to pick Mrs. Russo up from L.A.X?"

"Oh, Christ," Pepi said, "that's right. Thanks, Carter, for reminding me. With everything going on, I almost forgot. Mama is due on an evening flight from New York tonight. I think it arrives at midnight, but I'll..."

"Sir, I'll check the time of arrival. Don't worry."

"Good, thank you, Carter."

"Do you want me to bring her directly to the hospital, sir?"

"Ah...yes." Then out of the corner of his eye, he spotted the police station. "Oh...here, Carter, right here, this turn. The police station is on the right."

"Yes, sir, I see it."

There were hordes of people and reporters everywhere. The police had sectioned off the street and erected barriers in the parking lot with yellow tapes strung across which read 'Do Not Cross'.

Pepi sighed. People began to scream and run toward the vehicle when they spotted the approaching limo. Police cars were positioned in front of the door. Uniformed officers were running around, trying to direct the limo to a parking place. Carter whispered something under his breath as he was forced to come to a standstill. People surrounded the car, trying to see who was in the limo, crying out something that sounded distorted and frightening.

A police officer started saying things over the loudspeaker about clearing the area. Pepi took a breath. He heard the word 'disperse' several times. He had encountered crowds of fans before, but never before had they seemed as agitated and anxious.

Carter managed to inch forward as the police were slowly pulling people away from the vehicle.

"Unlock the doors, Carter, I'm getting out!" Pepi announced. Carter hesitated and then did as he was asked. The locks in the back slid up. It took him several minutes to get the door open wide enough so he could get out, and the moment he managed to, he was bombarded. He didn't know who was worse, the fans or the press. Microphones were pushed into his face, and people were jammed all around him.

He fell backwards against the car and put his hands up in front of his face, trying to regain his

balance. He saw Carter try and open his door in order to come and help him, but Pepi shouted to him to stay inside. Carter wasn't a young man, and there wasn't anything he could do.

Several police officers were pushing their way through the crowd, and one managed to get a hold of his forearm. He began to lead him towards the door of the station, which seemed to be miles away, when in actuality it was less than twenty or thirty feet. The camera bulbs flashed. In the distance, fans cried, "Free Drake, free Drake, we Love Drake." Reporters' voices all shouted together, "Pepi, is Drake guilty? Why doesn't Drake want a lawyer? What will happen to the Russo Brothers now?"

Pepi wanted to scream at them, feeling cornered like a rat, not being able to move more than an inch at a time. The chanting of the fans and the hounding questions being thrown at him reverberated in his head.

"Leave me the fuck alone!" he finally cried out, but it didn't sound like his voice. "For Christ's sake, leave me, leave me...!" He lowered his head, his mind racing, barely aware that someone was pulling him forward.

Finally, he was being whisked inside the main door of the police station. Instantly, several police officers barricaded the door behind him. He felt himself being pushed into a chair. Someone shoved a glass of water into his hand. He couldn't answer when he heard someone ask him if he was all right. He put his face in his hands. His heart was practically pounding out of

his chest. Never in his life had he ever felt like this, even after that concert in London where there was a near riot in the crowd. He managed to take a few sips of water, then looked up into the eyes of a stoic police officer and said, "I want to see my brother."

"You and everybody else." The officer's mouth twisted into a semblance of a smirk. "Mr. Carr is here. He's waiting for you."

Pepi got up and followed the man down a corridor. Phones rang and people were talking, but he didn't understand what they were saying. He kept his head down. His legs felt like rubber. For the first time—at the age of twenty-eight—he felt old.

A young policewoman stood in an empty room at the end of the hall with their manager, Frank Carr.

Frank was a man in his early forties with shoulder-length silver-grey hair and a gold earring. He was fit and handsome, and quite the ladies' man. They really liked Frank, with his charming Australian accent and his no-nonsense style of getting things done. They made tons of money for him, and he took care of them.

Frank had never seen Pepi look so bad, not even when he had been hospitalized in Singapore with that bout of food poisoning. His long brown hair was disheveled and tangled, and there were black rings under his eyes. It was apparent he hadn't shaved, washed nor slept since the day before. His jeans were spotted with blood, and there were coffee stains on his navy sweatshirt. "You look like shit, my boy."

"I don't doubt it. I got one brother in jail and the other one on the brink of death. You tell me when I got time for a hairdresser."

Frank put his arms around him for a moment, then released him. "I've got a great lawyer for Drake, but you have to talk to him..."

Pepi ran a hand over his face. "I know he'll need a lawyer to iron all this out eventually, but I was thinking there's no hurry. This is all one big misunderstanding, you know that. Drake would never hurt Johnny, Johnny's his life, he loves Johnny...he..." Pepi broke off helplessly. This all seemed so crazy. To even take this seriously, to say the words, made no sense.

"Pepi, haven't you been listening to the news? The DA is going to charge Drake with attempted murder sometime today or tomorrow."

Pepi shook his head. "No, it can't happen, Frank. It just can't happen. Johnny is going to pull through this, and...he'd die if he thought Drake was in jail because of this. It's not what Johnny would want, Frank. You've got to do something."

"Johnny can't speak for himself right now," Frank replied. "This is out of my hands, kid. I can't fix it this time. I can't even get him bail if he won't see a lawyer." Frank took a seat. He was exhausted himself. He hadn't slept all night and there were reporters hounding him everywhere, tying up all the lines at the recording studio. It had been like watching a train coming down the track all these years. The train had been frantically blowing its horn, but no one moved.

He knew that when it finally hit, it would hit hard. It could destroy everything. And as he met Pepi's tired brown eyes, he knew Pepi knew it too.

The radio the policewoman carried on her belt crackled suddenly. She took it and pressed a button. A voice said something that neither of the men could understand, and she muttered "Ten-four," in response. She looked over at the two men in front of her and announced that they would be bringing Drake in now.

Frank stood up again. Pepi felt weak suddenly, and tried to remember if he had eaten anything that day. The door opened and a black officer led Drake into the room by the elbow. He had handcuffs on.

Pepi looked over at his eldest brother for a moment, and his bottom lip started to tremble. Suddenly, he took several heavy steps toward him and enveloped him in his arms. They both started sobbing.

The male officer moved closer and placed a hand on Pepi Russo's shoulder. "You're not supposed to touch the prisoner," he told him sternly.

"For Christ's sake," Frank growled, "give them a few minutes, will you? That's his brother."

* * * * *

Marisa Carlyle glanced over at the woman sitting on the aisle seat in first class and shook her head. She leaned over to Sonia Descartes, who was busy taking out the plastic cups, and shook her head. "Poor

woman, she hasn't stopped crying since we left Kennedy. I wonder if she's afraid to fly."

Sonia took one look at the woman in question and whispered, "Don't you know who that is?"

Marisa studied the woman. She was probably in her mid-fifties to early sixties. She looked European, Italian or Greek. She had beautiful jet-black hair with natural streaks of white coiled up into a bun on top of her head. Her skin was smooth with an olive tint. If she hadn't been dressed so simply in a cheap blue cotton dress with a plain black trench coat, she might have looked like a movie star, with her huge brown eyes.

"No, who is she?" Marisa enquired.

"She's the mother of the Russo brothers."

Marisa gasped. "Really, how do you know?"

"Saw her on the news a few hours ago," Sonia replied. "She was surrounded by press the minute she stepped out of the taxi in front of the airport. Poor woman, I felt sorry for her, really. I don't think she's used to it, you know?"

Marisa shook her head and began to help Sonia with the refreshments.

Sophia Russo clutched her purse on her lap and thought about moving over into the window seat, but she changed her mind as soon as she felt the plane dip a little and sway. The captain's voice came over the loud speaker explaining that they were flying at an altitude of thirty-seven hundred feet and experiencing a little turbulence. The seat belt light came on over her

head, which didn't affect her. She had never taken hers off.

She wasn't really afraid to fly, she just didn't care for it. When Pepi had called her at seven in the morning New York time to tell her what had happened, she never thought about the flight at all. He told her what time to be at the airport and that her paid ticket would be waiting for her. He had reserved three in a row so that she could be alone. He would have sent the private jet for her, but he told her that he wanted to keep it on standby just in case. In case of what, he never said.

She clutched her purse again, the used tissue in her hand. Maybe the plane would crash. Maybe that would be her punishment. Drake, her beautiful, wonderful Drake, in jail. She couldn't stand it. She couldn't bear the thought of it, and each time she pictured him there, she began to cry. It wasn't his fault. He might have held the gun that had shot Johnny, but she had loaded it and if he died, she was responsible for killing her own son.

She closed her eyes. Those reporters who had surrounded her at the airport earlier were like vultures. When her boys were on top, how kind they were. Now, all they wanted was dirt. They were there, ready to condemn her Drake without really knowing him, without really understanding anything about her boys. Hell, how could the press understand, when the boys themselves didn't even know?

Poor Joe, her dear husband whom she lost only two years before, went to his grave never knowing.

How could she tell them? She had always told herself that there were more reasons to keep silent than to tell them. She had seen the destruction, the pain that her lie had caused, and still she remained quiet. Drake's divorce, then Johnny's...Johnny's coke addiction, Drake's drinking. The broken lives. And her grandsons...one lost to her forever and the other, oh her precious Angel, who would certainly end up being affected by it some way or another.

Perhaps it had been her own prejudices, her own Catholic brainwashing, which...no, that was no excuse. There had been a night over thirty-five years ago when being a Catholic had no meaning at all to her. In fact, she would have sold her soul to the devil in order to have him...but that was long ago. It was funny how religious belief could be tossed out or held near, depending on the circumstances. She had witnessed the strength of that love for years, and yet she still foolishly believed that she could fight forces that were much stronger than her lies.

Sophia opened her eyes. The turbulence had passed for now. The seat belt light was off. One of those nice young stewards came by and offered her a beverage. She took a Diet Coke and began to sip it.

Your children weren't supposed to die before you, Sophia mused. It was unnatural. She didn't want to die knowing that Johnny had gone and Drake was rotting in jail, and what of her Pepi? What would he do without his brothers, whom he loved so? For a second she prayed that she would never have to step off this plane in Los Angeles. *Let me die here, God and*

face your judgment. Let me burn in eternal hell, if that's what I must do to repent. Just let me see my love again. I have been waiting all this time to join him, my beautiful love who never loved me, my love, who I would have gladly joined at the bottom of the ocean, if it hadn't been for the baby.

She felt a sharp pain in her heart, and withdrew the nitro pump from her purse. She knew that dying now would simply be her way out of this. It was too easy. She had no choice but to step off this plane, to witness firsthand what her lie had done. She had to pick the right time and then put things right, whether she approved of what happened after that or not. *Please, God, please let my boys be all right. I promise I will undo the lie even if I can't make up for the pain I've caused. Please let it all be all right and then...then I can die.*

* * * * *

Tony sat across from his father at the kitchen counter playing with his spaghetti. It was quarter to eight.

Tom Newton had arrived home at his usual five-thirty after a fairly good day at the office to find his wife absent and his son glued to the television set. He got up now to grate some more parmesan cheese, even though neither he nor Tony had touched their pasta.

Tony watched his Dad as he stood at the counter, his back turned, hunched over the cheese grater. He hadn't said more than a few words to him since he had come through the door, and what he did say sounded forced.

Tony pushed his plate away. He wanted to scream at him, *what in hell is wrong with you? Don't you care that Mom is missing?*

He was really beginning to worry about his mother now. He had called her store at six, and there was no answer. What Tony found even more bizarre was that when he told his father about Mom not being at the store and the way in which she'd left the house, he reacted as if there was nothing to be concerned about. God, his father should be frantically calling around trying to find out where Mom was instead of grating cheese that neither one of them would eat. It wasn't at all like Mom to take off like that. He knew that, and so did Dad.

Tony watched him as he brought more cheese over to the table. He sat down and lifted a fork to his mouth, avoiding Tony's eyes.

"Dad?" Tony tried to keep his voice steady. "Did you and Mom have a fight at lunch or something, or maybe last night?"

Tom Newton breathed in deeply. "No, of course not. Tony," he sighed, "just stop, okay?" He stuck another forkful of spaghetti in his mouth, wiping his chin several times with a napkin.

"Dad, Mom is not at the bookstore, so where can she be? She left the television on full blast and the door unlocked. Her car is still in—"

His father threw down his fork. He ran a hand over his light brown hair. For the first time, Tony noticed how upset he was. "What in hell is wrong with you? Is this the Inquisition or something? Maybe she

walked. She told me she wasn't getting enough exercise lately. Maybe she went shopping, or to visit someone!"

Tony fell silent. Something in his father's voice told him to stop asking questions. He got up from the table, scraped his plate in the garbage can and put it into the dishwasher. He had a queasy feeling in his stomach. He heard his dad say that he was sorry as he left the kitchen. He didn't answer. He was shocked, really, by his father's attitude, and baffled. God, he hoped they weren't getting a divorce. Half his friends came from divorced families.

He walked down the hall to his room and shut the door, switching on the television. There were new celebrities now, born from the Russo Brothers shooting. There was Ann Garcia, Drake Russo's housekeeper, being paid to tell the public what kind of meals she cooked for Drake, and how often Johnny came to eat there, and little pieces of nonsense about things guests left behind when they stayed over. Then there was a young guy named Mark Freeman who mowed the lawn and cut the shrubs. He said that Drake Russo got angry at him once for not cutting the lawn in a particular way. Who cared? Half of it was lies anyway.

Tony switched off the set and called Sam. He wanted to get out of the house for a while. He was tired of watching the news. They had nothing to say anymore. The real news was Johnny's condition and Drake's fate, and as hard as they tried, the media was unable to get any more details about that. So now

they were creating news where none existed. With his own personal drama unfolding right in his own house, the media circus and the fantasy that surrounded the Russo Brothers thing was taking a back seat.

Sam answered on the third ring. He was also fed up with the news. They agreed to meet on the corner.

While Tony was walking down the hallway toward the front door, he thought he heard something. He stopped for a second. He could have sworn he heard crying. His heartbeat grew louder in his chest. He crept silently around the corner and there was his dad, still sitting at the small spot at the kitchen counter. His head was lowered, and he was sobbing as if his very heart was breaking.

Never in his life had Tony ever seen his father cry. He didn't know what to do. He wanted to ask him what was wrong, but somehow he figured he wasn't meant to see this. He wanted to hold him and tell him that what ever it was, it would be all right, but instead he silently continued on down the hallway.

He quietly opened the front door, feeling like a thief in the night, and closed it softly behind him. He felt guilty, he felt stunned, sad. He didn't know what to do and he didn't know why. Tears stung his eyes. What is it? What is it?

* * * * *

As he walked out down the front steps and onto the sidewalk, he was only certain of one thing; something

had happened to his family today, and it left a hollow, empty feeling in the pit of his stomach like someone had died. He began to run and when he finally came face to face with Sam, waiting for him at the corner of the street, he blurted out breathlessly, "God, Sam, I think my parents are getting a divorce."

Sam laughed at him. Sandra and Tom Newton were the last people on earth that would ever get divorced. They had everything. They were the perfect couple, in the perfect house with a dual car garage and affluent, fulfilling jobs. Tom Newton didn't dominate his wife, she wasn't a slave to her house and the good-natured and handsome pediatrician was not fooling around. Why would he? Sandra was beautiful, intelligent, financially independent and really nice on top of that.

But Sam stopped laughing when he noticed that Tony was actually crying. "Tony?" Sam went to touch his shoulder in a compassionate way, but Tony jerked away from him. "Tony? Were you serious? You can't be serious. How do you know this? Did they tell you they were...?"

"No!" Tony looked up at his friend, wiping his eyes on the back of his sleeve. "I just know. Something's wrong, Sam. Mom hasn't come home yet and she's not at the store and Sam...Dad...he...well, he acted like he knew where she was. He wasn't at all concerned, and then I found him crying tonight. I got so embarrassed. I've never seen Dad cry...never! I mean, when I was a kid, he used to tell me that real men did cry...that it was good for you to..." Tony

broke off, and started walking.

Sam broke into stride beside him. "Do you want to go looking for your mom?"

Tony shook his head. "Maybe she's gone for good, but she left all her clothes...didn't pack a suitcase."

"Could you be blowing this all out of proportion, Tony?" Sam inquired carefully.

Tony stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and considered the possibility, and then shook his head. "No, something terrible has happened, and it happened while I was at school today. I'm scared, Sam, really scared."

* * * * *

The damned line had been busy right up until six o'clock, and then of course the place was closed. She couldn't even get the answering machine to leave a message for him to call her back at the hotel, if he would even bother calling her back.

She was beginning to get desperate. She had gone through almost a pack of cigarettes already and a quarter of a bottle of rye. She felt as if finally the day had come when her entire world was going to fall apart. It was funny how you could float through each day, living in your happy bubble of fantasy, and then it takes only something like this to threaten everything, to bring your world crashing down around you.

She had to reach Frank. She had to know. Damn, she didn't have his private number anymore and even

if she did, he had probably changed it half a dozen times or moved. She tried the L.A. operator. The number was unlisted, but of course she already knew that before she asked. She thought about calling the hospital, but was afraid who they would put on the line. She only wanted to talk to Frank. She was desperate enough to take a flight out to L.A. and camp on his doorstep, or wait for him at the studio. She had to reach him soon, or she would lose her mind.

She lay down on the bed, her mind racing with all kinds of thoughts, crazy thoughts. She had to think rationally, relax, do things right. Maybe she should call Tom. Maybe he could...no, he was probably going through his own hell now. *Tom, I'm sorry. Maybe we should have told him like you said, but you don't understand how he hurt me...how he...still she felt the pain.* Whenever she looked at Tony's face, his eyes, something hurt deep inside. Damn you, damn them all. They were cursed, the whole damned bunch of them.

She sat up and took a drink. Had to reach Frank. She had to reach him tonight. She paced the floor and laughed to herself, thinking of the stupid things people were saying about the Russo brothers on the television. Cooks talking about food, and gardeners going on about Drake's temper. Ha! She could tell some stories, she thought bitterly. She could tell those gossip papers and the American News Network some things that would make every other headline before it look like a children's tale. She'd be a millionaire, and

she'd expose those people for what they really are. No. Never! Never would she allow her son to know those people, never.

She knew what she had to do. She took out the phone directory and looked up the number for the airport. When someone answered, she told them, "I'd like to be booked on your first available flight out to L.A., doesn't matter which class."

When she hung up, she dialed home. Tom answered on the second ring. "Sandy?" His voice sounded hurt, like a small child.

"Tom. Listen to me." She knew she sounded drunk. "I'm going to L.A. to see Frank Carr because I have to know what's going to happen if Johnny dies. I'll fix everything. Just tell Tony I..."

"Sandra." His voice was shaking. "Tony should know the truth, especially now. We're not going to be able to hide it anymore. I'm going to tell him."

"Do it and I'll hate you forever. I'll kill you! I'll kill you!" She was shrieking.

Tom hung up.

She banged her fists against the wall until they were bloody. She banged until someone came to the door and told her to stop. She flung herself on the bed and sobbed. After a few minutes, she sat up. She had to think. Her flight was not until midnight. She had to go home and talk Tom out of doing what he threatened to do...God, if he hadn't already. He loved her. He'd listen to her.

She washed her face, lit a cigarette and went down to the lobby. Several cabs were waiting outside. She

paid her bill with her credit card. The clerk gave her a curious glance but took the card, asked for her signature and gave her a receipt.

She left the receipt on the counter and walked outside. Climbing into the cab, Sandra gave her home address. "Hurry, please," she said softly, taking a drag of her cigarette. Her mouth was dry. She felt sick to her stomach.

"There's no smoking in the cab, Madame," the cabby said politely.

"Fuck you."

* * * * *

"How is Johnny? No one here will tell me anything?" Drake asked anxiously, looking from Pepi to Frank.

The two officers stood stoically at the door while Drake sat across from Frank and his younger brother.

"He's out of surgery," Pepi replied. "I don't know any more than that, really. Mac will call as soon as he..." He broke off. He was having a difficult time seeing his brother like this, so discouraged, so defeated, handcuffs on his wrists. Drake looked so small suddenly, even though he weighed one hundred and eighty pounds and stood six-foot-three. There was usually a gleam in his eyes, big beautiful eyes fringed with thick black lashes and the color of liquid chocolate, but now they looked kind of dead.

"Pep, you okay?" Drake leaned forward in his chair. He knew Pepi was taking this really hard. He was in the middle, with one brother in the hospital

and the other in prison. He knew he really didn't understand what had happened and that he desperately wanted him to explain.

Pepi met his eyes. "Tell me that you didn't shoot Johnny, Drake! I don't understand what happened. I know you wouldn't shoot Johnny, but why did you confess? Why did you say....?" Pepi jumped up and paced around the room.

Frank stood up. "Pep, calm down. You know Drake can't say anything until I get a lawyer here. Anything these cops hear can be used in evidence, can't it?" Frank looked over at the two officers at the door.

"Yes, sir," they both replied in unison.

"Let me get you a lawyer, Drake," Frank pleaded, opening his palms to him. "The DA didn't charge you today, but they're sure to..."

"Get the lawyer," Drake nodded at him. He looked up at his younger brother who now stood at the side of the room, face in his hand. "And Frank," Drake lowered his voice, "take care of him, will you? Encourage him to get some sleep, eat something. He's going to collapse if he goes on like that."

It was just like Drake to play the big brother, even now. Frank nodded. "Don't worry. I'll take care of him. Your mother is coming in later, you know. I've made sure she's being put up at one of the finest hotels."

Drake sighed. "Poor mama. Try to reassure her, okay? Tell her I'm okay. And Angelo, how's he taking it?"

"I don't think he knows yet. He'll catch it on the news, wherever he is. I assume he'll come home as soon as he..."

Drake winced. He hated the thought of his son hearing about all this on the news.

Just then the female police officer stepped forward and said, "Five more minutes."

Drake nodded. "That's okay, I'm ready now."

Pepi came over to him as he stood up. "Drake, I know you can't say much, but...can you just tell me that you didn't shoot Johnny, or at least you didn't mean to?"

He looked so desperate. Drake knew he was trying not to cry, but there was nothing he could say to ease his mind. "Try not to worry about me, Pep. Just take care of Johnny, okay?" Drake's voice deepened and he started to shake. "Don't you let anything happen to Johnny, Pepi."

Pepi opened his mouth to say something, but Drake turned away from him. The female police officer led him out of the room.

Back in the cell, Drake sat on the side of his cot and lowered his head. With the cuffs off, he could reach back and rub his neck. Whenever he was exhausted, tense, this is where it got him, right in the back of neck and the shoulders. Only Johnny knew how to work the tension out of him there. After a concert, in the dressing room, he would lie on his back with his shirt off and Johnny would massage his neck and his shoulders. Sometimes it would relax him so much, he would fall asleep.

Drake closed his eyes. Oh, to sleep, to really sleep. He hadn't really slept properly in years. In fact, he went through stages where he barely slept at all. He was either frantically writing music all night, or disturbed by something or another that was going on in his life at the time, or too exhausted from touring to sleep.

Johnny.

He was afraid to close his eyes. He didn't want to sleep. He would see it all again and again, and then he'd wish he had that gun so that he could just end it. If he had ended it years ago, it would have set Johnny free, allowed him to live a normal life. But how could he have? He hadn't really even allowed himself to acknowledge the truth until last night.

Last night, what was real moved up from his stomach, where it had lain all these years, and landed in his throat. He had looked at Johnny and there was no more reprieve, no more time in which to deny, or repress it. He had no choice. The gun was there.

But he had managed to live with it, to hide it even from himself, although Johnny had known it all along. Since they were teenagers, he had spent his time denying that there was a problem, while Johnny had openly struggled with it. Cocaine dulled Johnny's pain for years until it had almost killed him. A series of different lovers, men, women, always gave them both periods of distraction but none of them ever lasted. It was true that neither one of them ever made the other's lover feel welcome, but in all fairness, it wasn't always their fault that lovers came and went.

More often than not, some of them were more in love with the fame and the excitement of rock and roll than with him or his brother. Good ones were rare and when they did appear, they always ended up heartbroken, feeling rejected. Eventually, they were gone.

All these years of hiding and pretending that all was as it should be...blaming everything on something else. He and Johnny had talked and fought about almost everything...except the truth. Johnny was the one who tried over and over to talk about it, but he put up a wall every time. To actually say it wouldn't take away the pain, or make it all right. It wasn't all right. It would never be all right.

Last night, Johnny had told him that someone must have played a cruel joke on them. Drake thought of it more as a cosmic curse from hell. Deep down, he had tried to rationalize it in his mind many different ways. They could simply be crazy, but Johnny had gone the psychotherapy route and he found no comfort there. Perhaps they were reincarnated and had done something terrible in a former life, or maybe someone had made a mistake and they were not meant to be brothers at all.

At one time, Drake was convinced it was because they had spent too much time together as kids and somehow they had become too attached, overly bonded. The jealousy, the rage, the fights, people around them watched silently and said nothing, as if talking about it was the first step to hell. Everyone just hoped it would all go away. But it didn't go

away.

Finally one night late last summer, passion exploded between them. There was no way to stop it, even if they had wanted to. It was like someone pulled up the door of an overly filled dam, and the water came rushing at a most powerful and unstoppable speed. He had turned off his mind. He remembered how Johnny had held him, and they cried. The answer to the reasons for all those years of emptiness was there. Never in his entire life had he experienced such pleasure, such love, but it frightened him.

In the cold light of morning, he couldn't even look at him. Johnny was there, his heart on his sleeve, wanting him again, and he got out of that bed and dressed without speaking.

Johnny pleaded. This was beyond their control. They had no choice but to just give in to it. They couldn't live without one another. It was destroying them, and destroying the lives of others who loved them.

Drake knew he was right, and even though a part of him wanted to hold him like that again, he couldn't get past the shame. They were brothers, and brothers had no right to be lovers. He couldn't just forget the taboo that said that incest was morally wrong. To have shared such exquisite pleasure with his brother was unforgivable; and if there was a hell, surely they would burn in it.

He told Johnny that it could never happen again. In fact, it should have never happened at all. That night,

so beautiful, so erotic, had done such irrefutable damage to their relationship as brothers that nothing seemed the same after that. He felt guilty. Johnny was hurt at the rejection, and sought to hurt him by flaunting his lovers in front of him. Drake hated him for that. It hurt even more than before to imagine him making love with this one and that one, and he worried about Johnny getting sick from AIDS. Johnny didn't seem to care much about anything after that, including himself.

Now it had come full circle. Last night, everything had happened so fast. They were angry at each other, but that was nothing new. He regretted buying that gun now. He had never liked guns. Frank had convinced him to keep it in his nightstand after a fan had broken into his house last month when he was on tour. It wasn't meant to shoot anyone, except maybe himself when he could no longer take it anymore. None of this was supposed to happen, but here he was in jail for shooting the last person on earth he would ever harm, not even able to be with him as he lay in critical condition miles away.

Tears rolled down his cheeks. He heard a sound, and looked down the hall to see the guards checking him out to make sure he wasn't trying to do away with himself or something. He knew the warden had him on suicide watch, which was kind of stupid, because he couldn't have killed himself in here even if he'd wanted to. Last night, they had even taken his sheets out of the cell. Drake gave the guards a mocking wave and they pretended not to be looking

at him. A freak in the circus, that's what he felt like. Although he was used to people staring at him, he had never imagined it would be under these circumstances. He couldn't blame them, really, for staring. He was a celebrity who had shot his own brother. These guards were celebrities themselves now, just by the very fact that they were here with him.

Drake wiped the tears off his cheeks and stood up. He paced, wishing he had a cigarette. The craving would pass. He had given up smoking years ago. It was playing havoc with his voice.

He sighed and sat down. If only they'd let him see his brother, just once. "Oh, Johnny," he whispered, lowering his head, "You can't die, because that bullet last night wasn't meant for you, it was meant for me."

* * * * *

Janet took Mac's hand in hers as she sat down beside him in the waiting room. She looked around for a no-smoking sign, and then to be sure, she asked Mac if she could smoke.

"I don't see why not," he shrugged. "There's an ashtray over there." He withdrew his hand, got up and walked across the black and white tile floor to retrieve the ashtray for her.

She thanked him and offered him a cigarette, which he took with a murmured, "Thanks." She lit them both and met his eyes. She had often wondered what it would have been like if she had married Mac.

He had asked her once, years ago but she'd turned him down. They had a brief affair, which began when her son was a teenager and started spending summers with the band. Although Drake teased her, calling her a 'mother hen', she would often join up with the band so that she could check on Angelo. She had been friends with Mac since high school. He was Drake's best friend, and the best man at their wedding.

It wasn't that she didn't find him attractive. He was a little on the husky side, but not fat. He had beautiful long blond hair and the nicest blue eyes. He was a great drummer. He was sweet and always kind, but never had she seen him as a potential love interest until that time.

To this day, she wasn't sure whether Drake ever knew about that thing between her and Mac that summer. If he did, he never mentioned it. When Mac later confessed to her that he had been infatuated with her since high school and that he would have asked her out if Drake hadn't done so first, she started to distance herself from him. He was too nice a guy and she was still in love with Drake. It was her cross to bear, to be in love with a man she could never have.

She sighed. It was funny how tied together they all were, how one life affected so many other lives. She looked around the room, puffing on her cigarette. Leather sofas and chairs, the latest magazines, fresh-brewed coffee in the corner with doughnuts that did look a little stale, copies of Monet and Picasso on the

white stucco walls, this was not a hospital room for ordinary folk. The loved ones of poor people were sitting on hard chairs and subjected to bawling brats and vending-machine coffee, while she smoked here in luxury. That's what fame bought. But in the end, everyone died. Death was death, be it in satin sheets or on a bed of asphalt.

Mac was talking to her now, asking her if she wanted coffee. Janet smiled at him and shook her head. She hadn't seen Mac for at least four months, and it felt good to be with him now. He just had this way about him. God, I wished I could have loved you, she thought.

"How's Kate?" she asked, shaking herself out of that state she sometimes got herself into, that 'what if...should of...' state.

Mac got married two years ago. It was a beautiful wedding, not only because Mac looked so happy, but because it was the first time in a long time that both her men had been by her side. Drake had been the best man, and he looked so handsome in his tux. Her son Johnny and Pepi had been ushers, red carnations in their pockets. They had sat together as a family at the wedding table. Even Johnny and Drake got along that night.

Mac was saying something about Kate, and Janet leaned forward to hear him. Unfortunately she had never got to know Kate that well. She thought she heard him say something about it being over. "Over? What do you mean? Oh, Mac, I'm sorry, I had no idea that..."

Mac nodded and then smiled. "It's okay. She couldn't take the life. She was never much of a traveler. She came on the road for a while and hated it. I can't say I blame her. I never had much time to be with her. She wants to live the American dream; home, family, nine to five. I can't live like that. I couldn't give up music. It's my life. She deserves better. Our divorce came through last week."

"I'm sorry, Mac," she told him again.

"Hell, life's a bitch and then you die. What do ya want?" He looked around, and then sighed. "I've never had much luck with women. You know," he said with a noticeable change in his voice, "they could come and tell us something about how Johnny is doing in this bloody hole."

"Well, they say no news is good news, right?" Janet smiled at him. "I guess Pep is with Drake."

Mac reached over and squeezed her hand tight. "Drake never meant to hurt Johnny. I know that, and he's not going to prison." Mac squeezed her hand again for emphasis.

Janet swallowed. "Mac, there is something else. I mean with everything...I...what if...should I...?" It had been so long she was almost afraid to talk about it. In fact, she no longer knew how to talk about it.

Mac wondered when it was going to come up. He too had been thinking about it when Johnny was in surgery. He wanted to discuss it with Pepi, but Pepi already had too much to handle. Mac folded his hands together in his lap. He didn't know what to say. "Suppose she's told him by now?" he managed.

"I doubt it." Janet sighed. "Look, for sure she knows about it. She didn't try to call me or anything." Janet searched in her purse for another cigarette.

"You're shaking," Mac said, taking her purse out of her hands. He found her cigarettes buried in a sea of wallets, keys and lipstick. "It's a terrible thing to have gone all these years, and..." He broke off, handing her the pack.

Janet took them, shaking one out and placing it between her lips. He lit it. She took a drag and closed her eyes. They had said some terrible things to each other the last time they spoke. God, that had been over seventeen years ago. They had completely different ideas on things. She could forgive her for her bitterness, although Janet never felt that it was right to use a child as a weapon. She couldn't believe how far she was actually willing to go in order to keep the truth hidden. They had been so close at one time, to have completely shut her off was hard enough to bear, let alone forgive. Seventeen years. For seventeen years, they hadn't spoken, or seen each other.

"Would she even know how to reach you?" Mac was asking now, shaking her out of her daydream.

"I've had the same address and phone number for the last sixteen years, Mac. If she wanted me, she's always known where I am. I've been so tempted to call her sometimes, but she told me that she didn't want to hear from me ever again so...what can I do? She was my best friend in the whole world, we were like sisters."

"Do you think you should call her now?" Mac

raised an eyebrow. "Maybe she wants to..."

Janet shook her head. "No. She'd only hang up on me, Mac. You know I..." Janet began, then paused. Her head went up, her eyes riveted to the two individuals which were suddenly walking toward them, two individuals in white coats.

Mac sucked in air and stood up. He wished Pepi was here, and then he suddenly wished that he wasn't. He was afraid to hear what they were going to tell him.

Janet also rose out of her chair, letting her eyes settle on the two men. One doctor had a ginger-colored brush cut and bright, bulging green eyes. He looked like he ought to wear glasses. He was tall and lanky, and Janet thought he must have been real skinny as a boy, the skinny boy on the beach that gets sand kicked in his face. He introduced himself as Doctor Monroe and the other man, a short, stubby bald guy, as Doctor Sandborn. They all shook hands while Mac introduced Janet as Johnny's sister-in-law. Technically, she wasn't anymore, but she was grateful for being included.

Doctor Monroe was clearly in charge. He invited them to sit down. Mac and Janet retook their chairs and Doctor Monroe sat across from them, Doctor Sandborn standing at his side.

"I'm sorry it has taken so long to get back to you. We haven't been able to address the press either, and you know how they are," Doctor Monroe wiped some imaginary lint off his grey flannels. "I assume, Mr. Russo, the patient's brother is not here?"

Mac shook his head. "He should be back shortly."

"Well, Mr. Hayes, I know that you are like family and you, Miss, are family. Mr. Russo did tell us that if he were absent, we were to speak to you."

Mac nodded, swallowing. "Yes," he managed.

"We removed the bullet from the brain. It took seven hours. It was a very delicate operation. We have had him under observation for the past four hours. We..." he paused. "We are under a great deal of pressure here, because..." he was perspiring. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "The problem is...we don't know what to tell you. At first, we wanted to be able to say whether there was any brain damage or not...you know...."

Mac closed his eyes.

Janet leaned forward anxiously. "Is there...brain damage?"

"That's just it, we can't tell you...we don't know because he doesn't...he hasn't woken up."

There was a silence. Mac opened his eyes. "What? You mean...he's...he's not...?" Mac ran a trembling hand through his hair. He stood up. Janet touched his sleeve.

"He's not dead." Doctor Sandborn was speaking. He met Mac's eyes. "What we are trying to tell you, Mr. Hayes is that Mr. Russo is in a coma, and we have no idea when or if he will come out of it. And even if he does, there is a fifty percent chance that he will have some brain damage and a twenty percent chance that his brain will be severely...."

"I don't want to hear anymore, Goddamn it!" Mac

threw up his hands. "Twenty percent chance of this and fifty percent chance of...Goddamn it...damn it..."

Janet tried to take his arm, but he jerked away from her and stalked off down the hallway. He stopped at one point and hit the wall.

Janet didn't bother to apologize for him. They all knew what he was feeling. Both doctors issued Janet a sympathetic look.

"When can we see him?" she asked.

"In a few hours," Dr. Monroe replied, standing up. He took her hand. "There is no easy way to..."

"I understand. Is he on a life support machine?"

"No, the good news is that he seems to be breathing on his own. We will have to insert a feeding tube if he doesn't wake up soon. I.V. will do for now. Look, once we get him all settled in his room down the hall here, the nurse will let you know."

Janet nodded. "Will you speak to the press this evening, tell them that...?" The question hung in the air.

Dr. Sandborn cleared his throat. "The hospital will issue a brief statement this evening to say that Mr. Russo has come through the surgery and is in stable, but critical condition, then depending on what the lawyers say..."

Janet nodded as they shook her hand again, and then headed off down the hallway. She watched them until they disappeared and then wondered if she should go looking for Mac. She decided to let him be on his own for a while. She had a lot she needed to think about herself.

She sat down and dug in her purse for her address book with the tattered edges and crossed-out names. She rummaged through it and found what she was looking for. She studied the address, the phone number and then put it back in her purse. She got up and poured herself some coffee. She gulped it, and wished she had something stronger.

She was just about to pour another when she heard voices coming from the end of the corridor. She recognized the slow, monotone voice of Dr. Monroe, rising and falling in a tempo meant to calm. Seconds later, she heard another voice, loud and laced with anguish. She knew that voice. It belonged to Pepi.

* * * * *

It was after ten when Tony finally decided to go back home. He didn't want to go alone so Sam came with him. Tony sighed and stood at the edge of the driveway. His mother's car was still in the same place, but now his father's four by four was missing. Maybe he went looking for Mom.

"What's wrong?" Sam asked him.

"I don't know. Now Dad is gone, and every light in the house is on."

"Why don't we go inside? Maybe your mom is back and your dad went to the video store or something."

It was true that they often rented movies on Friday night. Tony shivered in his light jacket. They had been all over town. No one had seen his mom and in a

town of just twenty thousand people, a lot of people knew one another. They had even stopped by Francine Letourneau's house. She was his mom's best friend. Francine told them that she hadn't even heard from his mom at all today. She looked concerned.

Tony took a breath and turned to Sam. "Come in with me, okay?"

Sam rolled his eyes heavenward with a 'you're exaggerating' look on his face, but followed him up the path to the front door anyway. He had spent all evening trying to convince him that his parents were the last people on earth who were getting a divorce, but knew that he had failed. It was true that a lot of stuff didn't make much sense, like Tony's dad crying in the kitchen, but Sam still couldn't believe that they were going to divorce.

The door was unlocked. Tony entered, calling out to his mother. Sam moved into the living room and sat down while Tony walked down the hallway to his parent's bedroom. He could see that the lamp on the night table was on. The door stood halfway open, so he knocked and then opened it. "Mom?" he said.

Sandra Newton sat up in bed. She was lying fully dressed on top of the comforter, a washcloth across her forehead.

"Mom? Are you all right? Are you sick?" Tony asked, coming over to the bed. "Where have you been? I've been all over town looking for you, and..."

"I'm all right," she replied weakly. She took the washcloth away from her face. "Is your father back yet?"

"I don't think so. Did he go to the video store?" He looked at her. Something was wrong, very wrong.

"No. He'll be back. Listen to me, Tony," she reached out and clutched his hand, "I'm going to have to go away for a few days. I'm going to close the store. I want you..."

"Go where?" Tony blinked. "Are you sick, Mom? Is that what it is?"

"No. I'm not sick," she sighed. "Sit here beside me, okay?"

Tony sat down. She placed her cold hands on his face and smiled at him. "I love you. No matter what happens in the next few days, I want you to remember that."

"Mom, you're scaring me. Stop it," Tony said, moving away from her. He stood up, his voice rising to a frenzied pitch. "Tell me where you were tonight! Tell me why Dad was crying in the kitchen! Are you and Dad splitting up?"

"This isn't about your mother and I," a voice spoke from behind him suddenly.

Tony turned around to see his father standing in the doorway.

His mother got up off the bed and glared at his father. "I told you before, I won't let you...I won't let you do this! Tony, leave, leave this room now while I talk to your..."

"No!" Tom Newton stepped into the room and took Tony by the arm. "You stay right where you are."

Tony's eyes moved from his father to his mother

and then back again.

"I told you no, Tom! If you do this...I'm begging you...I'm begging you..." she was pleading, tears rolling down her face. "I'll get on my knees if I have to...I..."

She fell on the floor in front of them.

"Mom!" Tony cried in alarm, attempting to reach out to her.

"Leave her," Tom barked angrily. "It's time she told you the truth...it's time we both tell the truth before it finishes us. I should have never allowed this. I tried to tell myself that you did it for Tony, but you did it for yourself." Tom Newton's voice was filled with bitterness. "You still love him..." His voice broke, and he released Tony's arm. "You have never stopped loving him, and you wanted to punish him because he no longer loves you."

Sandra looked up at her husband, her eyes wide. "Please don't...think of what you're giving up as well."

"I'll take my chances," Tom nodded, wiping the tear away which rolled down his face. "Now, I'll leave the two of you alone. I'll give you a few minutes to tell him what you should have...what *we* should have years ago, and if you don't, I'm coming back in here and tell him myself." He turned to leave the room. "I'm going to drive Sam home."

Sandra got up off the floor. "Tom," she said softly.

He paused but didn't turn around.

"You were right about one thing." Her voice was clear and cold. "I do still love him, but I wasn't bitter

about him not loving me anymore because...he never loved me...never!"

"Unlike me," Tom murmured and left the room.

"I hate you!" she screamed. "I hate you for making me do this!"

Tony had backed up into the corner of the room. Tears were in his eyes, and he couldn't believe what he had just heard and seen. He understood less now than he thought he had before. He was frozen to the spot. He watched his mother light a cigarette, pace, and then stop and look at him.

"You are the dead-on image of him. Didn't anyone ever tell you how much you looked like him? I was always afraid of that, especially when you and Sam became obsessed with them as kids." She spoke as if to herself. She sat down at her vanity and studied her face in the mirror. She puffed on the cigarette. "There were so many ways you could have figured it out. I tried to cover all bases, but I couldn't keep you from watching television, or listening to music. And then there was always the possibility that he would show up at the door one day, but he never did. Maybe he thought he deserved to be punished, who knows." Her voice remained quiet for a moment, then she let out a sigh. "I don't know if there was ever a time...oh well, doesn't matter now. All that matters now is you."

She watched him as he forced himself to move out of the corner. His feet moved across the hardwood floor with its braided rug and he felt as if he weighed a thousand pounds; each step was labored. He had

absolutely no idea what she was talking about. He stood behind her now. "Mother," he managed, "please...please tell me what the hell you're talking about?" He was afraid that she had somehow suddenly lost her mind.

She reached up for his hand and pulled it onto her shoulder, covering it with her own. "I remember your birthday two years ago. You came to me begging to let you go to Toronto to see them in concert. I hesitated for so long that by the time I finally decided I couldn't deny you something you wanted that badly, there were no more tickets available except at the Toronto box office. We drove to Toronto. I spent the night in the car, and you and Sam," she laughed harshly, "you and poor Sam stood outside all night with a gang of other people waiting for the place to open."

Tony nodded. "Yes, and then we didn't get to go. They were all sold out, but Mom...what does this have to do with...?"

"The irony of it," Sandra squeezed his hand, "Johnny's own son not being able to get into his concert. There's something quite tragic about it." Two tears rolled down her face.

Tony gasped. "Mom...Mom...what do you...you can't mean that Johnny Russo is...Mom..." She had lost it. Perhaps she had this fantasy about Johnny Russo or she was in the early stages of dementia.

"Listen," she stood up and grabbed his shoulders suddenly. Tony looked at her with alarm. She shook him hard. "Johnny Russo is your biological father. I

was married to him briefly a long time ago. It didn't work out because...because he's sick, and I don't want you to..."

Tom Newton came into the room suddenly, and forced his wife's hands off her son. "He has a right to see him," he told her. "He may die, and by God if Tony wants to go to L.A. to see his father...then I'll make sure he gets there!"

Tony blanched. It was true. It was all true. The room began to spin. He swallowed something that tasted like vomit. He felt as if he was going to be sick.

His mother was yelling at his father again. His father. Tom Newton wasn't his father. My God. He tried to focus on what she was saying. She was telling him to stay out of it. She was crying again, blaming him for all of this.

Tony suddenly let out a yell. "Stop it! Just fucking stop it!"

Tom and Sandra Newton froze, their eyes riveted to their son.

"Mom," Tony said calmly, his hands shaking, "you had no right to keep this from me and I still want you to explain to me why you lied, and why I wasn't allowed to see my father."

She opened her mouth to interrupt but he held up a hand and shook his head. "Not now...when you have calmed down, and Dad," he looked at Tom, "you'll always be my father, no matter what. I love you. Right now, I need to be alone. Do me a favor and stop fighting. What's done is done." With that, he turned and left the room.

A few minutes later, Sandra was alone in the house for the second time that evening. She walked over to the window and looked outside. Tom had taken the four by four. Tony had left on foot. Maybe he'd spend the night at Sam's. She hoped that he'd be all right. She went and lay down on the bed. She should call, cancel her flight to L.A. There was no longer any reason to go, except that Johnny could be dying, and... She closed her eyes. She didn't want to think about the fact that he could die. Her head pounded. She had drunk too much. She began drifting away, which was good.

* * * * *

Angelo didn't want to talk to the reporter that sat next to him in the plane. He was a little bald guy in his mid-forties who worked for some gossip magazine in L.A. He had been sent to London to follow up on the car crash that had killed Lady Di.

"A fresh angle," he announced. "All I needed was a fresh angle." He opened his laptop. "But now," he said, "I've been called back home where the real action is. I'm going to put all the Lady Di stuff on hold because what's really hot is the Russo thing."

Angelo glanced around. Christ, sometimes life really sucked. First, all this shit with his family and now he ended up sitting right next to a goddamned reporter who just couldn't shut up about it. The only blessing was that the guy had no idea who he was.

All he wanted was to be alone, to allow himself time to digest what he had heard on the news.

He had been in a pub when he had heard it. He had been waiting to meet these guys who were looking for a second guitarist and someone to do vocals. He had heard them play a few nights before in a club. They were good, solid musicians and he was really anxious to jam with them.

Anyway, if they did finally show up, he never knew about it because shortly after he arrived at the pub, the B.B.C made the announcement on the television over the bar. He got up and went back to the room he had rented near Piccadilly Circus, threw his few belongings into his beat-up old duffle bag, grabbed his guitar and headed for the airport.

The man beside him was still talking, tapping away now on his laptop at the same time. "If you ask me," the man told him, "this closeness between the brothers was all a crock...a publicity stunt. I think Drake and Johnny have always hated one another. For me, there was sibling rivalry. When Drake won that guitar award, and..."

"Listen," Angelo smiled wearily at him, "this is all very fascinating, but I'm really tired and I think I'm going to try and catch some sleep, okay?"

"Sure," the man said. "No problem."

Angelo closed his eyes. God, the guy couldn't be further off-base with this sibling rivalry stuff. Dad and Uncle Johnny had never been jealous of each other's musical accomplishments.

But then, it didn't matter what the press printed. It

was always ninety percent horseshit with a bit of twisted truth thrown in to give it some legitimacy. He remembered reading stories about his Dad and uncles when he would travel with them on tour. It was always a howl to read. He remembered the one time Dad tripped over a cord that one of the roadies forgot to secure. Some press heard his dad scream at the roadie, "What in hell is wrong with you, Rodger, are you trying to kill me?"

The next day, the headline in one of the leading rags read, 'Ex-Con Roadie tries to kill Drake Russo'. There was a whole story on Rodger Mercury who had been in prison years before on a simple possession charge. Rodger also liked to play guitar. So, all of a sudden the ex-con roadie tried to kill the rock star because he was jealous of his success. No one ever knew what Rodger had been convicted of. Needless to say, there were many more stories like that one.

But what had just happened was not just another story in the tabloids. It was all over national television. Funny how all this didn't really surprise him. Not that he wasn't shocked about the shooting, just that he somehow knew, one day something bad was going to happen.

There was always so much tension between them. When they got along, it was wonderful. Drake had never seen two brothers who cared more. But when they fought, it was ugly and it affected everyone around them. It was painful to watch them because they loved each other so much, but yet there was something really terrible underneath that no one ever

wanted to talk about, something that was tearing them apart. He noticed it had grown worse since last summer.

He discretely checked his watch so that the reporter next to him wouldn't notice that he was awake. He would arrive in L.A. around suppertime. He did try to call his mother before he left, but got the answering machine. She was probably at the hospital.

One of the stewards walked by, offering refreshments. Angelo opened his eyes and smiled at her. "Just a Diet Coke, thanks."

She handed him an ice-filled glass filled with cola. She returned his smile. God, he was handsome. Beautiful eyes, the color of liquid chocolate... long black hair...broad shoulders, great body. He reminded her of some celebrity, although she couldn't think who. She let her eyes linger on his mouth as he spoke to her, lower lip slightly fuller than the other, a mouth made for kissing.

"Miss?"

She mentally slapped herself. "Yes, sir."

"A pillow when you get around to it, okay? Thanks," he said, settling down and closing his eyes before Mr. Talkative could begin his endless chatter.

She ran her gaze over him again before handing the guy beside him his gin and ginger ale. Suddenly she remembered where she had seen him.

"Excuse me...sir..." her voice was excited.

Angelo opened his eyes. "Yes?" Oh, God, she had recognized him. He could see it in her eyes.

He stood up immediately and took her elbow before she could continue. He turned her gently into the aisle, his lips at her ear. People were staring.

"Please," he told her, "I'm traveling incognito, okay. The man beside me is a reporter and if he discovers who I am, I won't get a moment's peace. I'll be eternally grateful to you if you help me to keep a low profile. I'm dealing with a lot right now. I really can't deal with the press."

She turned her face to his and smiled. "I'm on stop-over in L.A. for a few days. I know that it's probably a bad time for you, but..."

"Write down a number where I can reach you," he whispered close to her cheek. "I'll call if I get some time, and thank you."

She nodded and then said in a loud voice, "I will be bringing your pillow, sir."

He took his seat and closed his eyes again. He felt sleazy. He had done something his father would have done, agreed to take a phone number he had no intention of ever calling. *Oh, well, you did what you had to do.* Imagine that girl thinking that with his dad in prison and his uncle near death, he would take time to go out on a date with her.

His parents had tried to keep him out of the media, and they had done a good job. When he was a kid, no one ever knew that Drake was his dad, but when he got older and went on tour with them, people asked questions. He did look like his father. His dad was in his mid-thirties, but stayed in great shape. They were beginning to look more like brothers than father and

son. They were both over six feet, slim, muscular with long black hair and dark eyes. The press began taking pictures of him and it had just begun to be known before he left on his travels that Drake had an eighteen-year-old son.

Leaving to travel around Europe had kept him out of the papers for a while, but some people did recognize him from time to time. Now, he was sure that his face was soon to be plastered all over the papers, especially if there was to be a trial or worse, a funeral. He couldn't picture Johnny dead.

His uncle Johnny meant the world to him. He had always treated him like a second son. He and Dad had taught him how to play guitar. They were special, all three brothers...and Mac, of course. His dream had been to someday join the band, although Dad had told him that he had to try and make it on his own first. "You have to start from the bottom, experience the hardships, know what it means to struggle and then," his father had told him, "maybe, if you're good enough, I'll make you a member of the Russo Brothers Band. If it's too easy, you'll never learn to really appreciate it. You'll get too arrogant, you'll become lazy and you'll let the band down."

He had been so pissed when Dad had told him that, but there was some wisdom in what he said. Only now, it didn't matter because there was no Russo Brothers Band to aspire to. It could be all over, everything that they had worked all these years for, and it would kill his father. It would kill them all, because they wouldn't be able to live without making

music. It was in their blood. It was in his blood now. His mother would hate it, but he had decided that he wasn't going to college. He was going to make music, because he was good at it and it was all he wanted to do.

The plane would be landing soon, and he had managed to get through this flight without being discovered. He desperately wanted to see his dad, to be with his uncles. His mom, Mac and probably Grandma would be at the hospital now. He had missed them all, but this wasn't the reunion he wanted.

As the wheels touched down on the runway, he suddenly panicked. He was afraid. What if Uncle Johnny had already died while he was in the air? What if something had happened to his dad? What if he had crumbled under the pressure of it all? He had seen his dad at his worst; drunk, miserable, speaking about life as if it were a curse, rather than a gift. How was Mom taking all this? She still loved Dad, even if she didn't say so.

The plane came to a standstill. The reporter started chattering again, shutting up his laptop. He stood up, waiting for Angelo to do the same. Angelo picked up his duffle bag and began to file out behind the others.

The reporter leaned over and said in his ear, "I'm excited now. Things are really heating up in the Russo thing. I just got an e-mail message from my boss. The D.A. has charged Drake Russo with attempted murder, and from what I hear about Johnny's condition, they'll change it to murder soon enough.

I've got work to do and it's going to be fast paced. The press are going to be on the trail like hounds in a fox hunt. Look for my byline, kid."

Angelo's heart fell to his feet. He forced himself to keep moving. His eyes filled with tears, which he forced back. Dad, his mind screamed. Oh God, Dad, *no!*

* * * * *

Sophia shook her head adamantly. "He has a right to know, Janet. Phone that crazy friend of yours and demand to..."

"Mama," Pepi interrupted. "Calm down, you're upset. Look, eat your chicken, it's getting cold."

They were in a luxury suite at one of Los Angeles finest hotels. After visiting Johnny at the hospital that afternoon, they all needed to rest. Since a restaurant was out of the question, having food sent up here to Mama's suite allowed them to all be together without the press.

It had been a day from hell and Pepi didn't want to ever live through another like it, but he had a feeling that tomorrow wouldn't be any better. The press were following them everywhere. He didn't dare step out the door or answer a phone. And if that wasn't enough, his mother nearly collapsed when she saw Johnny lying like he was dead in the hospital. Then when he finally convinced her to leave Johnny's room, she was bound and determined that she was going to visit Drake. It took him almost an hour to try

and explain to her why Drake wouldn't want her to see him in jail. On top of all that, at the very end of the day, the district attorneys' office publicly announced that they were laying formal charges against his brother.

Pepi looked around the room, taking a sip of the dry red wine; a very good vintage, but it tasted like sawdust. Mac sat over on the brocade sofa now, smoking a cigarette. He had eaten little. No one had much of an appetite after today. Mama hadn't touched her food, and Janet merely played with hers.

"You know I don't need all this," Mama waved her hand around the room. "This is a waste, overpriced and...a person could get lost in here."

The suite was fit for royalty. It consisted of four rooms and a bath. The floors were adorned with red plush carpets. The furniture was deep walnut. There was a brass bed with a canopy in the bedroom, gold-rimmed mirrors and crystal chandeliers.

"Mama, we're rich. Stop it." Pepi sighed. Mama had never accepted the fact that she could have had anything she wanted. She had stubbornly fought them when they wanted to buy her a new house, a car with a driver to take her around New York. It was annoying, really. She had insisted on living in that old working-class house in Brooklyn where they had grown up.

Sophia clicked her tongue while Pepi managed to get down a piece of chicken. "Fraud. The rich get richer, and the poor pay for it." She pushed her plate away and folded her arms across her thin chest.

"Janet," she looked at her former daughter-in-law. "Call your friend and make her put my grandson on the line. I'll tell him myself that his father may be dying. Enough is enough."

Mac cleared his throat. "I agree with Sophia. Johnny's son should know that his father is..." He paused. "That he is unwell, and..."

Pepi nodded at Janet. "I know it's going to be tough, but these are exceptional circumstances."

Sophia shook her head. She narrowed her dark eyes at her. "She kept my grandson from knowing about his heritage. She has lied to him. She broke my son's heart, and..."

Janet had all she could do to hold her tongue. She knew that this was not the time to tell her just what she thought of her. Oh, Sophia was a good enough soul. She doted on her grandson, but she was too damned protective of her boys, especially when it came to Drake. When they got divorced, Sophia told her over the phone that she was shocked to hear that they were splitting up. Although she didn't come right out and say it, she insinuated that she must have done something to drive him away. She felt like telling her that she had done everything but tear out her heart to keep Drake, but that he was just too damned close to his brother.

Anyway, for the time being, she would keep her temper. She issued Sophia a smile and said, "In all fairness, Sophia, I do think that the divorce was hard on Sandy. I don't agree with what she did, but I understand it."

"Understand...understand..." She threw up her hands. "And my grandson, your boy, where is he, by the way? Shouldn't my grandson be with his family now?"

"It wasn't my idea to allow Angelo to traipse all over Europe, Sophia." She smiled tightly.

Pepi gave Janet a 'I know she's getting on your nerves' look and came over to place his hands on his mother's shoulders. "Never mind all that now, Mama. Janet is going to try and reach Sandy, okay? Drake Junior will be here when he gets here. He's a grown man."

Janet smiled at Pepi in gratitude. Then she searched in her bag and pulled out her little telephone book. Getting up, she went over to the telephone. She hesitated for a moment. There wasn't a sound in the room. She picked up the phone. "Yes," she said, "this is suite four. Please give me an outside line."

* * * * *

When Angelo woke up, he couldn't believe it was nine-thirty. It felt kind of strange to sleep in his own bed again after almost a year. He stretched, yawned and got up. He pulled off his jeans and his socks, and walked naked into the bathroom. He turned on the shower with the six different spray heads and closed his eyes, letting the hot water saturate his skin. He reached for some organic shampoo his mother had sitting on the shower shelf and washed his long hair. When he got out, he shaved except for the moustache,

which he thought made him look older. He unzipped his bag, found clean underwear and socks and looked in his closet for jeans and a shirt. He settled for faded Levis and a white T-shirt, and threw on his old faithful tan leather jacket that was looking pretty battered now.

He grabbed a piece of cheese out of the refrigerator and then searched the drawers for the key to his motorcycle. It was a vintage model, a chrome monster Harley that his mother begged him not to buy, but he did anyway. He had missed his bike. After almost fifteen minutes of frantic searching, he found the key. She had put it in the drawer with all the odds and ends. He turned on the security system and went into the garage. He hit the garage door opener and the door cranked upwards. There she was, sitting over in the corner, just the way he'd left her, covered up with heavy plastic. He'd have to take it in for a tune-up. He hoped there was some gas left in her.

He'd ride over to the hospital. That must be where his mother, Mac and Uncle Pepi were. He removed the dusty cover, ran a loving hand over the leather seat and straddled the bike. A few minutes later, he was out of the garage and roaring down the road and out onto the highway. He flipped on the stereo and turned up the music. They were playing one of the Russo Brothers' latest tunes. He liked this one. He began to sing the words as he stopped for a red light. "Baby, baby, give me tonight...I won't ask for anything more. I know it's wrong...but I can never let go. I love you...I want you far more than you know..."

Suddenly, he looked in his rearview mirror and sucked in a breath. There were two cars behind him. Press. One of them, a red Subaru was trying to maneuver up beside him. There was a man in the other car, a dark sedan, who was rolling down the passenger side window and sticking a mike out into the air. "Drake...Drake...." he called, shouting out his proper first name. "Have you seen your dad yet? What has all this done to your family? Drake...just a few minutes..."

Angelo watched the light anxiously. "Shit!" When the light changed, he slammed down on the gas and roared through the intersection. Increasing his speed, he spotted an alleyway. He turned the corner sharp, swerving, nearly toppling, then righting the bike. He came out the other side. He was going too fast. He nearly rammed into a parked car before he could stop. He pulled the bike to the side of the street and closed his eyes. His heart was beating heavily in his chest. "Damn! Goddamn!" He had come close to having one hell of an accident, and he hadn't even bothered to wear his helmet.

After a few minutes, he turned the key to the ignition again and rolled on down the street at a speed that was more than respectable. He turned at the next intersection and headed for the private hospital where his uncle was.

When he arrived, he was surprised to find it fairly quiet. Except for a few police cars and Frank's 'monkey men', as he had always called them, the crowds were small...just a few diehard fans keeping

vigil for Johnny, candles glowing. Some were singing and strumming guitars in tribute to the Russo Brothers' music.

He parked his bike in the visitor's parking lot and began walking toward the main door, keeping his eyes peeled for the press. Just as he was preparing to mount the steps to the door, a potbellied policeman sauntered over to him.

He ran his eyes critically over the long windblown hair, faded jeans and battered jacket, and then demanded to see some identification.

"I think I should tell you, young man," the police officer took the driver's license Angelo offered him and studied it, "this is a private hospital. What exactly is your business here?"

"I'm here to see my Uncle. I'm Drake Russo's son."

The cop blinked and looked at the license again. "It says here your name is Smith."

"My mom's name is Smith," Drake told him.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Smith, I can't let you go wandering around that hospital without prior authorization for security reasons. Now, I understand," he placed a fatherly hand on Drake's shoulder and turned him around, "maybe people your age want to meet rock stars, but I assure you that Johnny Russo is in no shape to deal with fans at this time."

"I'm not a fan, goddamn it," Angelo jerked away from him. "I'm his nephew. Listen, at least bring one of those monkey—one of Frank's security guys over here. Maybe he can at least tell me where my family is."

The cop nodded. "Okay, but you stay right here, no tricks, and you better not be wasting my time. I'll take your I.D. with me."

Angelo watched the policeman wander over toward the underground parking. Ha, this was supposed to be Los Angeles' finest. The guy was at least fifty pounds overweight. His grandmother could outrun him.

The kids at the edge of the parking lot were now bellowing out the chorus from 'Rock Heaven', an old tune of his dad's, a classic now. "I'm in rock heaven, better than lovin'...better than drugs....better than kissing...rock me...rock me my whole life long." Angelo hummed along for a while. He had played this song so often on his guitar that his fingers moved in his pockets as if they were moving over the strings.

He noticed now that several of Frank's monkey men had emerged from the parking lot and were checking him out. After a few minutes, a beefy-looking guy with a brush cut said something to the cop and then began walking toward him. He straightened his tie and adjusted his belt, making sure Angelo saw the flash of metal at his waist, as if this was a necessary prelim to what ever was to come. The man held his license between his thick fingers.

"Mr. Smith," he said, handing his license back to him. "May we be of service in some way, sir?"

Angelo sighed. "Look, I'm Drake Russo, Drake Angelo Smith Russo, if it makes it easier. I just came to see if my family was still here and to check on my uncle. I didn't realize it was going to be such a

damned challenge to get into the hospital!"

"It's a private hospital, sir, and you have to understand that anyone could claim to be Johnny Russo's relative. We've had people pretending to be his mother, his sister, his cousin...you name it, and I'm sorry if you are who you say you are. I've no authorization to let you in."

Angelo nodded. "Okay, fine, but can you at least tell me if my mother and uncle are inside? Maybe you can call and let them know I'm here. I just got in from Europe a few hours ago, and I'm anxious to know how my uncle is doing."

"Well, you go on home now and watch the television. They'll tell you all about it," the man said with an icy smile.

There was little he could do except have the son of a bitch fired when he got a hold of Frank. "Great, I'll do that, but you know what, we're going to see each other again, you and I, and when we do, you're going to be on your way to the unemployment centre."

"Look, punk, don't threaten me. Go on home, smoke a reefer and get yourself laid...a good-looking guy like you shouldn't have any problem. If I were off-duty, I might even be willing to give you an education...one you wouldn't forget." In spite of what he was suggesting, the stern expression on his face never altered.

Angelo laughed at him and then sobered. "Believe me, buddy, you'd be the last man on my list, even if I was fucking desperate, and I wouldn't be so quick to presume who would be doing the educating."

The man's face drained of color as Angelo looked him in the eye. "I wish you a good night. Enjoy pushing your weight around; it will be the last time. Not only will you never again work for the studio, I'll fix it so you won't ever work in this town again, you piece of shit."

The man grabbed him roughly by the arm.

Angelo pulled away. "Don't add assault to the list." He stood his ground for a few minutes. They glared at each other and then the security man turned and walked away. Angelo breathed a sigh of relief. He really didn't feel like wrestling with that guy.

He walked back to where he had parked his bike. It was almost midnight. The kids were still singing. He closed his eyes. It was times like these that he wished he wasn't part of all this. If his uncle were just an average guy in a regular hospital, he'd be in there now. He could ask the nurse to tell him how his uncle was doing and there would be no security men, no suspicious glances, no need for I.D. and interrogations. He would just be a nephew wanting to see his uncle.

He thought about going home, but he wasn't tired. He felt restless, afraid for his dad, for his uncle. He didn't want to be alone. He didn't want to think too much about what had happened. He wanted to hear music, dance, maybe have a drink. It was Saturday night. The bars were filled with people having a good time. He wanted to be one of those people with an ordinary life, with ordinary problems.

He turned off the main drag and headed for the

village. He was no stranger to the gay bars. He must now know every gay ghetto in Europe as well as North America, but it was in L.A. he felt at home.

He had first visited this district when he was sixteen. A bouncer had tossed him out on his rear after he had managed to mill around in this one particular bar for an hour. The guy's name was Marty, and he had told him not to be too anxious. "Come back in a few years, kid, they're going to love you."

Angelo smiled as he parked his bike. He hadn't seen Marty in a while. The *Encounter Bar* was still there on the corner, one of the milder places where men weren't permitted to have sex in the open, and you could still have a drink without someone trying to run their hands all over you.

Dad never liked the idea that he hung out in these bars, but Angelo told him that he'd probably outgrow them eventually. Aside from not being keen on the bars, his father had a very open-minded attitude about sexuality. He'd told him when he was fourteen that no one could choose who they loved. He'd said, "Son, experiment if you like, but always protect yourself, always treat your lover with respect and realize that like it or not, my son, one day you're going to fall in love, and it may not be with someone you should love."

That statement had always puzzled him some, because as far as he knew, his father had never been truly in love with anyone. He'd had relationships, ones which lasted a month, others a year. Some with

men, others with women, but he never once indicated that he loved any of them, although he certainly treated them well. The marriage between his parents had been a mistake.

In spite of his parents' divorce, they had always been there for him. He felt lucky about that. Mother didn't know he came to the bars. She would have raised the roof, although she knew he had been intimate with men. Deep down, he knew she hoped he'd get married one day. Maybe he would. But tonight, this is what he wanted. He intended only to browse, not buy. He was too tired, unless of course, there was something exceptional being offered.

He walked in the door and was immediately assaulted by a blast of rock music coming from the sound system. 'Satisfaction' by the Stones was playing. He would have a drink, listen to a few tunes and then leave.

* * * * *

It was pouring outside, which didn't happen that often in L.A. The alarm clock said seven a.m., but it felt like three. Janet pulled herself out of bed and walked down the hallway to her son's room. The bed was still unmade, but he wasn't in it. She bent over and picked up his dirty clothes. She took his open suitcase off the bed and set it in the corner. He hadn't even unpacked.

Last night when she came home, right away she noticed that his bike was gone. Poor kid, she thought.

He had probably been looking all over for them. When she went into the house and found his suitcase, she knew he had come home. She kicked herself mentally for not having left him a note. She should have come home before going up to Sophia's hotel suite to eat. Oh, well. The question now was, where had he been all night?

She made herself some toast, put on the coffee and sat down at the kitchen counter. She had to stop acting the overprotective mother. Angelo was eighteen. He had been halfway around the world by himself.

When the phone rang, she let the answering machine pick it up. A voice said, "Call me back, Janet, I refuse to talk on this thing." It was Sophia. She sighed. Last night, she had tried to reach Sandy. There had been no answer. She had promised Sophia that she would let her know the minute she contacted her. That's probably why she was calling.

Janet poured her coffee, threw in some milk and dug her hands in her hair. Johnny looked really bad yesterday. She could hardly stand looking at him. He had always been the one with the most energy out of the three of them. When Drake and Pepi were ready to drop after a concert, Johnny would want to go dancing, to party. Now, he looked dead. The only thing that moved was his eyes under his lids, constantly moving. Janet thought that maybe he was dreaming, but the doctor told her it was just a reflex.

Janet got up with her coffee cup, lit a cigarette and looked at the phone. She wondered if she should try

her. *Sandy. Goddamn you, girl.*

Just then, she heard the garage door open and there was the roar of a motorcycle. Angelo. She got up and hurried to the door. There he was, her son, her beautiful boy, after a year of missing him.

"Angel!" She ran to embrace him.

He kissed her cheek and gave her a bear hug, growling humorously just the way Drake used to. "Hey, old lady," he teased, grinning at her.

"Old lady!" she accused, placing an arm around him, squeezing him a few times as they walked down the hall to the kitchen together. "You little ass, where have you been? I've been worried to death. What time did you get in?"

"Ah...I don't know," he sat at the counter, rubbing his face. He looked tired. He needed to sleep. "Guess it was about suppertime. I lay down and passed out, and then I tried to see Uncle Johnny...they wouldn't let me in, and I didn't know where you were. Were you and Uncle Pep at the hospital?"

"Until around five, then we went to your grandmother's suite at the hotel to eat."

He nodded, got up and poured himself some coffee.

"Are you hungry?" Janet asked.

"No, exhausted. You know one of those stupid security guys that works for Frank gave me a hassle like you wouldn't believe last night. He told me to go home and smoke dope and then...get this...he made a pass at me."

Janet's eyes widened. She laughed. "He's got good

taste."

"Mom, he's a creep," Angelo protested.

"Well, maybe, but he's the least of our worries. How did you find out about all this? Where were you?"

"London, heard it in a pub." Angelo drained the coffee and sat back down at the counter. He laid his head down. "Mom, how is Dad?"

She heard the pain in his voice. "I haven't seen him. He's been charged." She blinked back tears. Being here with Drake's son suddenly made her feel as if her heart were breaking.

"I know." He looked up. "Why'd he shoot Uncle Johnny, Mom?"

"I don't know."

He got off the stool. "How is Grandma?"

"Taking all this very hard, of course. Pepi has really had a lot to deal with. Your dad won't see her and she was insistent yesterday, and then when she saw your uncle...well. Also, she's really on my back about getting in contact with Sandy."

Angelo had almost forgotten that Johnny had a son in Canada. "If your friend wanted news of her ex, you think she would have..."

"Yes, but she never told Tony about his dad, so the family thinks Tony should know in case something should...you know..."

Angelo swallowed. "Could he...die?" Her son's face drained of color as he said the words.

Janet went over and took him in her arms. They held each other for a moment, each with their own

fears. She didn't respond. She couldn't. The possibility was just too terrible.

Angelo had another coffee with his mother and then told her he was going to grab some sleep. They would leave together for the hospital after lunch.

When Angelo retired to his room, Janet paced and smoked several cigarettes. At ten-thirty, she picked up the phone and dialed Sandy's number.

* * * * *

Tony looked out the window. His father hadn't come home since Friday and his mother had kept a low profile, spending most of the time in her room. He had spent Friday night and most of Saturday with Sam, who was too shocked by the news to say much of anything. Mostly they walked together while Tony ranted and Sam listened.

Saturday night, his father—or at least the man he had always believed to be his father—called. His mother answered the phone and then told him to pick up the extension in his room.

Tom Newton was at his mother's, who lived at the other end of town. He wanted to know if Tony was okay and he wanted to tell him that he loved him, and that if he wanted to go to L.A., he would buy him the ticket. Tony couldn't reply. He started to cry, and then he hung up.

He was so confused, hurt and angry, especially at his mother. He felt so bad that Tom, whom he loved very much, wasn't really his father. His real father

was a famous man, one of the greats in rock music, and his uncle was 'the' Drake Russo, and he never ever got to benefit from it. He loved music, played a little guitar himself, but was denied his family. He could imagine his dad and uncle teaching him to play. It was a dream, a dream that could have been reality if he and his real father had been together.

Selfish of him or not, he resented being shut out completely from his father's world, a world any kid his age would have died to be a part of. Why? Why did she lie to him about all this? Why didn't his real father want to see him? Why didn't he try and contact him? Did he even know about him? What had happened to make his mother hate Johnny Russo so much that she kept his son a secret? Was *he* a secret?

He still had so many questions he needed to ask his mother, but he couldn't stand to look at her just yet. He needed time, and yet all the time he waited, his real father might be dying. He was tempted to call Grandma and tell Dad that he would take that ticket. He didn't need to say anything to his mom about it. He'd just go.

When the phone rang, he froze. His mother picked up after two rings. Tony moved to his bedroom door and pushed it open a crack. He heard her say, "How dare you...how dare you call me! Never call here again!" Tony heard the phone slam down onto the receiver. He heard his mother sobbing, then the sound of footsteps and the front door slamming. She was gone.

Tony held his breath. He came out of his room.

Who was that? When the phone rang again, he jumped. It froze his blood. He stopped. Two rings, three.

He ran to the phone in his mother's bedroom and picked it up. He felt numb. His hands were shaking, and so was his voice. "Hello?"

"Sandy...no...is this...Tony?"

It was a woman's voice.

"Yes...who...who is this?"

"It's Aunt Janet, calling from Los Angeles. Is your mother...?"

"No...but I know. I know that..." He took a painful breath. "Johnny is my father."

There was a silence.

"I found out on Friday. Why didn't Mom tell me?"

"I don't know. You should ask her that. Listen, Tony, do you want to see your father? He's quite ill...in a coma. I can arrange for a ticket for you if your mother...you can stay here with us, there's lots of room."

"Us?"

"Me and Angelo, your Uncle Drake's son. I would like to talk to Sandy, though, if..."

"She stormed out of here a few minutes ago. I don't think she wants to talk to you." Tears streamed down his cheeks, he wiped them away. "Janet...I mean, Aunt Janet, can you arrange a ticket for me, then? Call me back and let me know when the flight is. I'll get my friend Sam to drive me to the airport. He just got a secondhand motorcycle for his birthday."

"I'll call back in twenty minutes, okay?"

"Thank you," Tony replied and hung up. He called Sam and asked him for a lift to the airport. He knew that he would take him. He began to pack some clothes in a bag, and then the phone rang again. It had only been ten minutes.

"Tony, Pepi will send the jet for you. There is a landing place right outside of the airport in Toronto. Anyway, be at the airport at seven o'clock your time this evening. Wait at the Canada customs desk. A man will be carrying a sign with your name on it, okay?"

"I can't...I can hardly believe this. Okay, I'll be there at the Canada customs desk. I'll find it."

"See ya later," she said and hung up.

Tony called Sam back and told him the news. "Can we leave early? I'd like to be gone before Mom comes home. I'll leave her a note telling her where I am. Oh, ya, and I have to go to the bank machine first and withdraw some money." He had three hundred and twenty-two dollars in his bank account.

"Sure, it's going to take us at least two and half hours to get to Toronto anyway. We can hang out at the airport, maybe grab a bite."

"I'll treat you," Tony offered. "Okay, I'll be ready in a half hour."

"I'll be there soon."

Tony sat down to write the note. The words came easily, pouring onto the page. There was nothing she could do now to stop him. He was going to be with his family; his aunt, his uncles, his cousin and his dad.

Sam arrived after ten minutes. Tony put the note

where she was sure to find it, grabbed his bag, locked the door behind him and got on the back of Sam's old bike. "Hope it holds out until Toronto," Tony teased.

"Me too," Sam replied, handing his friend an old helmet.

Sam put on his own helmet and then after a few seconds, he asked Tony if he were scared.

"Ya, scared, excited. This should be such a happy time, really. My dream of meeting face to face with the Russo brothers has come true. Only problem is, one is in the hospital, one's in jail and I've just found out that they all happen to be my relatives. It's a weird feeling. They're sending a private jet for me, imagine!"

"Wow! You didn't tell me that."

"Freaky. Anyway, let's get out of here," Tony urged.

They didn't talk much after that. It was almost impossible to hear each other anyway what with the traffic on the 401, the roar of the engine and the wind. It was mid-October already, and it was damned cold on the back of the bike. Tony sure was glad of his black leather jacket. His thighs and his hands, however, were freezing by the time they arrived at the airport.

It was a little after four. Tony paid for Sam's parking and they went to get coffee in order to warm up. They sat together, watching the planes land and take off.

"Ever wonder where all those people are going to?" Sam mused.

Tony smiled. "Ya. Somewhere good, maybe."

"I've never been to L.A.," Sam offered. "You're lucky. Did you ever go?"

Tony shook his head. He put down his coffee cup. "They seem to want me out there. That's why I decided to go, you know. I don't think I would have gone unless someone called. Dad...well, Tom offered me a ticket, but I...I didn't know if I'd be welcome."

"That was pretty cool of your dad," Sam said, meeting Tony's eyes.

"Ya," Tony replied softly, "it was, wasn't it?"

* * * * *

"Johnny," Sophia said softly, leaning over the guardrails so that she could place her mouth close to her son's ear, "Tony is coming. Janet spoke to him on the phone. He's a big boy now. He's coming, John, he's going to be here by your side."

Pepi watched his mother's wrinkled hands curl around the metal railing and tighten. Tears were coursing down her cheeks.

"I know he hears me...I know..." She lowered her head and started to cry.

Pepi, who'd been sitting in the corner of the room, got up and went over to her. He pulled her hands away from the guardrail and directed her out of the room.

"Enough now, Mama," he said. "Go and sit down. Janet will be here with Angelo soon. You don't want Angelo to see you with your eyes all puffy, do you?"

He'll get upset if he sees his grandmother like that."

She sat, took a tissue out of her purse and blew her nose.

He had stayed at the hotel with her last night. They sat together late into the night talking. She fell asleep in one of the overstuffed brocade chairs. He had covered her with a blanket and let her sleep.

He didn't have the energy to drive home. He had curled up on one of the sofas and passed out. First thing in the morning, she wanted to go to the hospital. He hardly had time to shower. By nine-thirty, they were in Johnny's room.

There had been no change. He looked the same as he had yesterday. He still lay in the same position, flat on his back, hands at his side. His head was covered with a thick bandage, his shoulder-length curly dark hair was gone. They had shaved his head for the surgery. His usual swarthy complexion was white. He was hooked up to a heart monitor, there were tubes coming out of his mouth and out of various other parts of his body. The doctor told them that they hadn't yet put an eating tube in. For now, the I.V. was enough. He looked dead yesterday, he looked dead today, and the only good news was that he seemed to be breathing on his own.

"I need to see Drake," his mother said suddenly.

Pepi was sitting across from her, dozing off. He lifted his head. "What?"

"I have to see Drake, and I have to speak to Johnny alone."

"Mama," Pepi groaned, "Johnny can't hear you,

and Drake is in jail. He's supposed to meet with his lawyer today."

"I don't care! Drake will see me. You call him and you tell him that I want to see him. You saw him!" she accused.

"Yes, but only for a few minutes, Mama," Pepi insisted, his voice growing impatient.

"I have things to discuss with him...things I need to tell him." She looked away suddenly, winding her fingers together. "Things I should have told him long ago."

"Mama," Pepi leaned over to her, "are you all right? What's wrong?"

He tried to touch her hand, but she pulled away. She looked at him sharply. "Do you love Drake?"

Pepi looked surprised. "Love Drake...of course I love Drake, Mama. Everyone loves Drake."

"Do you think I loved Drake more than you and your brother?"

Pepi's eyes widened at the question. Why was she asking him this now? He was speechless.

"Answer me!" Her voice was sharp. "Do you think I loved Drake better than you and Johnny?"

Pepi nodded, trying to find his voice. "I think you love Drake more than anyone, even more than you did Papa."

Their eyes met.

"Thank you for being honest with me." She took his hand.

"You're not going to deny it, are you?" Pepi asked her.

She shook her head. "No more lies. I have always loved Drake more than anything, more than my own life, but you knew...you, Johnny and Joseph all knew that, but none of you ever minded, did you?"

Pepi shook his head. "No, because we understood why you loved him so much. We all did, too. Johnny adores Drake, and so do I. We both do. I was never jealous of your love for Drake. I knew you loved me too, but differently. If I was jealous of anyone, it was Johnny, because he and Drake were closer in age and Johnny always demanded and got all of Drake's attention. I envied Johnny's closeness to Drake."

"No, never envy that!" Mama shook her head. She took his hand. "It was a curse, a curse put on me perhaps for what I did, for lying to your father, or for loving another woman's husband, even if she was dead."

"Mama, what are you talking about...what in the name of...?"

"Never mind...never mind now. It's not the time yet." She sighed. "Work that silly elevator for me, will you dear? I'm going downstairs to get something to eat. I need to take my pills."

"I'll go with you then," Pepi said.

"No, I'll take that card. Someone will work it for me on the way up." She stood up.

Pepi took her elbow and helped her onto the elevator. "Don't talk to anyone, Mother."

"I know...I know...when is my grandson getting here?"

"Angelo?"

"No, the other one...Tony, isn't it?"

"He'll be here soon, around five our time."

"Who is meeting him?"

"Carter is bringing him here, Mama," Pepi told her.

"Don't worry, go have a sandwich, relax."

"Someone from the family should be meeting him," she muttered as the elevator door closed.

Pepi breathed a sigh of relief. A few minutes of peace and quiet. She was acting a bit strange. He hoped it wasn't the beginnings of senility, though she wasn't that old. All this talk about having to say this and that to Johnny and Drake, and then going on about some man losing his wife and her loving him and curses...God, he couldn't deal with her losing her marbles right now.

He yawned and rubbed his tired eyes. After this was over, he was going to sleep for a week. They would be on tour in Latin America right now if all this hadn't happened. But of course, that had been cancelled. In fact, everything had been cancelled until further notice.

He had been trying hard not to feel sorry for himself. He tried to concentrate on the fact that Drake was in jail and Johnny was in the hospital, but there was that voice in the back of his head that told him his career was probably in the toilet now. He couldn't help resenting Drake and Johnny just a little for this. Damn them, damn both of them. It had always been about them from the beginning, and although he loved them both, he could never understand what it was between them...that something that always

managed to creep out every once in a while and touch everything and everyone with its madness. There was something that brought both his brothers such pain over the years... something they had never confessed to him. Maybe this is what he resented most, being excluded.

He had always felt an outsider, even when he was finally old enough to play keyboards in the band. He'd told himself that being born six years after Johnny was the reason for the distance. But he realized that it wasn't only the age difference that kept him at arms' length from his brothers. There was this magic between them, a magic that was at the heart of the Russo Brothers Band, a magic that Frank Carr had spotted the first time he'd laid eyes on them playing at the *Rock Castle*. But that magic that made everyone around them feel good and warm could just as quickly turn into a hurricane, knocking everything and everyone down in its way.

His cell phone was ringing now. He almost hated to answer. All news seemed bad lately, and it was getting worse. He lifted his phone out of his pocket and flipped it open.

"Ya?" he said.

"Pep, it's Frank. How ya doing?"

"Not bad. Mom insisted on going to the hospital before the birds got up today, so I'm here with Johnny. How's things with you?"

"Tough. Some people are not happy about the cancellations and I can't get anywhere with your record label. They insist on sticking to the release date

for the C.D. How far are we from finished?"

Pepi sighed. "Two songs, maybe."

"Can we re-master two classics and stick those on?" Frank's voice sounded tense, tired.

"Why not? Have the sound technicians work with 'Love Me Tonight' and 'Heartbeat'. 'I'll try and spend a few hours this week going over it, putting the finishing touches on them. When is the release date?"

"End of October," Frank replied.

"Shit. That's in like...two weeks?"

"You got it."

"Well, I'm a little nervous about doing anything without Drake and Johnny's approval...especially Drake, you know how he gets, but I've got no choice. I'll tell Drake what's happening, though. Speaking of Drake, what's going on?"

"I sent Francine Thomson over there. Damned good criminal lawyer...expensive. She's meeting with Drake now. Do you want to meet us for coffee at the doughnut place across the street?"

"When?"

"In about an hour."

"Look, Mama is downstairs in the cafeteria. I'm waiting for Janet and Angelo to show up..."

"Angel is home?" Frank asked enthusiastically.

"Ya...at least I'm pretty sure he's back," Pepi chuckled.

"What?"

"Well, seems he had some problem with security last night. One of your blue-suits told me this morning about this guy that showed up claiming to

be Drake's son with an I.D. card that said Smith on it. They wouldn't let him in. So I gave the guy hell, but it's not their fault...with everything going on, I forgot to forewarn them about Angelo.

"Anyway, Frank, I don't want Mama to be alone right now. She's acting kind of weird, and she does have a bad heart. I'd rather wait until Janet and Angelo get here before I take off. I'll call Janet and hurry her up. If they get here in time, I'll come and join you at the coffee shop, okay? If I don't show, you know why."

"Okay, I'll be by the hospital later today anyway. How is he?"

"The same."

Frank sighed. "Catch you later," he said and hung up.

Just then, the elevator doors opened. Pepi stood up. Janet and Angelo stepped off. Great, now he could go and find out about Drake.

"Uncle Pep," Angelo said, stepping up to him and giving him a hug. He was already several inches taller than Pepi.

Janet gave Pepi a kiss on the cheek. "How's our boy?"

Pepi shook his head and then gave his nephew a smile. God, it had been a year since he'd seen him, and he looked more and more like his Dad. "Well gorgeous," he teased, "how was Europe?"

Angelo gave his uncle a sassy look. "Great, until London."

Pepi sighed. "How'd you hear?"

"Television. Anyway, doesn't matter now."

"Listen, guys, Mama is downstairs and I want to go and join Frank in a hour or so. Drake is seeing a lawyer now, and she agreed to meet with us. I don't want Mama to..."

Janet nodded at him. "No problem. Listen, I'll stay here." She turned to her son. "Angelo, did you want to go with your uncle?"

"Will I be able to see Dad?" he asked.

Pepi shrugged. "Depends on your dad, but come with me anyway and we'll see what happens. Just don't let your grandmother know where you're going. She insists on seeing him, and I know he doesn't want Mama to see him in jail."

"Anyway," Janet said, sitting now, "I'll occupy her by reminding her that she will get to see her other grandson later in the day. Tony is on his way, isn't he?" She looked at Pepi.

Pepi nodded. "Ya. You know, there is so much going on that's stressful. It doesn't seem like it should all be going on at the same time. Damn it, meeting Tony for the first time would be enough in terms of tense situations...or Johnny being in the hospital, or Drake being in jail...or my career falling apart. One of these situations would be more than enough, wouldn't it, but gee, I guess what they say is true, when it rains, it fucking well does pour, doesn't it?"

Angelo stood up and placed an arm around Pepi's shoulder. Although he loved Uncle Johnny, Pepi had always been his favorite uncle. He was younger and

he always had time for him, unlike Uncle Johnny, who was always hanging out with Dad.

"It's going to get better," Angelo told him; although he wasn't sure he believed it.

"Bullshit," Pepi replied, but gave him a grin and hugged him.

Angelo laughed, then sobered. "I'm going in to see Uncle Johnny."

Janet reminded him of what to expect, and Pepi pointed the way. He walked down the corridor and entered his Uncle's room.

Ten minutes later, he came out, tears streaming down his cheeks. His mother went to comfort him, but he shook his head and turned away. He cried for a moment and then stopped, reaching for a tissue in the box on the end table.

Except for his mother, the waiting room was empty. Pepi had gone downstairs.

Then the elevator opened and his grandmother stood there, holding her son's arm. Janet got up to meet her, giving her son a look that said, 'Dry your eyes fast so your grandmother doesn't see.'

A few seconds later, Angelo was smiling at his grandmother. She hugged him several times, made a comment about his hair being too long and took his hand.

"Come sit with me, Drake," she said. She was the only one in the family who always called him Drake.

He sat beside her.

"You are back home now for good? No more wandering?"

He grinned at her. "I make no promises, Grandma. I think I have the wanderlust."

"Ants in your pants are more like it. Just like your father," she grumbled.

He laughed.

"Now, what college did you choose for next spring?"

"Grandma," he sighed, "I really haven't decided on..."

"You are your father all over. You're going play music in those smoky dens of sin, aren't you?"

"Yes, Grandma." He grinned at her.

She shook her graying head and then laughed. "You're such a charmer and handsome...or at least you would be, if I could see that face under all that hair."

He laughed again and then comically gathered his hair together in his hand to show her his face. She laughed and then pulled him close to her and held him, rocking him like she did when he was a small boy, as she had his father.

Sophia closed her eyes. The way he felt, the way he smelled, just like his grandfather. She kissed his hair. My love, she thought, and then hastily withdrew from him, reminding herself that this was not him, it was his grandson. Her love was gone. He had been gone for many years. How had she managed to live an entire lifetime without him?

"Grandma?" Angelo was saying to her now.

"Grandma, are you all right?" She seemed to have gone into a trance.

She nodded. "Yes, dear. Where is Pepi?" She looked around suddenly.

"Talking to Mom, over there in the corner."

"Did you see your uncle yet?"

Angelo nodded. "Yes, and don't worry, okay?" He took her hand.

Pepi came over now and looked at Angelo. "Ready?"

He stood up.

"Where are you taking my grandson?" Sophia enquired. "I haven't seen him in a dog's age!"

"I need his help with something, Mama, for a few hours, then we're coming back. Listen, Janet will be here, and Mac will be here soon. I just spoke to him on the phone. You remember Mac, don't you, Mama?"

Sophia nodded. "Yes, he's a nice boy...the drummer. Of course I remember him, Pepi, he practically lived at our house when you kids were growing up. Do you think I'm going senile?"

"And Sophia," Janet said, coming to sit down now in the chair that her son had just vacated, "Tony, Johnny's son will be here later on...your other grandson."

She smiled and took Janet's hand, which surprised her. "Thank you for that, dear." She began to ask Janet in detail about how she had managed to contact Tony.

Pepi took the opportunity to leave. Nudging his

nephew to move toward the elevator and lifting a hand, he called, "See ya later." He slipped in his code card, the doors opened and they were gone.

* * * * *

On the way down, Angelo burst into laughter.

"What," Pepi said, "What's so funny?"

"You, and Grandma. That was quite the getaway."

"Ya, well, it's been a while since I've had to answer to anyone, except your dad sometimes can be a pain. I'd forgotten how bossy Mama could be."

"Mothers will be mothers," Angelo said.

Pepi smiled at him. Funny how Angelo could always make him feel so good. It was like being with Drake, having Drake all to himself. "Ya, but you have Janet for a mother. She's cool."

"Ha! You think. Man, Mom can be a royal pain in the ass...like she didn't want me to go to Europe. It was Dad who talked her into giving me her blessing. I would have gone anyway, but she was dead set against it, and this college thing..." He rolled his eyes as the elevator stopped in the underground parking lot.

A security man was waiting. Before Pepi could comment, they were hurried into a blue sedan. Immediately, they sped away, past the police, past the press and the crowds.

* * * * *

"Why do you have the impression I don't like you, Ms. Thompson?" Drake looked up at the woman across the table.

She was a large-boned woman, tall in stature, with broad shoulders and steel-grey eyes. Her ash-brown hair was swept up at the nape of her neck.

"Well, because," she lifted her papers off the table with the edge of her thumb and then let them fall back again, "you're not being very cooperative. Would you rather a man as a lawyer?" She lifted one eyebrow.

Drake laughed. "You think I'm sexist, is that it? You'd be far off the beaten track for that one, Ms. Thompson. I assure you, man or woman, if I thought you were incompetent, I'd tell you. It's just that I have nothing else to say."

Francine Thompson studied Drake Russo for a moment. He was brutally handsome, and she had seen him perform; he was immensely talented. It wouldn't take a hell of a lot for a person to fall in love with him. It wasn't only the whole image of who he was that would draw you to him like a magnet. The fact that he was tall and well-built and had beautiful eyes also didn't hurt. But there was actually something special about him. It could have been the light in his eyes or the smooth self-assuredness of his deep voice, but whatever it was, it was quite overpowering. She had felt it the minute she had entered the room, although he had made no attempt to flirt or be fresh with her. In fact, he had been quite

exasperating.

"Mr. Russo...Drake...do you want to get out of here?"

"Well, maybe you've hit on the right question finally, Ms. Thompson." He lifted up his hands. "Maybe I like it here."

"Mr. Russo," Francine sighed, slamming her books shut, "you are wasting my time and yours."

"I want to see my brother, can you arrange it?" He leaned across the desk and fixed her with those liquid brown eyes of his.

"First, before you can see anyone, you have to help me get you out of here. Do you want bail or not? I don't know if they'll go for it. They might, since it is your first offence, and..."

"I don't want bail. I just want to see my brother."

Francine shook her head and stood up. "Give my office a call when you're ready to talk to me, Mr. Russo, otherwise, be prepared to defend yourself."

Drake watched her walk away. The guard came immediately and led him back to his cell. He sat down on the bed. He heard the cell door slam shut, the guard's footsteps retreating down the hall.

He'd had a dream last night. He dreamt that he was burning, burning in the fires of hell, and he begged for mercy.

Johnny was there, standing outside the fire, shaking his head. "I knew when you'd die, you'd call for a priest and confess and look what it brought you...eternal damnation. It's just Mama's Catholic brainwashing, Drake. You never believed in that.

When I die, I will never call for a priest, and I will never confess you as a sin, because you're not a sin." Johnny was crying. "How could you turn that night into something ugly when it was so beautiful, Drake? I'll never forgive for this, never!"

Drake tried to reach out for him, but the flames were engulfing Johnny. He was choking, fading, crying, "I love you, Drake, I'm not dead but I'm burning...burning...I'll burn forever for you, Drake...I love you..."

Drake had wanted to die for a long time, because he couldn't live with the shame. The fact that he couldn't stop wanting him no matter what he did was tearing him apart. Insane. That's what he was, insane. He had tried once to talk to someone, a psychologist, but he had changed his mind. How in hell could he tell a stranger that he was in love with his brother, when he couldn't even tell his closest friend?

Who could he trust? He could only imagine how much money the media would pay to buy that information. Many people would be tempted, psychologist or not, to sell that kind of gossip for a million dollars or so.

He knew that Johnny had been in therapy for years—many celebrities had a shrink—but whether Johnny risked telling his therapist about their relationship or not, he didn't know. He had asked him what he talked about with his therapist once and Johnny had told him that it was confidential, so that was that.

Drake lay down on the bed, pulling the flat pillow

double under his neck. He couldn't sleep. He didn't know what to do. He didn't want to do anything. If he couldn't see Johnny, then he would lie here and do nothing.

* * * * *

"So, how was Europe?" Pepi asked his nephew in the back of the Sedan.

Angelo smiled. "Super...I loved it, especially Paris. Paris is really a beautiful city. I remember going there with you guys when I was fourteen. I fell in love with it then. I had a dream that I'd go back there on my own."

"And the Frenchmen?" Pepi lifted an eyebrow.

"Ooh la la," Angelo teased, and they both laughed as the car stopped at a red light.

"Angelo." Pepi sobered.

"Ya?" He turned to meet his uncle's eyes.

"Would you have even imagined that...?"

The question hung in the air.

Angelo sighed. "Pep, did you know that my dad was desperately unhappy?"

Pepi nodded, looking away.

"I used to worry about him taking his own life, especially this last year. Do you remember Nancy, that fashion model Dad lived with who weighed about seventy pounds?"

"Ya, the anorexic. She lived with him for about three months," Pepi replied.

"Well, just before I left on my trip, Dad had me

over for dinner. When he left the room to get some wine from the wine cellar, Nancy told me that Dad had put a gun in his mouth one night and threatened to blow his head off. Later he had tried to convince her that he had only been kidding, but it had shaken her up pretty badly."

"Ya, well, she was a little dizzy," Pepi mused.

"Ya, I know, but she was really serious when she told me that. Pep, what were Uncle Johnny and Dad fighting about the night of Mac's birthday?"

"What did they ever fight about? I don't know."

"You must remember something."

"Johnny got there late. He missed supper. He showed up with a guy...a couple of guys. I didn't know them. They might have been sound techs or studio musicians. Drake was angry at Johnny anyway for something, and Johnny kept telling him to F off."

"For what?" Angelo insisted.

"I honestly don't know, Angelo. This last year since you've been gone has been hell. They'd get angry at each other for something stupid. None of it made sense."

"It was really bad this last year especially? Why this last year?" Angelo inquired, narrowing his dark eyebrows.

"Something went wrong between them last summer. We needed a vacation, so Frank rented us a summer cottage in the White Mountains. The four of us spent a week out there; your dad, Johnny, Mac and me. We were all having a great time, and then just before we left, something changed between them.

They became unusually distant. They wouldn't even look at each other for a while. They either didn't talk, or they snapped at each other when they did.

"After a while, they mellowed a bit, but nothing was ever the same. Johnny started sleeping around heavy-duty after that...with whoever came along. You know neither one of them has even been an angel in that department, but Johnny really went wild this year. There were sometimes two, three a night. Your dad began drinking more than usual. They didn't hang out together except when they were working. Both Mac and I could see that they were both in great pain. Your dad drank his pain away and Johnny lost himself in a long line of lovers. I tried talking to both of them. They both told me there was nothing wrong. They never have talked to me, Angelo, so what am I supposed to do?"

"What about Mac? He's Dad's best friend. Did he try talking to him?"

"Mac knows Johnny and your dad maybe even better than I do. When I spoke to Mac, he told me that there was nothing anyone could do about it. He wouldn't say more than that."

The car pulled up now in front of the coffee shop.

"It's been cleared for our meeting," Pepi told him as Angelo eyed the crowd that was sectioned off by barriers on the other side of the street.

Frank stood up in the window and raised a hand as they got out of the car. People in the crowd screamed, "Pepi...Pepi...!" The security man ushered them quickly inside the doughnut shop.

A beautiful woman with upswept hair stood up. She stared at Angelo and shook her head. "Wow, I know whose son you are. You certainly look like your father. If he were standing here, I would swear I was seeing double."

Pepi ruffled Angelo's hair. "Such a curse, eh, kid?" he teased, and Angelo blushed a little.

Frank introduced Francine Thompson, and they all sat down. A gushing waitress came over and set steaming mugs of coffee in front of Pepi and Angelo, gazing longingly at Pepi.

Frank practically shooed her away. "I promised her your autograph later, Pep, for keeping a low profile, you know. I had to rent this joint." He motioned to the girl. "You can refill mine and the lady's."

She hurried over with the coffee pot. They waited until she had refilled Frank and Francine's mug, and then resumed talking.

Pepi took a breath. "So, Ms. Thompson, what's the situation with my brother?"

"Your brother has to be the most stubborn, uncooperative client I've ever had. He won't tell me dick, if you'll pardon the expression. He wants to see Johnny, and that's it. He told me he likes it in there."

Angelo lowered his head and then banged his forehead on the table a couple of times.

Pepi was growing enraged. "I'll talk some sense into him later today. What in hell is wrong with him? Did he give you anything at all you can work with?"

She shook her head. "I asked him why he confessed and he told me because he shot Johnny. I

asked him if there was a struggle for the gun...was it self-defense...accidental? He won't tell me anything. I don't know what to plea.

"There are witnesses already being called, guests at the party that night who heard Drake and Johnny arguing. In the DA's mind, it's open and shut. Drake was drinking, he was angry at his brother, they argued, Drake took out a gun and shot Johnny in the head. Then he walked around in a daze, ended up at the police station and confessed. How much neater can it be? On top of that, Drake gives me nothing. He has no intention of taking the stand and based on the confession, I'll have to plead guilty unless he tells me otherwise."

"Given the fact that he confessed that night at the police station, is there any chance that...?" Angelo asked her.

"Look, the confession is verbal. He never signed anything, which is good. He walked in, said "I shot my brother," and collapsed, but if he doesn't help me, that declaration will be what the jury is going to focus on when it comes time to make their decision, along with the gun and the witnesses. Now," she pulled out a sheet of paper from her leather binder and laid it on the table, "there is one positive note. I received this from forensics this morning. There are two sets of fingerprints on the gun: Drake's and Johnny's. This indicates that there was a struggle."

Pepi wanted to cry. An image of Johnny and Drake struggling with a loaded gun came to his mind. What the hell was happening to his family?

When no one said anything, Francine continued. "That's good, because we could go for accidental or self-defense. Maybe Drake never meant to kill his brother. Maybe he was going to shoot himself, and Johnny tried to stop him."

Pepi gasped. Angelo met his uncle's eyes, and Frank shook his head. "What in the world...?" Frank began.

"No," Angelo raised his hand. "Uncle Pep and I were just talking about that. Dad's old girlfriend Nancy, remember her, Frank?"

Frank rolled his eyes.

"Ya, well, she told me that Dad put a gun in his mouth last year, scared her to death."

"Excellent," Francine murmured. "We've got to find this girl. Nancy what?"

Frank looked at Pepi.

Pepi searched his memory. "What was her name... Nancy...Nancy Dobson...that's it...Dobson. That's it!"

"The famous fashion model?" Francine wrote down the name. "She'll be easy to find. Will she testify to that, you think?" She was looking at Angelo.

"Don't ask me. I hope so," Angelo replied. "Ms. Thompson," he said suddenly, "think I can see my dad?"

"I'll call over and ask. I think it's up to your father."

Angelo nodded as Francine opened up her cell phone. Pepi stood up and looked at Angelo. "I'm going with you," he said.

Frank looked up at the two young men. "I'm going

to stop by the hospital. I got some stuff to go over with Mac. When are you planning on going by the studio, Pep?"

"Soon, Frank. This week, I promise."

Frank stood and squeezed Pepi's arm. "Talk some sense into Drake, will ya? We need him."

"After this, do you think we can really save the band, Frank?" Pepi blinked.

"The fans are standing by you, Pep, they don't believe that Drake would shoot his brother in cold blood. We're going to hang on, kid. I promise if we get through this, you'll be up there on stage again, stronger and better than ever." There were tears in Frank's eyes.

Pepi thanked him just as Francine Thompson finished talking on the phone.

"Drake will see you," she said. "You can go right over."

"Thanks, Francine," Pepi hugged her. He felt close to her for some reason, even if they had only just met.

Angelo shook Francine's hand while Pepi picked up a napkin and began to write his name.

He looked over at the young girl at the counter. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Carol," she replied shyly.

Pepi wrote 'To Carol' on top of 'Love, Pepi', walked over and handed it to her. "Thanks," he said, winking. "Great service."

She grinned and took the napkin from him, watching as he filed out after the younger man who

looked a lot like Drake Russo. Wow, what a day, she thought.

Outside, Frank's cell phone rang. "Oh, what now?" he groaned, taking it out of the inside pocket of his suit jacket.

It was his personal assistant, Jenny.

"Frank, sorry to bother you, but I should tell you that some woman has been calling here for the last three hours. She sounds really freaked, like she's hysterical or something. She insists on speaking to you...something about kidnapping her son and calling the police. I thought I should tell you."

Frank sighed. "Okay, thanks, Jen, I'll take care of it." Frank held up a hand to Francine, who was just about to drive off in her car. She waved and roared out of the parking lot.

He motioned to Pepi, who was getting into the limo.

Pepi stuck his head out and Frank came over and slipped into the car beside him.

"What is it?" Pepi asked.

"Sandra...she's been calling my office. She's freaking out. You sent the private jet for Johnny's son?"

Pepi sighed. "You want me to take care of this, don't you?"

"Look, I hardly know Johnny's ex. God, they were divorced so fast, I hardly even remember her. Why is she calling me?"

Pepi shrugged.

Angelo glanced over at Frank, who was looking a little frazzled. "Maybe I should get Mom to call her. They were best friends. What do you think?"

Anxious to pass the buck, Frank and Pepi both nodded.

"Great," Frank said, opening the door. "Just do it soon before she has the police knocking on my door."

"Give me your cell phone, Uncle Pep," Angelo said as Frank stepped out and walked over to his own car.

"Wait a bit, will you, Carter?" Pepi told his driver. "We're going to make a call before going over to the jail."

"Yes, sir," he replied.

Angelo dialed his house. There was no answer. "I thought maybe she went home. She must still be at the hospital. I'll try her cell phone."

Pepi nodded.

"No answer. What's Mac's number?"

He rattled it off. "He's probably at the hospital, and he usually has his phone," Pepi said.

On the third ring, Mac picked up. "Ya," he said.

"Mac, Angelo. Look, is my mom nearby?"

"She was. She's down in the cafeteria with your grandmother right now. Want me to get her?"

"No. Look, have her call me. Uncle Pep sent the jet for Johnny's son, and his mom is freaking out. Frank is panicking, as usual and I think Mom should call Sandy and calm her down."

Mac started laughing.

"What?" Angelo demanded.

"Well, just that it might make things worse. Those

two...at the end, they were like oil and water. But, I'll tell her to call you as soon as she comes upstairs."

"Okay, Mac. How's Uncle Johnny?"

"The same, no change."

Angelo sighed. "I'll see you later."

"Ya, you too."

Angelo shut down the phone and met Pepi's eyes. "You go in. I'll wait for Mom's call in the limo. They won't let me take the phone inside. I'll come in later."

"Okay," Pepi nodded. "Carter," he rapped on the window.

Carter slid open the glass door which divided them. "Yes, sir," he responded.

"Take us over to the jail now, please," Pepi instructed.

"Right away, sir," he said and the limo immediately began to roll.

* * * * *

Tony's eyes widened as he scanned the city of Los Angeles from two thousand feet in the air. The plane had been gradually descending over the last ten minutes and Kevin Cochrane, the man who met him at the airport, was pointing out certain things about the city below them that he thought the young man would find interesting.

"It's a huge city." Tony shook his head, sitting back now in the leather swivel chair.

"Over ten million people," Kevin commented. "Was founded in 1781 by the Spanish."

Tony looked around him. He had never been on a private jet before. This one was mind-blowing. There were two of these black leather chairs with matching sofas, one sitting on opposite sides of the room. In the arm of each chair were built-in CD players with headphones. There was wall-to-wall carpeting, a fully stocked refrigerator and a widescreen color television with DVD. In the corner sat boxes of compact discs and videos. In another room separated by curtains were four sets of bunk beds and wall-to-wall closets, with a toilet and shower. For a boy from small town Ontario, this was luxury like he had never seen before.

Tony didn't dare touch any of the high tech equipment that surrounded him, even though Kevin Cochrane told him to go ahead and do whatever he pleased. He was just too nervous. Instead, he concentrated on the man who kept him company on the flight. Kevin Cochrane was a middle-aged, balding man with an earring and a potbelly. He laughed a lot and made off-color jokes, most of which Tony didn't get. When Tony asked him if he was a musician, Kevin roared with laughter and just about fell off his chair.

"I can't carry a tune, let alone a note," he replied, slapping his thigh. "Actually, I'm the band's personal gofer."

Tony had narrowed his eyes. "Personal what?"

"Gofer. Basically I do anything that doesn't fit into someone else's unionized version of their job description."

"I guess locating long-lost sons is one of those things," Tony murmured.

Kevin sobered for a minute, and then reached over and patted Tony's knee. "I know it's got to be hard, kid, all this and Johnny in the hospital and all. It'll be fine, believe me."

Tony nodded and looked out the window.

Their conversation turned to other things after that. Kevin told him stories about things he had done for the band from time to time. Tony laughed when he told him that Mac Hayes had called him once when they were in Jersey to go all the way to Chinatown in New York City in the middle of the night to get egg rolls at this restaurant he really liked. The owner of the restaurant opened up especially so that Mac could get his egg rolls.

Time passed quickly with Kevin, too quickly, what with his humorous anecdotes, and before Tony knew it, the plane was lowering in the air and Kevin was pointing to the L.A. freeway.

Tony was sitting back in his chair now, his eyes closed. His heart was beating hard in his chest. He didn't want to get off this plane, didn't want to step into an alien city or meet these famous strangers who were his blood. He wanted to go home; home to Sam, and to the life he had just two days ago.

A voice came over a loudspeaker, instructing them to fasten their seatbelts.

Kevin fastened his and looked over at Tony to make sure his was fastened.

"Kev," the pilot said casually over the mike, "I'll be

putting us down in that airstrip in back of L.A.X, you know the one. I've phoned ahead to alert the limo driver. He's on his way now, but there's quite a bit of traffic on the freeway. It's moving pretty slow down there, so I'm thinking that he's going to be a few minutes late. I radioed the tower and I'm just waiting for clearance to bring us down. See ya on the ground."

Tony looked over at Kevin Cochrane. "Will we go straight to the hospital?"

Kevin looked back at him. "That's my instructions. Did you want to...?"

"No. Take me where I'm supposed to go. Will my aunt be there?"

"I think so. I really don't know much about it, kid. Your uncle told me to meet you at the airport, bring you on the plane and then accompany you to the hospital in the limo. That's all."

Tony nodded.

The person he was less nervous about meeting was his aunt. He hoped she would be in the car and that they could talk a little bit before he met Pepi Russo or Mac Hayes. These were famous people, people he had seen on television, and on videos. To suddenly be face to face with these people and interact with them was overwhelming. As for meeting his father, that was a completely different story.

His father, the famous Johnny Russo, was a stranger to him, a stranger in a coma who might die before he ever had the opportunity to ask him why he had abandoned his only son. Johnny Russo, this

godlike person who sang and played guitar alongside his brothers, always seemed more fantasy than real... Johnny Russo, who he had spent hours pretending to be, strumming on an invisible guitar and singing through empty toilet paper rolls.

He and Sam made up such fantastic stories. One of their favorites was when the two brothers were being chased by crazed fans, and they were forced to run and hide in scary places like underground cemeteries, which was really the upstairs closet at the Ashman house. Sometimes Johnny would get kidnapped by fans or evil rival musicians, who were jealous of their success. Sometimes they were aliens or monsters from hell. Drake, who had magical powers, would always rescue Johnny and they'd just manage to get to the concert on time. Mac, who they took turns portraying, would always be frantically looking for them. The fans would be screaming and stomping their feet, and then Tony and Sam would burst into the room as if they were running out onstage.

Sam would put on one of the Russo Brothers songs, and they would start moving and lip-synching. The fans would go wild, and the two brothers would smile secretly at each other as they performed, because only they knew what demons they had to fight to get to that concert. Later, they would tell their adventure to Mac, who would hug them with relief and scold them for running off and getting into trouble.

But he was no longer a child pretending to be a rock star. As soon as he stepped off this plane, Drake

and Johnny Russo would no longer be the fantasy characters of his boyhood. Drake Russo was a real man, sitting in a real jail, and he had no magical power in which to escape or rescue his brother.

* * * * *

Janet ran a hand through her hair, avoiding Mac's eyes. She didn't want to have to do this.

Mac held out his phone. She pushed it away.

Sophia watched the exchange, and then got out of the chair and walked over to where Mac and Janet stood in the corner of the waiting room.

"What is happening here?" she demanded. "Is it something to do with Drake? I have a right to know."

Janet rolled her eyes at Mac and then turned to her ex-mother-in-law. "Sophia, this has nothing to do with Drake. Drake is seeing a lawyer today, that's all I know. We'll know more when Pepi gets back." She wanted to add, "Now get off my back," but she didn't.

Sophia wrung her hands. "I don't understand why Drake won't see me. I just can't..."

"Sophia," Mac placed his hand on her shoulder and walked her away from Janet, "why don't you go in and sit with Johnny. Talk with him. Some say that people in a coma can hear you, and that it helps to bring them back."

He had her halfway down the hall now.

Janet watched them. The way Mac bent his blond head close to hers, the comforting sound of his voice

as he spoke so gently to her. God, she should have held on to that one.

Sophia nodded at Mac and then continued on to her son's room. Mac came back to Janet, and again held out the phone.

"Why me?" she whined.

"You were her best friend. Look, call your son, will ya, he's waiting to go in and see Drake." Mac placed the phone in her hand and gave her a meaningful look.

When she began dialing the number, Mac walked down the hallway toward Johnny's room.

Her son picked up the phone immediately. "Mom?"

"I know what this is all about, and I..." Janet began.

"Mom, listen, Sandy is harassing people at the studio. Frank is shitting bricks. She's talking about kidnapping and suing and stuff. How old is this kid, anyway?"

"He must be close to eighteen, but he could still be a minor. Oh, shit. Look, there's no guarantee that I can calm her down. Actually, I'll probably make it worse. We haven't spoken since..."

"Mom...please...try, okay? Either that, or send the kid back home. This is not the time to deal with lawsuits. We really have all we can handle now."

There was a silence.

"Mom?" Angelo urged.

When the hell did her son get so mature? "Ya, okay. Go see your dad. Give him my love, okay? I'll handle this," she said with a hell of a lot more

confidence than she felt.

He thanked her, and hung up.

Janet sat down and looked around her. The waiting room was empty. She was alone. She pulled her little phone directory out of her purse and pressed in the number.

On the third ring, it picked up.

She recognized Sandy's voice immediately. Janet stifled a sob. They were once so close. She was the best friend she'd ever had.

"Sandy?" she managed.

The response was dead air.

"Don't hang up," Janet choked.

"What do you want," Sandy breathed.

"I want to talk to you about Tony, and..." Janet began, then stopped. She suddenly felt pain and realized that she was digging her nails into her leg.

"How dare you!" Sandy growled into the receiver. "How dare you call me to talk to me about my son...*My son*. You had no right sending a plane for him...you and that fucking Russo bastard. I want my son back here in Ontario, do you hear me? Not tomorrow...not next week...tonight...or I swear to God, I will send the police after your ass and I will sue those Russos for all they are worth for...!"

She was beyond reason. She went on and on. Janet pulled the phone away from her ear, and sat it in her lap.

She didn't realize that she was crying until a hand reached down and pried the phone out of her fingers.

It was Sophia.

Janet's eyes widened when she heard Sophia speak calmly into the phone.

"Sandra, this is Sophia. I want you to listen to me. My son may be dying. He took a bullet to the head, which took over seven hours on an operating table to remove. He does not know his son. His son does not know him. Even now, it may be too late. Sandra, out of bitterness and revenge, you have punished your son. Your secrets and lies will come to haunt you. I know this more than anyone. Try now to make amends. Let Tony know his family. He needs to understand where he comes from, who he is. You know that denying him that is wrong. It will haunt you. Please, I beg you to let Tony stay and see his father, and pray to God your son forgives you for what you have done."

Janet watched the way Sophia's wrinkled hand gripped the phone as she spoke, and although her voice was steady and strong with conviction, tears spilled over onto her cheeks.

There was no longer yelling coming from the other end of the receiver.

Janet saw Sophia blink, pull the phone away from her ear, put it back and then hand it out toward her.

"She hung up, I think," the older woman said and sat down as if she were very tired suddenly.

Janet nodded, confirming the fact that her former friend had hung up and then folded up the phone.

They sat side by side without speaking; the only sound came from the ticking of the clock on the wall.

Suddenly, quietly, Janet asked her why she had

done that.

"What?" the older woman looked at her.

"Come to my aid like that," Janet replied. "And what was all that about, anyway?"

"That, my dear," Sophia said, taking her hand in hers, "was about many things. It was about love and pain and unquestioned beliefs and fear, but mostly it was about lies. I always admired you for that, you know." She patted her hand, then released it and looked away.

Janet's eyes widened. "Admired me...you admired me? I don't understand."

Sophia sighed and shook her head. "I know that I wasn't very fair to you when you and Drake got the divorce. You see, I so wanted your marriage to work."

Janet's eyes widened again; any wider, and she was sure they would have popped out of her head. "You wanted our marriage to...but when we got married, you were so upset. You told me that Drake was too young to get married and to be a father at seventeen. I remember you called me a whore and accused me of trapping your son..."

Sophia sighed, and took her hand again. "Janet, I'm sorry. Forgive me for that. I was raised very strictly and in the small village where I grew up in Italy, a poor girl who found herself pregnant and without a husband was seen as nothing but a whore. The boy...well...he was a boy. You and I, we don't come from the same place, my dear. I was taught to never to question anything: follow the rules or burn in hell, that was your choice. God's words were God's

words."

"But if you were so against the marriage, why did you want it to work?" Janet asked.

"I wasn't against the marriage. I resented the fact that he had to marry you because of the baby, that's all. Down deep I thought maybe this marriage would solve a lot of my problems, absolve me of my guilt. It didn't."

"What guilt? Guilt about what?" Janet asked.

She didn't answer that. Instead, she said, "You never lied to your son, and that's what I admire about you. After the divorce, you did the right thing moving out here to L.A., staying close to Drake so that his son would know him. I respect you for that. Sandy has lied to her son, denied him these years with Johnny, and if Johnny dies and Tony never gets the chance to know him, he will hate her. She punished her son just so she could punish Johnny for leaving her."

Janet nodded. She couldn't argue with that. Sandy had loved Johnny desperately, and she was completely broken up when he filed for the divorce. She would have done just about anything to keep him with her. In the end, she settled for revenge and in order to keep Tony's paternity a secret, she ripped herself away from everyone.

"What do you think she'll do now?" Janet asked her former mother in law hesitantly.

Sophia shook her head. "I don't know. The right thing, I hope."

This ends Episode One of The Russos.

Stay tuned for Episode Two:

- Tony Newton arrives in L.A.
- Mac has a heart-to-heart talk with Johnny, who is still in a coma.
- Sophia reflects on her past.
- Will Drake Russo be released from jail?



Meet Drake Russo

Drake Russo is the oldest of the three Russo Brothers. He is a musical genius, and the driving force behind the success of the Russo Brothers Band, propelling them to the top of the charts. He is thirty-seven years old, bisexual and gorgeous. Everyone wants him...in bed and out. In spite of his fame and fortune, he is a complex and tormented man, searching for happiness in a string of lovers. He has an amicable relationship with his ex-wife Janet and a rocky one with his eighteen-year-old son, Angelo, who he truly does love.

Drake is clearly his mother's favourite, and very close to his middle brother, Johnny, with whom he shares a very turbulent relationship, a relationship that preoccupies him.

D.J. Manly

DJ. Manly is fast acquiring a reputation for pushing the boundaries of male/male erotic romance. A reviewer once said of Manly's work that it was enough to give the reader "...third-degree burns in an air conditioned room..." and that's putting it mildly. If you adore gorgeous men who can't get enough of each other's bodies...if you like rich plots laced with steamy sex, thick and rich with aching need and glorious adoration and love...Manly's books will satisfy the craving and leave you panting for more.

"If I wouldn't enjoy reading it, I wouldn't be writing it," says Manly. "I like to tease...but I always please..."

To check out books by D.J. Manly, you can visit the website at djmanly.com, and take a taste...if you dare.

"Fair warning, I've been told that it's highly addictive."

D.J. .