

A promotional poster for 'The Russos' featuring three men in a club setting. The man on the left is in the foreground, wearing a white tank top and looking intensely at the camera. Behind him are two other men, one in a grey shirt and another in a patterned shirt, both looking off-camera. The background is a blurred club scene with blue and orange lighting. The title 'The Russos' is prominently displayed in the center in a stylized blue and white font.

# The Russos

D.J. MANLY

Episode Two

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The Russos: Episode Two

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***Also By D.J. Manly:***

*Connor's Storm*

*Melting Ice*

*The Russos: Digital Soap*

***Dedication:***

To my readers.

***The Russos:  
Episode One***

## *Previously on The Russos...*

**I**n Episode One, the eldest brother, Drake Russo, shot his younger brother Johnny in the head. Johnny is in a coma, and Drake Russo is in prison. Their youngest brother, Pepi, is doing everything he can to get his big brother released from prison.

Meanwhile, Tony Newton, a young man in Canada, a great fan of the Russo Brothers band, finds out that his biological father is really Johnny Russo. He is on his way to the hospital in L.A. to see a father he never knew. Sophia Russo, the mother of the Russo brothers, has a terrible secret, one that she has kept hidden for years, contributing to the drama surrounding Drake and Johnny Russo.

## *And Now...Episode Two of The Russos*

Drake's eyes followed his son as he paced the room. Once in a while, he rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand.

He really regretted dragging Angelo through all this. When the guard came to ask him a while back if he wanted to see his brother and his son, he had almost said no. He wouldn't let his mother see him in jail, and he felt the same way in a sense about Angelo. But he said yes, because he missed him.

Angelo had been in Europe almost a year, and to see him and not even be able to hug him was hell. He had changed in that year, and not only physically. His features had matured into that of a man, but Drake could see other changes that could only come from being exposed to different geography and different cultures, and he was proud of him.

"Dad," he was saying now, "Ms. Thomson wants to help you. She wants to work with you. Why are you being so goddamned stubborn? We want you out of here."

Pepi, who had been quietly sitting in the corner of the room, stood up now. "She's going to question Nancy Dobson."

Drake blinked and looked up. "Nancy Dobson?" His eyes widened. "What in hell for?"

"You threatened suicide in front of her. The gun came back with two sets of prints on it: yours and Johnny's. Your lawyer thinks you tried to kill yourself, and Johnny tried to stop you. You struggled for the gun, and it went off. Is that how it happened, Drake?" Pepi met his older brother's eyes.

There was a long silence, then Drake said quietly, "There is no need to drag Nancy into it. I don't want her involved in this."

"Well, if you don't want her involved, give Francine something to work with. You were distraught when you walked into the police station. The warden told me he put you on suicide watch when you came in. Is that true?"

Angelo came to stand closer to his uncle.

Drake glanced at his brother, then his son. "I suppose they do that with all nut cases that..."

"No," Pepi shook his dark head, "they don't. He told me that you were very depressed."

"Of course I was depressed," Drake snapped. "I just shot my brother in the head. How was I supposed to feel, happy?"

"Did you put the gun to your head the other night in front of Johnny?" Pepi placed the palms of his hands flat on the table and looked directly in Drake's face. "Did Johnny try and take the gun away from you? Come on! For fuck's sake, Drake, you rotting in jail won't help Johnny. Johnny needs you, and I need you. Help me!"

When Drake lowered his head, Pepi threw up his hands and cursed, then gave Angelo a look. "I need



some air. Talk some sense into your father, will you?"

He barked at the guard to let him out. The door opened, then slammed shut.

Angelo sat down.

Drake looked across at his son, then said, "Call that lawyer, I'll tell her what happened, okay?" There were tears in his eyes.

"Thanks, Dad. It's going to be okay. We're going to get you out of here, and then everything will be all right."

Drake listened to the conviction in his son's voice. He didn't understand that nothing would ever be all right. It had never been all right to begin with.

\* \* \* \* \*

Angelo slipped into the back of the limo beside his uncle. "Dad wants to see Francine Thomson. He wants to tell her what happened."

Pepi grabbed his nephew in a bear hug, growling with delight. "Wonderful. What did it take? How did you convince him to...?"

"I think it was you."

"Me?" Pepi was surprised. "No. Drake would never do anything for me...only for Johnny, and now you."

Angelo looked at his uncle for a moment, and saw his eyes mist over. He touched him on the forearm. "Why do you say that? Dad loves you. I know he does. I know he and Uncle Johnny have been really close, probably due to their age, and..."

Pepi put up a hand. "Angelo, there are things that

you wouldn't remember...things that happened when we were growing up...before you were born. Leave it alone for now, okay?"

Angelo nodded, but he felt like there was so much more to say.

Pepi picked up his phone and called Frank. Frank was relieved to hear the news, and assured Pepi that he would get Francine Thomson on it immediately. "I guarantee you we'll have your brother out of that jail before you know it," he said.

Pepi thanked him and hung up. "What'cha say we get some food, kid? I'm starved. It must be at least six o'clock."

"Five-ten, but who cares. I'm with you, Pep. Chinese?"

"Sounds great. Should we call the hospital? Or maybe I should try and reach Kevin, and find out where he's at. They must have landed by now."

"Oh, shit, Johnny's son...eh... what's his name... Tony?" Angelo snapped his fingers. "Do you think he's with Mom already?"

Pepi shrugged his broad shoulders as he opened his phone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kevin Cochrane was sitting in the back of the rented limo with Tony Newton when his cell phone rang. He excused himself and pulled the tiny phone out his pocket. "Ya, Cochrane here."

"Hi, Kev, it's Pepi Russo. Just checking in. How did everything go? I assume you're on the ground."

"We're rolling toward the Hospital now. We should be there...oh, say, in about twenty-five minutes. We're hitting a bit of supertime traffic here."

"That's cool. How is he...the boy?"

"Okay. You want to speak to him?" Kevin asked.

Tony looked alarmed. He shook his head a little.

"Sure, put him on," Pepi replied.

Tony's hand shook as he took the little phone from Kevin Cochrane. "Hello," he managed.

"Hi there, Tony. It's Pepi Russo. I just wanted to say hi and to thank you for coming. It will mean a lot to Johnny, and it means a lot to all of us. Listen, Janet will meet you at the hospital along with your grandmother. I think Mac may still be there as well. Angelo and I, eh...Drake's son...we're going to eat something, then we'll come on over, okay?"

"Sure," was all Tony could think to say. He was stunned by the voice coming over the phone. This was Pepi Russo, *the* Pepi Russo who played keyboards in the Russo Brothers Band. Tony swallowed.

"Pass me Kevin, will ya," Pepi was saying now and Tony handed back the phone, realizing too late that he hadn't even said good-bye.

He heard Kevin say, "Ya, okay, sure, no problem," and then shut down the phone.

"Your uncle wants me to feed you before I take you to the hospital. Where would you like to eat?"

Eat? Eating was the furthest thing from his mind. He didn't think he'd be able to hold down anything. When he said he wasn't hungry, Kevin suggested they go

through a drive-through at one of the fast-food burger places and eat in the limo. "It's safer," he muttered.

A half hour later, they sat in the parking lot of Macdo's with their burgers and fries. Tony took a bite or two and then closed up the box.

He looked around him and decided that he could sit here forever without being bored. L.A. was a completely different world. There were so many people and they came in so many different shapes and sizes and colours. They all seemed to have somewhere to go, and quickly. The traffic whizzed by, horns honked and sirens howled. Electronic billboards changed their message every few minutes, and signs in English and Spanish told people where they were and what they should and should not do.

Kevin asked Tony if he could have his French fries, and Tony pushed the bag toward him. "Be my guest."

"So, big difference from where you hail, I bet," Kevin chewed on a French fry and reached for his Coke, which he had set on the little pull-out table in front of him.

Tony glanced at Kevin and nodded.

"Where is that place you come from in Canada?"

"Ontario."

"Oh, ya. Well, welcome to the land of Oz." He laughed at his joke as Tony looked once again out the window.

Across the street were two women wearing knee-high red leather boots with six-inch heels, and what looked like leopard-skin miniskirts and brassieres. They looked like characters in a movie. Six Hispanic kids

wearing pants that were about four sizes too large strutted by, plaid bandanas wrapped around their head. One carried a ghetto blaster that blared out some song with a Latin beat.

Kevin rapped on the window and told the driver to go on to the hospital now. It was after six, and the sun was beginning to go down. He wanted out of this neighbourhood before dark.

"We'll be at the hospital in about ten minutes, kid." Kevin told him. "You ready for it?"

Tony shook his head. "No. But I don't really have a choice, do I? I either meet these people or turn around and go home."

Kevin knew the kid was shitting bricks. Who wouldn't be under the circumstances? He was meeting his father for the very first time, not to mention the rest of the Russos. Worse than that, they were not ordinary people. They were celebrities, members of a rock band that this kid probably idolized. It had to be strange. He felt bad for him. He seemed like a nice kid. He should try and say something to ease the tension.

"You know," he looked over at him, and then slapped him on the knee, "you'll be okay once you get over the initial awkwardness of meeting these people. I've worked for the Russo Brothers for over six years now and they're good people, really."

"Thank you for saying that. It helps," Tony replied.

"So," Kevin Cochrane grinned at him, "we're on, then?"

Tony smiled back, even if he did feel his stomach doing rock-and-roll. "We're on."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mac curled his fingers loosely around Johnny's. For the last hour, Mac had been asking him to squeeze his hand if he could hear him. There hadn't been any response.

Mac placed his forehead down on the cool metal of the side rails and closed his eyes. He sighed, and stood up. He studied Johnny for a moment. His face was so drawn and white; the black curly hair was replaced by a sterile white dressing wrapped around his head like a turban. There was a spot of dried blood coming through the fabric on the right side of his forehead. His eyes were closed. He was very still, except for the constant movement underneath his eyelids.

The doctors thought it was a reflex. Mac believed he had to be dreaming.

He pulled a chair over to his bedside and took his hand again. They'd had too much together, too much happiness and joy. There was no way it could end like this. Or maybe they had been given more than their share of happiness, and now it was time to pay the piper.

No, he refused to believe that there was a limit on the amount of happiness a person was allotted. They had earned this success, and they had all paid for it in their own way.

"Remember, Johnny." He spoke aloud now. "Remember those dives you and Drake and I used to play in? Pepi was lucky, he was spared all that. He'll never know what it is to play for drunks who ask for songs you've never heard of. Remember that time we

kept on playing through that major barroom brawl on the east side of New York?" Mac started to laugh. "Christ, a guy landed right in front of my drums, and then Drake yells out, "Play Barroom Brawl!"

Mac's laughter died. "We've all paid our dues to be on top, haven't we, pal? I mean, I certainly feel paid up. Remember when Drake married Janet? Shit, that was the most depressing day of my life. Drake never knew how I felt about Janet, but you did. I stood by and watched my best friend marry the only woman I ever loved. God, did you and I get drunk that night. What a crazy wedding that was. Janet's parents hated Drake, and your mom cried during it all, and you...you were so quiet. That night, I remember you saying to me, "Mac, I feel like somebody close to me just died."

Mac squeezed his hand. "Anyway, it didn't last. I guess we knew it wouldn't, and then you and Sandy... Ah...let's not talk about that. Do you remember the first time we met, Johnny? Shit, I do," Mac laughed. "It was grade one. Drake brought me home to see his trucks. He'd built this tunnel in the back yard, and there you were. Drake said, this is my new best friend, Mac, and you wanted to play with us, and Drake told you that you were too young to play with us because you didn't go to school yet. Boy, did you cry. You ran to your mother, who was very pregnant with Pepi then, and told her that Drake said you were too young to have a best friend, remember?

"Anyway, it was after that, a few years later that I got the drum set for Christmas and Drake got a guitar, and he used to come over and we'd play out in the

garage. God, did we stink. Then you got your guitar because you felt left out, and you came and we would spend hours and hours in that garage. Those were good times, real good times."

But there were some not so good times too. Times that Mac didn't care to say aloud to Johnny. It was okay until they became teenagers, and then something happened. Johnny changed, and Drake began to distance himself from his brother. He would go out of his way sometimes to lose him, telling Mac to meet him someplace that Johnny wouldn't know about.

There would be fights. In fact, Drake and Johnny fought a lot. When Drake would get to the point where he would ignore his brother altogether, Johnny would act out, do stupid things, sometimes dangerous stuff. One time, he began walking along the edge of the Manhattan Bridge. One of the kids he was hanging out with came and told Drake what his brother was up to. Frantic, Drake left to rescue Johnny.

Another time, Johnny stole some hash from a member of a local street gang just for the hell of it. He was being chased by several of them and had to hide out. He disappeared for several days. His parents called the police. He helped Drake look for him, and they finally found him hiding in an old warehouse. Drake took back the hash and pleaded with the street gang members to forget about it. Drake had to give them his leather jacket in order to appease them. He was so angry at Johnny for that, he socked him a good one.

In spite of this acting out, Mac had always liked Johnny. He was a good kid. He had a lot of talent and a



good heart. But there was this sadness, something he held deep down inside of him that was sore and painful. Whatever it was floated to the surface every once in a while, and raged like a storm.

He had asked Johnny once when he was sixteen why he always looked so sad. He had everything going for him. He was good-looking, popular. He could sing and play guitar like a charm. Why should a kid like him carry the weight of what seemed like the world on his shoulders?

Johnny had said, "I wasn't meant to be who I am, that's all. Things are as they are, and I can't change them. That's why I'm sad. Sometimes I think I'm mad, and then I realize that I'm probably saner than anyone deserves to be."

Mac told him with a laugh that he was relieved to hear that he wasn't nuts.

But Johnny shook his head and looked off in the distance. "No, being mad would be a hell of a lot better, Mac, because I could blame everything on the madness."

"I'll never forget that...what you said," Mac whispered to his friend. He blinked back tears. "I lost Kate because I was never home, and you had that bad time with coke. God, I hated those years. Drake was in agony. He worried about you constantly. We all did. We thought you'd end up with AIDS. You were so stoned all the time, and you slept with just about anyone you could. You still do, but at least you've kicked the coke."

Mac sighed. "We were lucky. When Frank signed us,

who knew we'd go to the top. I never dreamed we'd get this big. Do you remember the first night Pepi played with us on stage? It was what...nine years ago? Wow! He was sick before the concert. I have never seen anyone puke so much. Shit. It was in Boston, wasn't it...or was it Philly? No, Boston." Mac laughed. "Poor Pep. But as soon as he walked out on stage and Drake looked at him...you know...in that way he has of looking at you as if to say, 'Get the lead out of your ass, boy', he started playing like a pro. Oh, what a night."

Mac squeezed Johnny's hand. "I love you, Johnny. You mean a lot to me, you and Drake and Pepi, and Angelo, of course. I grew up without brothers, so you guys are it for me. Better not die on me."

His eyes filled. Mac turned away from the bed.

When the door opened, he quickly wiped the tears from his eyes.

It was Janet. "Hey, you okay in here?"

He watched her walk toward him, her blue eyes filled with questions.

He placed a hand on her shoulder. He wanted to kiss her, but he didn't dare. He had a flashing memory of making love to her in a hotel room somewhere. It felt fresh, new, like it was yesterday.

She smiled at him, not sure what was happening in his mind. He looked emotionally drained. They all were.

"Are you hungry?"

Mac shook his head and sniffed. He gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze and then stepped away from her. "Tony here yet?"

She shook her head, walking over to Johnny's bedside. "Do you know there was a time I hated him?"

Mac walked over to her side. "No. I didn't know, but in retrospect, I suppose I know why."

"Do you?" She turned to face him, meeting his eyes again. "Do you really know why, because if you do, can you say it? Can someone please just say it?" She turned back to the bed and stared at Johnny's lifeless hand, lying beside the guardrail. Her shoulders were heaving silently.

Mac placed his hands on her shoulders and turned her around to face him. He pulled her into his arms and held her while she cried. She sobbed for what seemed like an hour, but was actually only a few minutes. Mac reached over and handed her some tissues from the box on the nightstand beside Johnny's bed.

Janet dried her eyes. She had needed that, to release the tension.

"I loved Drake more than anyone deserves to be loved, really." She blew her nose.

Mac watched her. He knew this, of course.

"I wasn't naive enough to think that I would never have any competition for Drake's love. I knew when I married him how people reacted around him. He was gorgeous and talented. He was always going to be in the spotlight. I also knew that he and Johnny were close, but I never understood until later on just where the competition for Drake's love would come from. Johnny tried really hard to conceal how he felt about me, but he resented me. Even when he and Sandy eloped, and Drake and I went to join them in Hawaii to

be their witnesses, Johnny couldn't let go of it, couldn't let go of Drake."

Janet blinked. "There, have I said it? Did I actually say it?"

Mac sighed. "More or less, but never mind. What good does it do to say it right now? Maybe it doesn't matter anymore."

"Yes, it does. It always will," Janet said, looking over at her ex-brother-in-law.

Mac let silence reign for a moment, but it was beginning to feel morbid suddenly. The air was heavy. "Let's go get something to eat, okay?" Mac suggested.

Janet nodded, her eyes still on Johnny. "Okay."

"Where's Sophia?"

Janet moved her eyes to him now. "Resting," she said. "I encouraged her to go back to her hotel room. As much as she wanted to stay and meet Tony tonight when he arrived, it was getting to be too much for her. I told her that she could see him tomorrow. She needs to rest."

Mac placed his arm around Janet. "That was a good idea."

He took one last look at Johnny and then left the room. "Let's order something in, shall we? I'm not up to hospital food tonight. If we order in, we can eat up here in case Johnny's son arrives."

Janet nodded in agreement. "You're right. He could show up at any time now."

Mac's arm remained around her shoulders as they walked down the hallway. It felt good...it felt very good.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sophia walked around the empty hotel suite and shook her head. She didn't need all this. She didn't need any of it. She would have gladly stayed at Pepi's house in Bel Air, except that Pepi wasn't sleeping there because it was too far from the hospital. He was staying at Johnny's condo in Beverly Hills for now.

Anyway, she would have gladly stayed at Johnny's house instead of in this place. Oh, she knew that Pepi meant well, but she was a simple woman and just because her sons were rich didn't mean she needed all this.

She remembered how Drake had offered to buy her a house in Los Angeles, one of these condo things where everything is done for you. He begged her to sell the house, the house that she and Joseph had struggled to pay the mortgage on, the house where her boys had grown up. What would she do in L.A. anyway? She had spent most of her adult life in Brooklyn in her little three-bedroom, two-story brick house on Delaware street. She loved the big tree on the front lawn and the tire swing out back that Joseph had made for the boys. All her memories were there.

Early last summer, Drake did manage to convince her to let them fix up the house. The place was in need of a coat of paint and the roof was missing some tiles. She thought that he meant to send someone to do it, but her sons surprised her by showing up the next day, prepared to do it themselves.

They all worked together on the house and for two whole days, it felt like old times. She had all three of her boys at home together. She could cook for them and watch them devour her food as they laughed and ribbed each other around the table.

But it didn't last long, because by the end of the second day, word had spread that the Russo Brothers were in Brooklyn. A helicopter took a picture of Drake and Johnny up on the roof working. Suddenly, there were reporters and fans everywhere. Johnny called a contractor and the next day, two men came in a truck and finished the job, and the boys went back to L.A.

Sophia sat down and closed her eyes. She felt a little guilty about not being there at the hospital to meet her grandson, but she was just so tired. She had spent hours sitting beside Johnny today. She had talked to him about when he was a little boy. She told him how much he reminded her of Joseph.

She had loved Joseph in her own way, but not in the way he deserved. He was a good man. He worked hard all his life in the steel mill and although they were never rich, they always got by.

The boys worked too, as soon as they were able. Johnny had a paper route at eight years old, and Drake used to mow lawns and help the neighbours with odd jobs when he was a teenager.

Pepi, well, Pepi was luckier, because by the time he was an adolescent, Johnny and Drake were gone. They were off playing music all over the place, sharing a room in downtown Manhattan. Then by the time Pepi was fourteen or so, they had made it. Pepi had

everything he wanted. He had only to mention it to Drake or Johnny and it was his. They did spoil him, but they were good to their father too. They insisted Joseph take an early retirement from the steel mill, which he did.

Two months later, he had a heart attack. The doctors told him he needed a heart operation. The boys sent him to the very best in the field. He came through the operation but the doctors told her that even with the surgery, chances were he wouldn't live longer than ten years.

Knowing this, the boys made sure that the last years of their father's life were happy ones. They sent them both back to Italy for their twenty-ninth wedding anniversary. They bought Joseph a beautiful new car, which he washed almost every day. They had satellite TV installed so that he could watch 'round the clock sports if he chose. There was nothing he lacked. Three and a half years after the surgery, Joseph Russo was dead.

She remembered the night. It was a cold, rainy night and they were coming home from attending a concert that their sons were giving in New York. They had been excited about it because the boys had just returned from Europe and they hadn't seen them in about six months. The boys were following their car in the limo, intending to spend the night with them.

Joseph had enjoyed the concert, even though he often remarked that "this modern day stuff is loud, and you can't understand what in heck Drake is singing about."

It was certainly true that it was loud. Sophia had attended a couple of these concerts, and each time she had to put cotton in her ears. She was sure that her sons were going to have hearing problems later on.

It had been fun, even if they were probably the only people there who were in their fifties. She remembered she was laughing, so happy to see her sons. It didn't matter that it was raining. She was talking a blue streak to Joseph, who drove steadily through the rain. He was quiet as he pulled up into their driveway. He looked at her and rubbed his chest. He said something to her about the 'damn restaurant food gave me indigestion,' and then got out of the car just as the limo pulled to a stop at the curb behind them.

The neighbours were snooping as always, waiting to catch a glimpse of the boys.

She got out. Joseph turned to say something to Johnny who was coming up the drive, and then he fell.

Drake and Johnny carried him into the house. Pepi called the ambulance. She sat down on the sofa and tried to decide what to do now. She knew he was dead.

The ambulance technicians tried to revive him. They did everything they could. He was gone.

It shouldn't have been a surprise, but it was.

She watched Drake. He stood in the corner of the room. He was crying. Johnny went over and held him, and then he started to cry. Her baby Pepi came and sat beside her. They said nothing.

At the gravesite, Sophia asked to be alone after he was put into the ground. Her sons walked off.

There were many celebrities there, singers and



actors. They all gathered around her sons. The boys hardly noticed. They were heartbroken.

Sophia told Joseph the truth then. She said it softly to his grave, so that only he could hear. "I loved you, Joseph, like a brother. You were so wonderful to me, but my true love lies in a watery grave, and his son stands over there with yours. Thank you for loving me. I hope you didn't mind too much that I never loved you the same. Please forgive me." She cried then, for a long time, and Drake came and led her away.

She should have told him the truth right then, but Joseph had just died, and her boys seemed happy in their lives at that time. Everything was going well with the music. They had just put out a new album, which had gone platinum. Johnny had just gotten out of some clinic where he was recovering from something that no one ever did explain to her. Apparently, now he was all right. Drake was living with a very nice woman called Martha something or other, an actress person who he seemed happy with. There didn't seem to be a reason to tell them then.

But she was blind. She had only been grasping for any excuse to keep the lie alive. If she had told them then, this wouldn't have happened. Johnny wouldn't be in the hospital now. Drake wouldn't be in jail. She was afraid to tell them. Would they ever forgive her? Would they hate her?

She got up from the chair and went to lie down on the sofa. The bed was too big. A person could get lost in that bed.

She closed her eyes and saw his face. She

remembered the first time she had seen him.

It had been in a photograph in one of the newspapers, which announced that he was scheduled to play a concert at one of the most celebrated concert halls in Rome.

She remembered thinking how handsome he was and how she wished she could hear him play the piano. She was miles from Rome, and even if she could get there, she could never afford the price of admission.

She was a poor girl from a poor village whose mother took in people's wash and did their sewing, the youngest of four girls. Her father had deserted the family when they were young. Everyone had to give up school early and go to work.

When she met Joseph, he wasn't much richer than she was. His parents both worked pressing grapes to make the wine. He wanted to marry her and her mother was anxious to see her provided for, but Joseph didn't have any money. He had the opportunity to work in one of the vineyards for a year up in Tuscany. He would save his money and then return so they could wed.

Sophia's sister Rosa worked in a factory in Rome. She wrote in one of her letters home that her boss was related to the famous pianist Drake Corderone. She went on in her letter to explain that Drake Corderone's wife was expecting their first child, but was a very frail woman and in need of some help. Rosa had suggested that Sophia might be interested in the position since it was only short term, until the baby came and the lady was on her feet.

Sophia was delighted. Taking the job would get her out of the village and into the city. At the same time, she could help out her mother as well as save some money for her wedding. She could also meet the famous Drake Corderone, and perhaps even attend one of his concerts. She wrote to her sister immediately, agreeing to take the job.

She was completely unprepared for Drake. She was an innocent peasant girl who had spent her life in a little rural village. Drake Corderone was sophisticated, charming and absolutely stunning to look at. He had long black hair and the most beautiful chocolate-brown eyes, fringed with thick black lashes. He was tall, well over six feet, and broad-shouldered. He had a wonderful smile and when he played the piano, she felt as if she had died and gone to heaven. He played like an angel. He looked like an angel. Eventually, she believed that he was an angel.

He and Julia treated her like a queen. She had a beautiful room next to theirs in a six-bedroom house in the middle of busy downtown Rome. She had no expenses, ate gourmet meals prepared by a cook, and did no housework. A servant even washed and ironed her clothes. They paid her a more than generous salary and gave her ample time off. Her only job was to be available to Julia when Drake was off doing a concert.

It was pleasant work. Julia was already three months pregnant when she arrived. She was a beautiful woman with porcelain skin and black eyes, thick red hair that hung down to her waist and a soft, gentle manner. But she was not a strong woman. She had contracted

consumption as a child, and it had left her frail. The doctors had advised against the pregnancy, but she told Sophia that she wanted desperately to give Drake a son.

Drake adored her, worshipped her even, and they were very much in love. He had begged her not to go through with the pregnancy, but Julia would hear none of it.

In spite of the fact that Drake had eyes for no one but Julia, Sophia had fallen desperately in love with him.

If only he hadn't been so kind to her. If only he hadn't spent hours talking with her quietly downstairs in the evening as his wife slept. He was so worried about Julia and would cry sometimes, saying that he didn't know what he would do if she died. "I don't think I could live without her, Sophia," he had said.

Those nights, she wanted to take him in her arms and hold him, tell him it would all be all right, but of course she couldn't. The doctor came often. As the months went by, Julia slept more and more. The doctor recommended she remain in bed until the baby came.

Sophia spent more and more time alone with Drake and she found herself looking at him in a different way, trying to imagine what it feel like to kiss him, to hold him.

Drake began cancelling his engagements, staying closer to home. At night, she would climb out of bed and come downstairs where she would find him pacing the floor. She'd make hot cocoa, and they'd talk until morning.

It became almost unbearable to be in that house. She was desperately in love, but it was a hopeless situation.

Drake and Julia belonged together. He was a man passionately and totally in love with his wife. She could never come between them and furthermore, she didn't want to. She had come to love Julia too.

Then, it happened. One afternoon as she was downstairs reading, Julia let out a cry. She raced upstairs. The bed was covered with blood. "The baby...the baby...!" she screamed.

Sophia called the doctor immediately. The doctor was there by the time Drake returned from running errands.

The doctor was in the room with her for what seemed like hours. Sophia walked the floor with Drake in the living room.

Finally, at ten minutes past midnight, the doctor came out to tell Drake that he had a baby boy weighing eight pounds, six ounces. He told him that Julia had lost a lot of blood and was very weak, and that he should go in to see her.

When Drake went into the bedroom, the doctor took Sophia aside and told her that Julia probably wouldn't see the morning. Two hours later, she was dead.

Sophia watched as they practically dragged Drake out of his wife's room. He was like a man gone mad. For days, he was listless and without spirit. He walked like a zombie through his wife's funeral, and paid little attention to his son.

Sophia cared for little Drake while his father spent hours staring at the wall downstairs. He didn't play the piano, he hardly ate and he said nothing.

Finally, after three weeks of that, Sophia grew angry.

She marched downstairs and glared at him. "Your son needs you. Are you going to sit like this in that chair for the rest of your life? What about your music? Julia wouldn't want this. Please, stop this, Drake."

He said nothing until she began to cry.

Suddenly he got up and looked at her. "Don't, please. Don't cry because of me. I..."

She looked at him. He looked thin, he needed a shave, his eyes were empty.

She sniffed. "I can't stand seeing you like this. Don't you know, Drake? I...I love you...."

His eyes widened. He opened his mouth, then, closed it.

She took his hand. She pulled him close and kissed him and after a few seconds, he kissed her back, hard and with passion, and they made love there on the sofa in the living room. She knew it was because he needed her and not because he loved her, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

She had made love with Joseph before he left for the vineyard, but it had been nothing compared to that night she had spent with Drake. This felt like the first time. He touched her like she had never been touched before. He caused her to cry out in pleasure, doing things to her she never would have conceived of in all of her mind, or dare speak out loud.

And after, he held her and smoothed back her hair. He looked into her eyes and said, "Thank you, Sophia."

He stood up, dressed and sat back down in his chair.

She lay there on the sofa as if waking from a dream and thought that she could die now. It would be okay,

because she had known the ultimate pleasure in his arms. There was nothing more to know now. The taste of him was still on her lips and she wanted him again, right now, but he was in the chair, far away from her. Is that what love felt like? God, it was beautiful...*he* was beautiful.

Then he looked at her and said, "Sophia, promise me something."

"Anything," she replied, sitting up, pulling her clothing modestly in front of her. She would have given him anything, too.

But he wasn't looking at her. He was looking at the photograph of Julia on the wall in front of him.

"Take care of Drake. Be a mother to him. He needs you."

She flowed with happiness. "Yes, Drake, yes," she said, believing he meant for the three of them to be together. It was going to be all right. She would help him fill the space that Julia left. She would give him everything, if only he would touch her again like that. She would write to Joseph, explain why she couldn't possibly marry him. He would be hurt, but she was doing him a favour.

Drake left the house after that. He looked at her, told her goodbye and left the house. When he didn't return that night or the next morning, she went looking for him. Then she notified the police.

She was frantic. No one had seen him. He was gone.

A week later, his body washed up by the river.

Sophia walked down by that river for several nights after that, trying to think of reasons why she shouldn't

join him there. Only that little baby stood between her and that water. Drake had saved her life. He was the reason she had gone on living.

She knew that Drake's father had never loved her, but she had desperately loved him. If only he had given her a chance. She could have made him happy.

Unsure of what she was to do, she had contacted Drake's cousin down at the factory where Rosa worked and asked him his advice. He was a very nice man, and explained to her that Drake's parents had died young, and Julia's family had disowned her when she had married a musician. He had five children of his own and really didn't want to take on another, so she was welcome to raise the boy as her own. He told her he would contact Drake's lawyer to find out if he had made a will.

Within three days, the lawyer called to tell her that Drake had a will, which stated that everything naturally went to Julia in the event of his death. Since Julia was gone, blood relatives were next in line. This, of course, would include his son.

The whole affair became very complicated. As it turned out, Drake and Julia spent every cent Drake made. There was very little money in the bank, and the taxes were due on the house at the end of the year.

Sophia couldn't pay. She stayed at the house for another month and then made arrangements to go home and stay with her mother until Joseph came back.

Drake and Julia's house was repossessed for back taxes. Sophia went home. Her mother was not thrilled that her daughter came home with a baby. She lied to



her mother and told her that she and Joseph had secretly married before he left. She didn't think her mother believed her, but she pretended to.

Sophia wrote to Joseph and told him about the baby. She also told him that she lied to her mother about them being married before he left.

What she should have done was tell Joseph the truth, tell him that she had fallen in love with someone else and was now raising his child, whom she also loved.

But she let him believe that Drake was his and he never knew the difference. He had adored Drake.

She had some happy times with Joseph in their lives together. They did have two sons, two sons she dearly loved, but Drake...he was special. He was a constant reminder of his father, of the only man she would ever love. He looked so much like his father that sometimes she would catch her breath when she looked at him. She could swear it was her Drake; the way he walked, the way he laughed. It broke her heart to look at him.

Sophia sat up. She couldn't sleep. She went into the bedroom and lifted her suitcase onto the bed. She reached into the inside flap and pulled out an envelope. Inside was a picture of Drake and Julia. She had taken it with her when she had left the house with little Drake. Drake's parents.

She pressed her lips to Drake's picture and closed her eyes. "My love, I will make sure he knows you...and you too, Julia...both of you...before I go. Maybe you can forgive me for the hell I've made of your son's life. If it's any consolation, I've ruined my son's life as well. He's in the hospital now, he might die. But I never knew...I

didn't understand...couldn't really believe that... sometimes I even forgot that they weren't really brothers. I should have understood feelings that powerful. I've seen a love like that before...the love you had for Julia, and the love I had for you. It's not an everyday kind of love. Your son, his love is tearing him apart, and it's my fault for not taking the shame away. It's all my fault, Drake darling."

She was crying when the phone rang. She picked it up.

"Mama?" the voice said. "Is that you? Are you all right?"

She clutched the phone. "Drake? Drake!" she cried, wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand. She recognized his voice immediately. "Oh, God, Drake, my baby, is that really you? How are you? Are you all right?"

"Mama," Drake laughed slightly. "Calm down. I'm all right. You?"

"Me? I'm fine."

"Mama, how is Johnny, really?"

"I don't want you to worry about that now," she sighed. How could she tell him that Johnny lay in the hospital like a corpse? "What is happening with you?"

"I was with my lawyer just now. I think they're going to let me out of here soon," Drake announced. His voice was without expression.

Sophia started crying again. "Thank you, God...God, thank you," she said, looking up at the ceiling.

"There will be a hearing, but it will probably be just a formality. I didn't mean to shoot Johnny, it was an

accident. You do believe me, don't you?"

"Of course I believe you," Sophia snapped back. "Any fool who knows you would know that you'd never hurt your brother." Sophia wasn't quite sure what he meant by a hearing, but it sounded positive.

"I can't wait to see him," Drake was saying now. "Mama...please, tell me the truth. How is he really? What do the doctors say?"

"Not much. It's too early to tell. Are you okay? Pepi... well...he didn't say this to me, but I heard him talking to Mac. He says you were depressed."

"A doctor gave me something for my nerves. I'll be fine. I've been doing a lot of thinking, that's all. Now, tell me about Johnny."

"Did you know his son is coming?" Sophia asked.

"Ya, Angelo told me. That's great. Has Johnny regained consciousness yet?"

"No," she said.

There was silence on the other end of the line. For a moment, she thought he was crying, but when he began speaking again, his voice sounded quite calm.

"I've got to go. You can tell everybody the news if you see them before tomorrow. When I get out of here and the police finally stop destroying my house, you can stay with me while Johnny recovers, okay? I'm not far from the hospital. Actually, everyone can come and stay with me until Johnny comes home, Pepi and Angelo and Janet, if she wants to."

"Okay, darling. You take care, and I'll see you soon. Are you sure you don't want me to come and...?"

"No, Mama. This is no place for you. Take care," he

said and hung up.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mac was laughing as Janet went to warm up her piece of pizza in the microwave oven, that was fastened to the wall next to the vending machine in the corner. Shit, if he had known that it was going to be all this trouble to get a pizza up here, he would have jumped on his bike and went to pick it up. When the guy arrived downstairs with the pizza, security had detained him twenty-five minutes. They finally went downstairs and got the pizza themselves.

"That poor delivery guy, he looked like he was about to piss his pants," Mac took a bite of his cold pizza.

It felt good to laugh. He hadn't had a hell of a lot to laugh about in the last couple of days.

Janet tried to take her pizza out of the oven, but it was too hot and she burnt her fingers. "Shit. It's hot and limp."

This made Mac laugh again. "Hot and limp, don't think I've ever heard those two words put together in a sentence before."

She gave him a sassy look. "Ha, ha. Very funny. Sure you don't want me to heat up your piece?"

Mac raised an eyebrow. "Heat my piece if you want, baby, but I don't want it to be limp."

Again, Janet gave him a look, and then grinned. "What a dirty mind."

She brought the pizza over and sat down beside him. She took a bite and then began to laugh.

"What? What?" Mac asked her.

Janet looked at him. "Just can't help thinking about the look on that kid's face when that burly security guy announced he was going to frisk him."

Mac nodded with a smile. "Poor kid."

She ate in silence for a while. "It was nice of you to give him your autograph." Janet finished her pizza and wiped her hands.

"The least I could do. I should have known they'd give the guy a hard time. I know it's important to have security, but shit...sometimes, I get so fed up with it. It's annoying."

"The price of fame. There have been some scary times. Remember that guy with the Mohawk who climbed up on the stage at that concert in Ohio?"

"Ya, you got a good memory, woman, that was years ago when I was still in my prime," he teased.

She grinned. "I remember your prime. It was nice."

Mac sobered. He looked into those beautiful blue eyes and wondered how he ever let her walk away.

She looked back for a minute, and then it got to be too much. She tore her gaze away.

"It wouldn't have worked," she said softly, keeping her hands busy by unnecessarily moving around this and that.

Mac reached over and placed his hand over one of hers.

She looked at him again.

"Why wouldn't it have?" he asked.

"You know why." She cleared her throat.

He removed his hand. "Drake," he said.

She didn't reply. She stood up and folded the pizza

box in half.

"How long are you going to love someone who doesn't love you in the same way?" Mac asked her.

"I can't help the way I feel. I'll always love Drake."

She walked over to the garbage and tried to force the pizza box inside.

It wasn't going to fit. Mac walked over and took the box out of her hand. "I'll take it downstairs to the garbage bins."

She nodded.

"You know," he said, turning halfway to the elevator, "I was prepared to accept the fact that the real love of your life was Drake. I could have lived with that, Janet. If you would have given us a chance, I think I could have made you happy. In time, you might have even come to love me."

Tears stung her eyes, but she said nothing. She had been afraid to love him, afraid to relive the pain she had felt when her marriage to Drake had fallen apart.

"It never works when you love someone else, I guess," Mac said. "I think Kate knew down deep that my heart was elsewhere. That's why neither one of us was that destroyed when it ended."

Janet turned to look at him. "Oh, Mac," she said softly, "I did care. I...those months that we were together were wonderful. I'm sorry."

Tears were streaming down her face. He wanted to comfort her, but he was afraid he'd start to cry himself, so instead he mumbled something about taking the pizza box downstairs and disappeared.

\* \* \* \* \*

The restaurant was dimly lit. Candles shimmered on each table on top of white linen tablecloths. The waiter brought another bottle of wine and Pepi quickly refilled both their glasses.

Angelo drank the wine and then shook his dark head as his uncle went to refill his glass again. "I've had enough, thanks, Uncle Pepi. God, I'm close to being sloshed. Where do you put it all?"

Pepi laughed. "I'm Italian. There's a special genetic insert they put in for us that allows you to drink unlimited amounts of wine and still stand up. You wouldn't understand, you're only half Italian." He waved his hand.

Angelo chuckled. "Really, well, it looks to me like that insert is pretty well full. Have you had enough to eat?"

"I don't think I ever want to see another egg roll as long as I live. I would like dessert, though, how 'bout you, kid?"

Angelo looked doubtful. He rubbed his belly and laughed. "I think it's full, but you go ahead. I'll have some coffee. My head's spinning. Want a coffee?"

His head really wasn't spinning, but he was trying to encourage his uncle to slow down on the wine a little. It was almost eight o'clock in the evening and they were supposed to meet Johnny's son for the first time at the hospital. Pepi was not going to make a great first impression.

Pepi threw his arm around his nephew and laid his head on his shoulder for a second. "Remember the first

time you ever got drunk?"

Angelo laughed. "Ya, I was sick as a dog. How much tequila did we go through that night, at least a twenty-ouncer? Dad was mad as hell. I threw up all over his bed."

Pepi was laughing hard. "How old were you, sixteen?"

"Hell no, more like fourteen. You were such a bad influence on me."

"Ha. Bet you were no angel over in Europe this past year. Tell me about it?"

The waitress came. Angelo ordered coffee for both of them.

Pepi yelled out that he wanted chocolate cake with ice cream.

Angelo wrinkled his nose. "Are you sure that after all that wine you want to eat sweet stuff?"

"Ya. Don't change the subject. Tell me what you did and who you did it to in Europe." Pepi drained his wineglass.

Angelo smiled and looked around him. "You're too young," he teased.

"Bull. I'm ten years older than you are. So, young, beautiful, hard-toned bodies, lots of drugs, rock and roll...come on?"

Angelo shook his head. "Here comes your cake and oh...thank God, coffee."

Angelo asked for the bill. The waitress asked Pepi for his autograph when she put the bill in front of him. He laid down his gold card and then scribbled his name on the receipt when she returned.



"And you?" the waitress turned to Angelo. "Are you anybody?"

"No. Nobody," Angelo replied with a smirk.

"He is too somebody. Don't you know who Drake Russo is?"

The waitress gasped. "I didn't recognize you...my God..." she squealed..."Drake...it's Drake Russo!"

"Sh--h--ii--t!" Angelo jumped up out of his seat and grabbed Pepi by the arm. "Come on. Jesus Christ, what did you have to do that for, Pepi?"

Angelo made his way through the restaurant clientele, who were scrambling to get a look at them. "I'm not Drake Russo!" He called out, moving toward the front door.

Pepi was laughing. "But you are...you are Drake Russo!" He laughed.

"Not the real Drake Russo," Angelo grumbled under his breath as they stepped outside.

It was pouring and as soon as Carter spotted them, he stepped out and opened the door.

Angelo pushed Pepi inside and then got in himself, pushing down the lock as people crowded the limousine.

"To the hospital, sir?" Carter asked.

Angelo took a look at his uncle, who had passed out in the back seat, and sighed. "Stop by my grandmother's hotel first, Carter, I'm going to leave my uncle there. Then I'll go on to the hospital alone."

"Yes, sir," Carter replied and pulled carefully away from the curb.

Angelo lay back against the seat and closed his eyes.

He had a hell of a time in Europe. He had spent three weeks in Amsterdam, smoking good hash and experiencing an entire range of sexual pleasures.

He had spent two days with a girl called Greta in Austria, who had to be one of the most uninhibited sexual partners he had ever had. She was at least six feet tall and beautiful, with voluptuous breasts and an insatiable sex drive. All they did the entire two days was fuck. He didn't think they even stopped to eat. God, she wore him out completely.

Then there had been Jean-Claude and Philippe, who lived in a loft in Paris. They were two of the most beautiful men he had ever seen; almost too perfect, with luscious well-toned bodies and smooth bronze skin.

Jean-Claude and Philippe were a couple. Jean-Claude was in his early forties but looked thirty, and was an incredible lover. He was an artist. Philippe was his model. He was nineteen and totally devoted to Jean-Claude, which Angelo could well understand. Jean-Claude was drop-dead gorgeous and extremely generous in his lovemaking.

In the bar, Jean-Claude did most of the talking while his companion moved up close to him and ran his hands over his arm. Jean-Claude told him that he looked just like Drake Russo. Philippe thought Drake Russo was the sexiest man alive, and Jean-Claude would have liked to give Philippe the real thing, but he wasn't available. "But you," he said, "you look more that Drake Russo than anyone we've ever seen."

Angelo didn't mention he was Drake Russo's son.

Jean-Claude asked him to come home with them that

night, saying that he wouldn't regret it.

It didn't take him long to agree. Jean-Claude and his model were the best-looking guys in the bar and he knew that if he didn't go for it, someone else surely would.

He went back to their loft, and didn't leave for three days.

He stayed in Paris another week and went back to visit them just before he left. Philippe wasn't home.

Jean-Claude told him he was beautiful and he wanted to paint him, but it would have taken too long. He wanted to move on to England and maybe visit Scotland and Wales. So he took off his clothes, smoked a reefer and let Jean-Claude sketch him. Jean-Claude said that he wanted to make love to him, but felt guilty because Philippe wasn't there.

Angelo said it was okay, stubbed out the joint and got up to dress. Jean-Claude wiped his hands on a rag and came over to where he was putting on his shirt. He began to take it off again, explaining to Angelo that he was sure Philippe wouldn't mind, and he really didn't have to know about it. They spent two hours making love.

He could still taste him when he was on the train to London. What a great lover he was. His hat was off to older men. If Philippe hadn't been around, he might have stayed for a few weeks, maybe a month.

He closed his eyes, wondering what Jean-Claude was up to these days. He might just pop in and visit him. He could do that.

Carter pulled up outside the hotel.

Angelo pulled his uncle into an upright position and then backed himself out of the limo.

Carter offered to help.

Angelo threw his uncle up over his shoulder with a grunt. "Open the door for me, will ya, Carter? Let's try and get him upstairs and into the suite before a lot of people see us, okay?"

Carter opened the door and they walked quickly through the lavish lobby of the hotel. Carter rushed over to the elevator and pushed the button.

The door opened right away.

Carter stepped inside with them. "He must be heavy, sir," he commented, pushing the button for the ninth floor.

"Not bad," Angelo replied.

Angelo had developed quite a bit of muscle when he had spent two months in Greece working on the fishing boats. It was back-breaking work. At over six feet and a hundred and eighty pounds, he was actually bigger than his uncle, who at five feet eight weighed in at about one hundred and sixty pounds. It would have been far tougher for his uncle to have carried him.

The elevator stopped with a sharp ring of a bell, then opened. Carter ran ahead of them and knocked on the door of Sophia's suite.

Angelo adjusted Pepi's weight on his broad shoulder and waited.

Sophia came and opened the door. She took one look at her grandson with Pepi heaved over his back and stood back from the door. "Oh, my goodness," she mumbled.

She put her hands to her mouth as Angelo walked over and lowered his uncle onto the sofa.

Pepi moaned and turned onto his side, burying his face in the sofa.

Angelo turned to Carter and nodded. "Thanks, man, I'll be down in a few minutes."

Carter bowed his head to Sophia and then turned and left the suite, closing the door behind him.

"What happened?" she asked Angelo, moving toward him to give him a kiss.

He lowered his head for the kiss, and then laughed. "Don't worry about it, Grandma, he's drunk. Too much wine at the restaurant. He's been under a lot of pressure lately. Hope you don't mind me bringing him here."

"Of course not." She reached up and smoothed back his long black hair. "You and your father and all that long hair." She clicked her tongue. "You need a haircut. Pepi and Johnny wear their hair long too, but not like yours, way down your back. It's nice, though, silky, soft. What do you wash it with?"

He grinned. "Rainwater, and lilies I pick from the meadow."

She made a face. "Very funny. I'll give you twenty dollars," she went for her purse, lying beside the phone on the end table, "and you go and get a haircut."

"Grandma," Angelo said. "I don't need twenty dollars. Stop it, now. I like my hair the way it is, okay?"

"The girls like it, I suppose?" She lifted an eyebrow.

Angelo laughed. "Yes, Grandma, the girls like it. Now I've got to go. Take care of Pepi."

He went to kiss her on the forehead and just as he

did, she cried out, "Oh...my God, I almost forgot."

Angelo jumped a little as his five-foot-two grandmother began to hop around.

"What?"

"Your father called me."

"Good, I'm glad. You can tell me all about it later, I've got to go to the hospital now."

"Wait, listen," she put a hand on his arm as he turned to leave.

Angelo stopped, trying to be patient with her.

"He's getting out of jail."

Angelo's eyes widened. "What? Are you sure?"

She nodded. "He said it would be soon. The shooting was an accident, Angelo. Your father is coming home."

Angelo laughed and then let out a holler. He lifted his grandmother in the air and waltzed around the room.

She let out a yell and told him to put her down. He did, feeling like a grand piano had been lifted from his back.

"Be sure and tell Pepi as soon as he sobers up, okay?" he told her. "Oh, Gran, this is wonderful news."

After a few more minutes of repeating how happy they both were, Angelo told her he really had to go. He went back downstairs and got into the limo.

Dad was coming home. Now there was Johnny to worry about. One thing at a time. Uncle Johnny had to live because Dad...well, Dad wouldn't be able to go on, that much he knew.

He said a silent prayer, and tried to focus on his cousin, who was probably already at the hospital by

now.

\* \* \* \* \*

Walking down that corridor to the waiting room at the end of the hallway, his legs felt like they were made out of lead. If it hadn't been for Kevin, he might have turned around and ran.

As it turned out, the waiting room was empty when he walked in. He breathed a sigh of relief.

Kevin looked around and let out a whistle. "Wow, this is some waiting room. The waiting rooms of the rich and famous," he chuckled.

Tony noticed the leather sofa and chairs, the vending machines and coffee machine. There was a phone and microwave in the corner, and Muzak playing very faintly in the background.

Kevin picked up a magazine off the table. "October 1998, this month's edition of Psychology Now. Even the magazines are up to date." He let the magazine fall back down on the table and then threw himself into a chair with a sigh.

"You don't have to stay, Kevin, if you have to be somewhere," Tony told him.

Kevin looked at him. He was a good-looking kid. He looked a lot like Johnny Russo, with his shoulder-length curly black hair and sherry brown eyes. He had a sweet face, the kind of face that should appear on a teen beat magazine, and he was quite tall for his age, about fifteen. The fresh-faced boy next door who looked rather lost and frightened at the moment, like he was on the

threshold of stepping into another world, a strange alien world that would ensure that he was never the same after.

Where in the hell was everybody, Kevin thought. Shit, at least someone should have been here to meet the kid.

Kevin got up, poured himself some coffee and sat back down. He picked up a magazine and then suggested to Tony that he sit down.

"I can't, Kevin. I'm a little restless."

He stood instead in the corridor made of double-paned glass and gazed out at the lights of Los Angeles.

"Who are all those people with candles?" he asked Kevin suddenly.

It had been raining a while ago. There were drops of it still clinging to the glass.

Kevin stood up and walked over to him. He placed a hand on his shoulder. "Fans. They're keeping vigil for your dad."

"That's nice."

"They've been there since the beginning," Kevin replied. "If you lived in L.A., you'd be one of those kids, wouldn't you....if things hadn't turned out this way?"

Tony nodded. "Probably. Me and my best friend, Sam." There were tears in his eyes now. "Everything is falling apart, you know...the world. The Russo Brothers were something special and wonderful. They made this world seem better, like redemption was possible. Do you understand what I mean?" He looked at Sam.

"I think so."

"When things were bad...when school was tough or



when there was bad news on TV, Sam and I always had something to look forward to; a new CD, the possibility that the band would come to Toronto and we would finally get to see them. We started a fan club at school, and..." he stopped.

Kevin squeezed his shoulder. "It's okay, kid, really."

Tony placed his forehead on the cool glass. "No, it's not. Nothing is okay, because my whole life has changed. I don't know who I am anymore, and I'm afraid to find out. The Russo family has come too close. The illusion is gone, the fantasy is gone and I feel like Alice in Wonderland about to go through the mirror. That jet today, the security people all over the parking lot down there, those kids strumming on their guitars, singing Russo Brothers songs, this is all too much now."

He didn't know what more to say, so he turned around and went to sit down in the waiting room.

A few minutes later, the elevator opened and closed. There were footsteps hurrying down the hall. Kevin jumped out of his seat.

It was Janet Smith, Drake Russo's ex. He had met her a few times at social occasions. She was one gorgeous lady.

Janet nodded at Kevin and then looked at the young man standing in the corridor.

Kevin came over to her. "He's stressed out."

"I understand. How are you?" she asked, her voice low, keeping her eye on her nephew, who hadn't turned around yet.

"Fine. Can you handle it from here, then? I'm off."

"Sure. Thanks and take care, Kevin."

Kevin raised a hand in the air so Tony could see his reflection in the glass. "Bye, Kid. Your aunt is here. Good luck."

Tony closed his eyes, then opened them and turned around to see a woman in her mid-thirties. She had shoulder-length blond hair and blue eyes. She wore jeans, red high-heeled shoes and a blue silk blouse.

She walked over to him. Her throat was dry. She couldn't speak. She blinked. There sure was no mistaking that he was Johnny's. He looked just like him.

"I'm your Aunt Janet," she managed, knowing that he already knew that.

"Tony Newton," he replied, trying to avoid her eyes.

"Do you want to sit down?"

He nodded, and followed her into the waiting room.

She asked him if he'd had a good trip.

He agreed that he had.

She offered him food and drink.

He told her he had already eaten.

He didn't want bullshit. She knew that, but she was overcome with emotion. She and Drake were his godparents. She told him that.

"Drake Russo is my godfather?" he gasped.

She smiled. "Yes. We were at your christening."

Tony met her eyes. "Why hasn't Mom spoken to you in all these years?" He fell silent for a minute.

Janet sighed. "I know this is hard for you to..."

"Hard?" Tony blinked. "My mother has lied to me all these years. Why did she lie to me?"

She ran a hand through her blonde hair. "I think you should ask Sandy these questions."

"She won't tell me, and anyway, I might not want to speak to her again," he replied stiffly.

"She's your mother," Janet protested.

"Is she?" Tony asked bitterly. "Maybe she's not my mother. Tom isn't my father. Who knows what other lies I've been told?"

Janet closed her eyes. She had warned Sandy that this would happen.

Tony stood up. "I have a right to know. How long was my mother married to Johnny Russo, or were they married at all?"

"Yes, they were married. I know, I was there. The marriage lasted a little over a year."

"Why did they break up? Why did she leave him? For Tom?"

Janet shook her head. "He left her."

"I see. Why?"

Janet let out a breath. "He just wanted to, I guess."

"I guess he just *wanted* to abandon me also!" Tony replied sharply.

Janet squeezed her eyes shut. He was putting her in the middle. She didn't like it. She didn't want to lie. She also didn't want to put all the blame on Sandy either, even if...poor Sandy.

"Johnny was the love of her life," she said.

Tony gazed at her. Janet saw that his eyes were full of hurt, rage, resentment. How could she make this better?

She couldn't. There had been so many lies. She

couldn't add to them.

"I want you to know that whatever I tell you, it's from my perspective. It's not the only truth, but it's my truth, understand?"

"I think so."

"You and I can both read the same story and you may hate it and I may love it, but it doesn't mean that one of us is lying."

"That's not quite the same thing. We are talking about facts here, facts, not fiction," Tony objected.

"No, we're talking about feelings, emotions...and emotions are never objective. We can't presume to know why some people do the things they do. We're not them. We have different ways of emotionally responding to things."

"The point is?" Tony urged, meeting her eyes.

God, he reminded her of Johnny when he looked like that. She felt like she was having *deja vu*. "The point is," she breathed, "I don't agree with what your mother did, but I'm not her. Johnny didn't love her and she knew it, but he adored you. You were the most precious thing in the world to him."

Tony felt himself trembling. "So...why, then, did he leave me?"

"He didn't leave you, he left your mother. She couldn't accept...certain things, and she wanted to punish him for breaking her heart, so she took away from him what mattered most...you."

"Why didn't he fight it, if I was so precious to him?"

"I don't know. Maybe he felt he deserved his punishment. Maybe she threatened him with

something. The band was just beginning to get recognized when you were born. If she had something on your father that would have ruined their chance of making it...well...I don't know. Your dad would have never allowed anyone to hurt Drake."

"But how could she have hurt Drake?" Tony asked her.

"If she had something on your father and she threatened to tell the media, it would have hurt the band, and Drake wanted so badly to make it. It's all he ever wanted."

"What was it she could have said? Do you know?"

She shook her head, but of course she knew very well what it was.

"Did he have an affair?"

Janet was growing uncomfortable now. This is not where she had wanted to go with this conversation.

"What could she have said? Was it bad? Was my dad a pedophile or something?"

Janet laughed. "No, oh God, no. He was never that. Look, Tony, it doesn't matter. It was a long time ago. There's been a lot of water under the bridge since then. All you need to know right now is that your father has never forgotten about you, and he needs you now. As for your mom, you'll forgive her in time. We do crazy things sometimes when we feel rejected by someone we love. She was crazy in love with your father."

"It feels like nothing has changed all these years. Poor Dad...eh, Tom. Doesn't look like she ever loved him at all," her nephew said.

"Who knows? Anyway, do you want to see your

father? I have to tell you that it isn't pretty. His head is bandaged, there are tubes everywhere and he is still in a coma."

"Is he going to live?" Tony asked her.

"You know...I don't know, dear." Janet reached over and placed her arm around Tony.

She drew his head onto her shoulder. "Your father and I were close once; at least, I thought we were. We all had some good times together, Johnny, Sandy, Drake and me and Mac too, of course, back in high school. God, deep down, he was so unhappy."

"Johnny?" Tony asked, looking up from her shoulder.

She nodded.

Tony lifted up his head, feeling a little funny about this intimacy all of a sudden.

"I think we were drawn together in a way, your dad and I, because we had similar hearts," Janet said almost to herself as she allowed Tony to move away from her.

She stood up suddenly. She had said too much now, but thankfully Tony didn't ask her to explain.

He really didn't understand what she meant. How could he? How could he possibly understand that she and his father had the same heart because they both loved the same man?

As well as she knew her own name, she knew that if it was Drake lying there right now, Johnny would be here beside her. They would comfort one another because they understood the other's heart. There would be no jealousy between them. Johnny had never had a reason to hate her because she was never any

competition. Johnny had always had his heart. The only time that Johnny had resented her was when she and Drake were married, and then he actually seemed to feel bad when they got divorced. He even came to her and tried to offer his sympathy, and she hadn't been ready then to see him.

Actually, he had been the last person she had wanted to see and she had screamed at him, told him to get out. "You got what you wanted. Now go, he's all yours! Go!" She had collapsed on the floor, sobbing. He had stood in the doorway saying "I'm sorry" over and over until she couldn't stand it anymore, and she got up and physically pushed him out the door.

It took months before she could even look at him and then when she moved out to L.A., he wanted to be a part of her son's life and they came together again, she and Drake and Johnny and Mac. Only Sandy was missing. Although it was different from before, at least it was honest.

Now she regretted all the bad things she had ever said to him. She didn't want him to die, because he was her friend and the one person in the world Drake loved more than anything.

She looked over at Johnny's son and smiled. "Let's go in now, shall we?"

Tony nodded. "Okay, Aunt Janet," he replied bravely, "I think I'm ready now."

**This concludes Episode Two of The Russos.**

**Stay tuned next month for the exciting  
Episode Three:**

- Francine gets a serious case of the hots for her client.
- Angelo meets Tony for the first time.
- Tony makes a confession to Janet.
- Johnny's condition gets worse.





## *Meet Johnny Russo*

**J**ohnny Russo is the middle brother. He plays guitar in the Russo Brothers Band. He was married to Sandy briefly when he was very young, and they had a son, Tony. Johnny hasn't seen his son for years. Due to Sandy's bitterness over the divorce, she has kept Tony's paternity a secret from him.

Johnny has had a lot of problems in his life. He is bitterly unhappy. He struggles with a drug problem and has been in and out of rehab. He has been through a variety of lovers. He harbours a hidden passion, a love that 'dare not speak its name,' and he suffers.

When the story opens, he is in the hospital in a coma, fighting for his life, having been shot in the head by his older brother, Drake.

## *D.J. Manly*

**D**J. 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](http://djmanly.com), and take a taste...if you dare.

"Fair warning, I've been told that it's highly addictive."

D.J. .