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The Russos: Episode Four
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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 Four

Previously on The Russos...

7 rake's lawyer, Francine gets a serious case of the hots for her client. Angelo and Tony meet for the first time, and seem to hit it off. Tony makes a confession to Janet about his sexuality. Tony has a wet dream. Johnny's condition gets worse before it gets better. Drake's visit to his brother has a profound effect on his condition.

And Now...Episode Four of The Russos

Ingelo found his Dad at the hospital around seven that evening. He was drinking coffee and pacing the hallway.

He embraced his father. "Hi, Dad, where in hell have you been?

"At home, why?" Drake asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I left fifty messages, telling you I was helping Mac and Pepi out with the new C.D."

Drake looked out the window at the hordes of fans dancing around in the parking lot. "What in the world are they doing out there anyway?" he muttered.

"Playing your music, singing, chanting, praying for Uncle Johnny," Angelo replied, coming to stand beside his father.

Drake looked at his son. Tall, handsome, he seemed so much like him, yet he wasn't like him at all, really. He wasn't tormented, and he hoped to God he stayed that way.

"Mac and Uncle Pepi will be by later on. Are you planning on working this week, or...?" Angelo inquired.

They really did need him at the studio, although Angelo didn't want to put any pressure on him right now. Uncle Pepi would probably be on his back soon enough.

"Tomorrow, okay?" Drake drained the rest of his

coffee.

"You want to see your uncle?" Drake asked him.

"Ya, then I'm going to get going," Angelo told him. "There's a drummer that Bernie wants me to meet. He thinks we could get something going."

"Good," his father said. "You need to get a permanent bunch of guys together, get yourself a name and let people hear you. Your problem is you haven't found the right bunch of guys yet."

Angelo rolled his eyes. "I know that, Dad, but it's not easy. You always knew who you were playing with; two brothers and your best friend. I have no brothers, and my friends either wouldn't know an A from a B flat or are like Bernie, and aren't into rock."

"I can set you up with a good bass player if the drummer works out," Drake offered. "Let me know."

"Another studio musician?" Angelo sighed. "Dad, the good ones are always busy."

"Yes, but this guy, Gary...Gary...forget his last name...anyway, he wants out of studio stuff. He's ready to break out. He's looking for people. Anyway, won't hurt for you to check him out."

"Okay, let me know when he's available," Angelo muttered. "God, it would be so much easier if you would just let me play with the fucking band."

There was a silence, then Drake casually brought his cell phone out of the inside pocket of his black leather jacket. "Go ahead and see your uncle," he said stiffly, turning around. "I've got a few phone calls to make."

He had been dismissed. There was to be no more

discussion on the subject now. Angelo glared at his father's back before he walked away from him. He swore under his breath as he headed down the hallway. Damn him. If Uncle Johnny was well, he'd talk Dad into letting him join the band. Uncle Johnny would tell him how unreasonable he was being. Shouldn't parents want to save their children from having it as hard as they did?

He was a self-centered son of a bitch, and if Uncle Johnny weren't so sick, he'd tell him so...all this talk about not being able to appreciate fame if he didn't earn it himself. What horse shit! He didn't understand why it gave his father so much satisfaction to think of him burning himself out playing for a bunch of drunken creeps in some dive somewhere. He was Drake Russo's son, but he might as well have been the son of a nobody for what that gave him.

If he hadn't been good enough he would have accepted that as an excuse, but his father told him that he was a very accomplished guitarist. He even admitted that he was better than he was at his age and coming from Dad, that was nothing to scoff at. He was a very harsh music critic, and it didn't matter who was at the receiving end of the criticism. Poor Uncle Pepi waited years until Dad was satisfied with his keyboards before being allowed to join the band.

* * * * * *

Angelo was still fuming about it when he stepped inside his uncle's room. He walked over to the bed and

took his hand. "Uncle Johnny, tell me one thing...why is my dad such a stubborn jackass all the time? I want to play with the band, Uncle Johnny, and I know you'd..."

Angelo stopped for a minute. He could have sworn he felt his uncle's hand move under his. He held his breath, removed his hand and waited.

He began to talk again, only slowly, carefully. "Uncle Johnny, can you hear me? Can you..." There, there it was. There was movement. Tears sprang to Angelo's eyes. Oh, God, he had moved. He was sure of it.

He raced out of the room and stopped at the nurse's station. "Get the doctor," he said excitedly, "get the doctor now! My uncle...he just moved his hand!"

The nurse didn't respond with as much enthusiasm as Angelo expected. She looked at him from behind her black-rimmed glasses and gave him a tolerant smile, one you would reserve for a pesky schoolboy. "I wouldn't worry about it. It probably was just an involuntary reflex. I will notify the doctor, and tomorrow..."

"Tomorrow? No...I tell you..." Angelo began, trying to make her see that it was more than that. He attempted to explain it all again to her, until she became quite openly irritated with him.

"All right, Mr. Smith," she snapped. "Come on, let us go see. I know you hope your uncle gets better...we all have his best interests at heart, but wishful thinking is one thing, an actual spontaneous recovery is quite another."

Angelo followed her to his uncle's room. She walked briskly, her rubber-soled shoes squeaking on the terrazzo floor. She kept talking, scolding him. He didn't pay much attention.

His father was in the room now standing beside Johnny's bed. He looked past the nurse and directly at his son. He seemed a little dazed, as if he'd seen a ghost. Then his face broke into the most heart-wrenching smile. "Angelo," he breathed, "he...he said my name. Johnny opened his eyes and said my name."

The nurse placed a hand over her mouth and gasped. Then she sprang into action. "Don't do anything!" she instructed, then raced out of the room.

* * * * * *

An hour later, the waiting room was filled with people. Everyone was there; Janet and Tony, Pepi, Sophia, Mac and Frank. Drake paced the hallway, demanding to know how much longer it would be before the doctor came to tell them something.

The nurse tried to assure him it wouldn't be much longer.

Sophia watched Drake pace, and then went to join him. If Johnny recovered, God would have answered all her prayers. Over the last little while, she had worked everything out in her mind. She had asked God for help and she knew he expected her to be patient, to wait for a sign. He would guide her, let her know what she should do. In the last few weeks, he had given her two very clear signs. Now here, tonight, was the last of them.

The first sign had been when Drake was released

from jail. Then Drake had met that wonderful Francine, who she knew was the right one, and finally, Johnny was coming out of the coma. God had forgiven her. He wanted her to forgive herself. There was nothing to be served by ripping her family apart. Drake and Johnny were brothers in every way except for one, and it was that one unknown factor that kept them brothers.

To expose that was to allow for a complete change in their relationship, a change that was unnatural and sinful and would only harm them in the long run. No, Francine would be good for Drake, and as for her Johnny...well, he had Tony now, and maybe there would be some nice girl out there for him as well later on down the line. She had to protect her boys. It was her job to make sure they remained a family...especially after she was gone.

"Dear, it's going to be all right," she told Drake as she stood next to him in the hallway. "God has chosen to give me back my boys. He has given me the signs I needed. Everything is clear now. I spent a lot of time in that lovely church down the street from the hotel. Sometimes in life we think we do wrong, but there is less harm that way."

He tilted his dark head and gazed at her as she continued on with what he often jokingly referred to as her 'sermons'.

She looked very haggard suddenly and seemed a great deal older than she was. He realized as he tried to concentrate on what she was saying that he had absolutely no idea what she was going on about.

Mama was always quite religious, attributing events in life to God's plan or God's will. She must have been disappointed in her sons, none of whom were really religious. Pepi and Johnny were both closet agnostics, and he had become disillusioned with God long ago. He once thought God was testing him with all this stuff but he finally decided that if it were a test, it was a cruel and unusual test, one he couldn't remember ever being wicked enough to deserve.

"Why don't you sit down, Mama, rest," he interrupted her. She had lost him a while back.

She was stubbornly protesting when Tony stood up suddenly, came over and took his grandmother's arm.

He gave Drake a smile. "Come on, Grandmother," he coaxed, "come sit with your newfound grandson and tell me about when you were a girl in Italy. Aunt Janet says you tell good stories."

"Does she now?" Sophia's eyes twinkled as she went to sit down again.

They sat near Pepi, who had his face in his hands. He hadn't said a word or moved since he'd arrived. Tony leaned over and asked him if he were all right.

He nodded, but didn't remove his hands.

Mac looked over at Tony and shook his head. "He's okay, Tony. Don't worry. It's just the way he is."

"Okay," Tony replied, again asking his grandmother to tell him a story about her youth. He forced himself to pay attention as she began telling him about where she grew up in a small village in Italy. As interesting as the story was, he was distracted, anxiously waiting to hear

something about his father.

His eyes strayed over to his uncle, who stood quietly now in the corner of the room. God, he was so handsome. He could hardly believe that Drake Russo was standing there in the same room. He remembered a sharp image from his dream suddenly and blushed, looking away.

Angelo walked over to his dad. Drake put an arm around his son's neck, pressing his forehead against his. They remained like that for a few minutes and then Angelo went and sat beside his mother.

Mac sat on the other side of Janet, quietly holding her hand. Angelo took her other hand and squeezed it. She kissed him on the cheek.

Frank Carr was on his cellular phone most of the time. He had cancelled two engagements and was in the middle of a conference call when the doctor came sauntering down the hallway toward them. "Gotta go," Frank said, cutting off whomever he was speaking to and moving closer to Drake.

Everyone stood up and gathered around the doctor. He looked at all of them, and then actually smiled. "Johnny Russo is awake."

There were shouts, hollers of joy, jumping up and down. People hugged each other, cried openly. Tony gripped his aunt's arm tightly.

Suddenly, Drake was calling for them to be quiet. The doctor began to speak again. They all strained to hear what he was saying. "There doesn't seem to be any signs of brain damage," he said, "although I must caution you, it is somewhat early to tell. He may have

some trouble with his memory from time to time and then again, he might not. He's going to have some vision problems in his left eye, but later we may be able to correct some of the damage. He is very weak and right now, I think it would be a good idea if everyone just went on home. You can see him tomorrow."

As people began moving toward each other again, hugging, expressing their feelings of joy and relief, the doctor placed his hand on Drake's arm for a minute.

Drake turned to the doctor. "Yes?"

"He's been asking for you, Mr. Russo. He seems quite anxious and insistent on seeing you right away so I promised him I would allow you to go in for a few minutes only, okay?"

Drake nodded at the doctor. "Of course. I'll go in straight away." He looked around. Everyone was laughing and crying, still hugging each other.

Janet and Angelo came and stood on either side of him now, kissing both sides of his face at the same time. He put his arms around them both and then Pepi came and hugged him, then Mac, then Frank.

Frank was shouting, "We're back, guys! We're back!" He raised his hand and slapped palms with Drake and Pepi.

Tony stood with his grandmother, who left his side now to hug both her sons and her other grandson. Tony had hugged everyone except for his uncle. After that dream last night, he felt odd about hugging him, although he really wanted to. When he saw Drake look over at him, he looked away.

When the excitement died down, Drake asked if

anyone needed a ride. When no one responded, he called out, "Hey, someone coming home with me tonight? I feel like celebrating. We should have a party."

Frank piped in. "Great idea! My house. Everyone knows the way."

There was some general agreement as people made decisions about who was going to hitch a ride with whom.

Sophia went up to Frank and thanked him for the invitation, but she wouldn't be joining them. She was feeling a little tired, and would like to go back to the hotel.

Frank told her it was perfectly all right, and then Drake told his mother that he would take her back to the hotel if she didn't mind waiting a few minutes.

"I'll join you all later back at Frank's," he told no one in particular.

When Tony noticed that Drake was leaving the waiting room, he asked his aunt where he was going.

"Your dad wanted to see him," Janet told him, suddenly realizing that Tony might be hurt that Johnny asked to see Drake, not him but he didn't seem to be. "Look," she continued, feeling a little funny about it, "why don't you wait here and go to the party with Drake? You'd have some time with him, and you could keep your grandmother company while Drake is in with your dad."

"Shouldn't we tell him first that I'm going with him?" Tony felt a knot in his stomach suddenly.

"Why?" Janet laughed. "He'll be happy to drive you.

You are his brother's son. Look, I'll see you later at Frank's, okay?" She pecked him on the cheek and left.

Tony nodded, then took a chair next to his grandmother. He noticed that people had cleared out quickly; there was dead silence now in the waiting room. He looked at his grandmother and was about to say something about how fast people had left when he realized that her eyes had closed. Startled for a minute, he thought she might be dead, but her chest was rising and falling steadily. She had dozed off.

Bored, Tony stood up and walked down the corridor toward his father's room. He'd wait outside. He wanted to tell Drake right away that he was still here. He felt quite awkward about it, wishing that Aunt Janet had told Drake before she left. Also, he wanted to be close to his dad. Maybe he could just poke his head in, say hello. No. He had to be patient. He'd wait until tomorrow. He understood that he was really still a stranger to his father. It was natural that he would want to see his big brother. He wasn't hurt by that.

As he neared the room, he noticed the door stood open partway. He didn't want Drake to think he was spying on him, so he stayed back. He could hear them talking, their voices drifting out into the hallway.

His first instinct was to go back to the waiting room. It wasn't right to eavesdrop on their conversation, but still he strained his ears to hear. He suddenly realized that he was hearing his father's voice in person for the first time.

"I...I needed to see you," Johnny said. His voice sounded very weak and strained.

"Try not to talk too much, okay?" Drake was saying. "You've been through a lot. God, I thought I'd lost you." Drake's deep voice cracked a little.

"Don't," Johnny said, "God, I couldn't stand it if...if you cried. I...I need you to know...oh, Drake...I don't blame you for this. It wasn't...it's not your fault....none of it is..." Johnny was crying.

"Stop," Drake demanded. "Just get well. I need you. We all need you."

"How do you need me, Drake?" Johnny asked him, his tone of voice softening suddenly, sounding quite different, almost seductive.

Tony's eyes narrowed. He moved closer to the door.

"You know how," Drake replied, clearing his throat.

"No, I don't. Say it, say you love me. Say you want me. All I've ever wanted is you, nothing else. You know that. Please tell me that we'll be together again, like last summer."

"Johnny, don't think about that now. You need...."

"Think about that now?" Johnny's voice rose, cracking with suppressed emotion. "That's all I ever think about. All I know is if it's going to be like it was before, I don't want to live. You love me, I know you do. I don't care anymore about what everyone thinks...about the world, about God. I don't care, Drake! I won't stand by and watch you love everyone and anyone except me. I can't take the pain, and I don't think you can either."

Tony leaned against the door.

His father was crying hard now. Drake was trying to comfort him, telling him to relax, get some rest, that everything would work out.

"I'm going to leave now, Johnny," Drake was saying. "Try and rest. I'll be here tomorrow."

Tony moved away from the door quickly, rushing down the hallway. His head was pounding. He tried to go over what he had heard in his mind, but none of it made any sense.

When Drake saw him, his eyes widened a little.

"Aunt Janet told me to wait for you. Thought I could sit with Grandmother, but looks like she's asleep," Tony explained, aware that his speech was rapid and jerky.

He waited for a reaction. He didn't get much of one. His uncle looked distracted. He walked by him and leaned over his mother, waking her gently. He gave his nephew a backward glance. "Are you ready?" His tone was polite.

Tony nodded.

In the car, Sophia kept asking about that 'nice girl', whose name she was always getting wrong.

Irritated, Drake said, "Francine, Mother, her name is not Fonda or Freda, it's Francine!"

Sophia mumbled something in Italian and then went on to talk about that 'nice girl' again. "Too bad she wasn't invited to that Mr. Carr's house. Maybe you should call her, invite her," Sophia suggested.

"Mama, for Christ's sake, get off my back, will ya? Francine is my lawyer, and we're friends. I'm not planning to carry her off and marry her, so get that out of your head."

"She's a nice girl."

"She is not a girl, Mama, she's a woman, and I'm not interested in getting married again. I already told you that."

"You need someone to look after you," she protested.

"I can look after myself and when I can't, I've got enough money to pay someone to do it."

"You can't pay for affection," Sophia protested stiffly.

"Oh, yes, you can," he murmured in a teasing tone.

She swatted him, and Tony laughed.

"Tomorrow," Drake said, sobering, "I'll come and get you and take you home with me, okay?"

She turned around and looked at Tony who was sitting in the backseat and smiled. "Oh, I finally get to leave the mausoleum?"

Tony smiled back.

"Your grandmother doesn't like to be pampered," Drake drawled.

"That is not true," Sophia shook her head.

"Really?" Drake raised an eyebrow. "Every gift we've given you, you've tried to refuse and most of the time, we had to take it back."

"Like what?" she demanded.

"The condo, for example," Drake said. He was smiling.

"Oh, well, that's natural. Why should I leave my little house in Brooklyn? I was happy there. I have memories in that house. It's your home. You boys grew up there. I wasn't going to give that up for some fangled dangled condominium here in this city of all

places, the city of crime and immorality!"

Drake sniggered. He pulled up outside the hotel. She opened the door.

"Hey...hey..." Drake protested. "Wait a minute there. I'll take you up to your room, Mama." Drake began to open his door, but she was already standing on the sidewalk.

"Nonsense! Tony, come sit up front now with your uncle. Give your grandmother a kiss goodnight."

Tony got out, kissed her and then got in the car.

Drake was out of the car. He stepped around to the sidewalk, insisting on seeing her upstairs. She gave in and took his arm.

"I'll be right back," he told Tony as the doorman opened the front door to the lobby of the lavish hotel and they were swallowed up inside.

Tony took a breath. Alone. Soon he would be alone with his uncle in the front seat of this car. Worse, he would be alone with Drake Russo in this car. The same Drake Russo he had always been infatuated with, who had just engaged in a conversation he probably wasn't supposed to hear, a conversation no matter how much he went over, still made no sense to him.

Ten minutes or so later, Drake was back in the car. "I wasn't too long, was I? I just wanted to make sure she was settled," he said, his voice deep and soothing.

Tony swallowed. "No. It's okay. It's been quite a night, hasn't it?" That was a safe topic, which could keep them talking for quite awhile.

Drake pulled out into traffic and headed for the freeway. "Yes, it has. I'm not a religious kind of guy

but...you know what I mean."

He kept his eyes on the road.

Tony moved closer to the passenger's door.

"You and my father...well, you're really close, aren't you?" Tony managed, his voice shaking.

"Yes," he said softly, signalling and then changing lanes. There was silence, then, "Tony, I hope you know what it means to your father to have you here. He never forgot he had a son. On your birthday every year, he used to..."

"Do you know I stood in line all night one time to get tickets to your concert in Toronto, and they were all sold out?"

He sighed. "I'm sorry," he managed. What else could he say?

"It's ironic, isn't it? My mother drove us, me and my friend Sam. She waited in the car. I couldn't get in to see my own father." Tony folded his arms across his chest, and then suddenly he started to cry.

Drake cast him a quick look. "Are you okay?" He reached over and patted him on the shoulder.

"Ya...I'm fine. I'm sorry." He felt like a real idiot. "I can't believe I missed all this...I mean, I suppose I'm jealous. Look at the kind of life I could have had...L.A. and rock concerts. Your son had all that."

Again, Drake remained silent. He wasn't sure what to say. Maybe there was nothing to say. He couldn't turn back time.

"I would have liked to have been a part of it, that's all," Tony sighed. "I watch you, Pepi, Angelo, Mac and

you're all so close. You...well, you have a history together. I'll never have that."

"Yes, you will," Drake replied softly. "You can start now, building that history. Your dad is still young. You'll have years together, to get to know each other."

Tony looked out the window. It had started to rain; fine little streaks of it spat at the windshield.

Drake switched on the wipers and then switched them off, sweeping the water away. It disappeared, then immediately came back again.

They didn't talk on the remainder of the drive to Frank's house. He had one of those long salmon-coloured bungalows that looked more like a sand castle than a house, but Tony loved it.

The rain had stopped. He got out, looked around and whistled. A Russo Brothers song was blaring out of the windows, which had been flung wide open. The lawn was perfectly landscaped. There were three big beautiful palm trees waving at them as they walked up the curb, well lit with several pink floodlights. Two white alabaster statues of King Tut guarded the front door.

Cars littered the driveway. Janet's car was parked beside Mac's motorcycle. There was a little green European car that looked like it was made from one of those kits. Drake told him it belonged to Pepi. In front of Pepi's car was the blue Chevy Coupe convertible that Frank drove with a license plate reading RUS BRO.

"We're paying for his retirement," Drake said out of the corner of his mouth with a smirk as he opened the front door and walked in. The hallways inside looked almost like the outside; as if they were made of sand. The walls were lined with pictures and awards. Tony stopped to examine each one as Drake walked on toward the sound of blaring music and laughter.

Tony suddenly hurried to catch up, passing door after door, room after room until they entered a huge sunroom, where they were greeted by Frank and the rest of the gang, all sitting around a heart-shaped indoor swimming pool.

The walls were made entirely of glass, and Tony let out an audible cry of delight as he noticed that there were palm trees, orange trees and lemon trees all around them. He looked upwards. The entire ceiling was a dome-shaped skylight with large high-tech speakers hanging from each corner. The floor was made entirely of white tile with little red diamonds and hearts painted carefully on each square.

There were twenty or so red leather reclining chairs scattered around the pool, with several little heart-shaped tables to accompany them. Each table had a built-in light, which gave the room a romantic glow. The moonlight and stars added just enough extra illumination to create the most perfect lighting.

Drake went and took a seat beside Pepi, across from Mac and Janet. He accepted a drink from Frank as Tony walked around the room, looking outside at the trees.

Suddenly his cousin came to stand beside him. Tony just realized that they hadn't spoken since he had said that stupid comment to him.

He turned around and gave him a rather shy look

when Angelo said hello. "Hi."

"Impressive, isn't it?" Angelo suggested.

"It's great. It's like nothing I've ever seen before. Like having a permanent picture on your walls, but it's real."

Angelo nodded and fell silent.

"Look," Tony said. "I owe you an apology."

"For what?" he blinked.

"For saying what I did about your dad...you know...him being responsible for..."

"Forget it. I have."

Both of them turned around suddenly as laughter erupted in the room. Mac had tried to push Pepi into the pool.

Angelo shook his head and grinned. He was about to go back to sit down when Tony placed a hand on his forearm. It was muscular, and hard under his touch. He withdrew his hand almost immediately and looked at him. It was odd, really. He knew that Angelo was only about a year older than he was, but yet he felt so young compared to him, so unsophisticated.

Angelo paused and met his eyes. "What is it?"

"I think I need to talk to you about a few things."

"Like?" He raised an eyebrow. He looked so much like his father at that moment that Tony caught his breath.

"Well, this is probably not the right time," Tony managed. "It's about something I heard or overheard, and I guess I...." He fell silent. What in hell was wrong with him? Couldn't he keep his big mouth shut?

He looked over at Drake. He was teasing Mac. Mac was getting pissed off, then Drake said something and

everyone laughed. Mac threw something at Drake, and Drake grabbed him by the collar. Everyone was laughing. Drake was the center of attention. No wonder. He was beautiful and charming and..."

"So, what did you overhear?" Angelo was asking him.

He asked him three times before Tony finally looked at him. "Oh...it doesn't matter. It's just stupid. It makes no sense and I think that...." He stopped. What was he saying? He wasn't stupid. He heard what he heard. He thought maybe he could just forget about it, but he couldn't. "Angelo, I thought I heard my dad and your dad...well, they were talking to each other, but not like brothers. Do you know what I mean?" He was shaking.

Angelo gave him a confused look. "Huh?"

Tony sighed. "Forget it, okay. Forget I said anything."

Angelo gave him another odd look, then walked over to the poolside and sat down beside his uncle Pepi, who was deep in conversation with Frank Carr.

After a few minutes, Tony came and joined them. What was the point of discussing what he had overheard with his cousin when he wasn't even sure he had heard it himself anymore?

Across from him sat Drake, who was still teasing Mac about something.

Mac was shaking his head at him. "Forget it, Drake. Forget it! No one wants to hear this story!"

Janet's eyes moved between her ex-husband and her ex-lover. "I want to hear it!" she protested loudly. Mac playfully reached over and tried to cover her mouth

with his hand.

Tony's eyes scanned the room as a distinctively sweet smell invaded his nostrils. Pepi and Frank were sharing a joint. Drake was letting one burn away in the ashtray beside him. In the corner of the room stood a huge punch bowl on one of those portable trays, half full of a purple liquid. Standing beside it was a glass dish piled high with expertly rolled joints.

Laughter rang out around the room as Mac stood up and threatened to throw Drake in the pool. "Stop it, Drake. You promised not to tell that story. Anyway, it wasn't just me. It was Pepi too."

Now Pepi was getting into it, and everyone started talking at once.

Tony nudged his cousin, who was practically the only one not involved in the conversation. He was sitting on the floor with his head leaning against the wall. His eyes were closed, and he was singing the words to a song that was blaring over the loudspeakers.

Someone knocked over their drink, and Frank jumped up, volunteering to pour them another.

Angelo's eyes snapped open and he stopped singing. "What?" He looked over at his cousin.

"What is that over there?" Tony inquired, pointing to the glass tray on wheels that Frank was now pushing closer to the pool.

Angelo sighed. "Dope," he said, and then closed his eyes again.

Tony clicked his tongue. "Hey, do you think I'm some hick just off the farm or something? I know what a joint looks like. I've smoked a few in my life. I meant

the purple stuff!"

Angelo laughed. "Thank God, you had me worried there for a minute. The purple stuff is Frank's Brew, at least that's what he calls it. Frank is Australian. They know how to drink down there. I tried it once. I was on my ass after two glasses, and I had a hangover for a week."

"I think I'm going to try it," Tony grinned and stood up.

"Do what you want. I'm not your mother," Angelo muttered.

"No," Tony smiled at him, actually taking the time to run his gaze over him, "you don't look like any mother I've ever seen."

Angelo's eyes widened a little, and then he shook his head and leaned back against the wall again, closing his eyes.

Tony dipped one of the cups into the bowl and raised the purple stuff to his lips. It was good, smooth. He picked two joints out of the bowl and shoved them into his pocket. He went to sit back down just as Drake stood up and began telling a story. Mac was still protesting. Pepi threatened to leave while Janet and Frank told them to shut up.

"So it was right before the concert and I told them, don't eat anything too spicy. It will upset your stomach. Mexican food in Mexico is not like the Mexican food you get in Los Angeles. Did they listen? No. Both of them had the runs like you wouldn't believe!"

Even Mac and Pepi were laughing now, embellishing the story with their own particular

recollections.

"Anyway, we had to put the concert on hold. I sent one of the stagehands off to get some of that stuff that stops the shits. It helped a bit, but every so often...in between numbers, either Pepi or Mac would disappear for a few minutes. At one time I think Johnny and I were totally alone out there on stage."

Everyone was laughing. Frank was laughing so hard, tears were streaming down his face.

Tony downed the last of the liquid and went to get some more. He lit the joint and sat back down beside his cousin, who was asking his dad to tell 'the one about the time you guys got lost in that little town down south'.

"Oh, ya," Pepi slapped his hands onto his thighs. "That man...remember...the one who said he'd show us how to get to Alabama?"

Mac started to tell the story.

Drake sat down beside his ex-wife and asked her for a cigarette.

His cousin had apparently heard this story often, because he added things once in a while like, "Ya, and remember the cage with all the squirrels the guy kept out back, Mac?"

"Oh, ya, that was wild," Drake piped in, puffing on his cigarette. The smoke curled up around his dark head like a halo.

Tony watched it and grinned. He drew in some smoke, held it deep in his lungs and then expelled it. Drake an angel? Maybe he was. Maybe he should ask him if he had a pair of wings under that T-shirt.

Pepi had taken over now, recounting how this strange man who promised to lead them to Alabama took them to his shack in the woods. "He told us he had bodies buried in the woods."

"Did he?" Tony asked, leaning forward, his eyes wide.

"I don't know," Pepi shook his dark head.

"Ya, and we didn't want to find out either," Drake added.

They all laughed nervously.

The story continued, bits and pieces of it. People drank and smoked. The music changed to some of the older Russo Brothers stuff.

"Remember this, Drake?" Frank asked as one of their old tunes from their first recordings came on.

"Shit!" Drake laughed. "That brings back some memories."

Mac shook his head. "Makes me feel old."

"You are old!" Drake threw at him with a smirk.

Mac stuck his tongue out at him.

"Before my time," Pepi grinned.

"Sing it, Drake," Janet urged.

A chorus of "Ya...Ya..." rang out.

Tony got up and moved closer to Drake. It was a song he remembered well called 'After Midnight'.

Drake began singing with the record. Others joined him. Tony leaned closer to his uncle and sang the part his father would have.

"Touch me...hold me after midnight.

In the dark, no one can see,

no one knows but you and me,

and when the light shines through my window,

you'll be gone baby...gone and I'll be lonely until after midnight. Lover, come back, don't leave me without your touch, yearning for you after midnight."

The song ended. Everyone clapped. Drake looked over at Tony suddenly and smiled. "You have a good voice, Tony."

"You're beautiful," he said softly. Drake's face seemed to swim in front of him.

Drake blinked, taken aback for a minute and then he laughed. "Tony, I do believe you're wasted."

"Ya," he slurred, "it's that purple stuff, but I wanted you to know that I love you, Drake."

"Thank you." He nodded. "That's very nice of you," he teased.

Angelo walked over to his father, then looked at his cousin, who was slumped against the wall. He shook his head.

Drake stood up and met his son's eyes. "I think we should lay him down somewhere. How did he get like that? Were you watching him?"

"Me?" Angelo jabbed himself with his thumb. "Since when am I his keeper?"

Drake shrugged. "I didn't say you were. It's just that...I thought you guys were hanging out, that's all."

"I have absolutely nothing in common with this kid," Angelo replied stiffly.

"Well, help me. We'll take him into one of the bedrooms."

Angelo groaned in protest and then went to take one

of his arms.

Tony looked up into one face and then another. "Two...there are two of you," he said. "The young one is going to show me...your mother said you'd show me."

Angelo and his father half carried, half dragged Tony down the hallway, laughing at his strange blabbing.

"Show me, then," he murmured.

"Show him what?" Drake asked his son.

"Damned if I know," Angelo replied dryly.

Just as they got him to the entrance of one of the spare rooms, Tony threw up—for the most part, on his cousin's expensive black boots.

"Goddamn it!" Angelo swore.

Drake started to laugh.

"You can laugh!" Angelo scoffed. "I bought these boots in Paris. They cost me a fortune."

"It will wipe off. Go on. I'll bring him in. Go wash that off. God, you smell," Drake smirked at him.

Angelo threw him a dirty look. "Wonder why!" he snorted, heading for the bathroom.

Drake chuckled. "Come on," he coaxed, turning his attention back to Tony. He pulled his nephew's arm further around his shoulder, hoisting him up a little higher. "We're going to need to get you cleaned up, too. I'll just lay you on the bed and then I'll get a washcloth," he said as he dragged him into the room.

With some relief, he dropped him onto the bed.

Tony squinted up at Drake. "I don't feel so hot," he moaned.

"I don't imagine you do," Drake gave him a faint smile. "I'll be right back, I'm going to get a..." Drake began, reaching over to turn on the lamp beside the bed.

Tony reached out and grabbed onto Drake's T-shirt. "Don't," he said softly. "Don't turn the light on and don't...don't leave me, okay?"

Drake stood perfectly still in the dark. Tony had a handful of his T-shirt in his fist. Drake's heart was beating hard in his chest. He tried to wrestle the material out of his hand, but Tony held tight.

Drake began to say something, and then he heard him whisper, "I want you. I've always wanted you. I know you think I'm just a kid...I know I have no...no experience but...it doesn't matter, does it, Drake? You can...ah, teach me everything." Tony's eyes were heavy, they were slowly closing.

Drake finally managed to release Tony's hold on his T-shirt. He swallowed hard, feeling a knot tighten in the pit of his stomach. Jesus. He stood there for a moment as if frozen, looking down at him in the dark. Had Tony really said that? He shook his head, as if that would take care of everything.

He forced himself to put one foot ahead of the other and leave the room. He walked into the bathroom.

Angelo had removed his boots and was furiously cleaning them. He looked up as his father entered the bathroom, noticing that his face was as white as a sheet. Angelo stopped wiping his boots. "What's wrong with you?"

Drake took a clean washcloth from the shelf in front of him and soaked it under the faucet. "I...I...nothing," he managed. He laughed a strained little laugh.

"You look sick. Are you sure you're okay?" Angelo asked him again.

"I'm all right," Drake snapped, leaving the room.

He stopped in the hallway. He hadn't wrung out the washcloth enough, and it was dripping all over the carpeting. He swore. Damn. He had done nothing to encourage him, had he? It felt odd, as if something wrong and unnatural was happening to him again. Johnny's son, young and beautiful, inexperienced, lying there pleading for him to teach him.

God, how easy it would have been to take advantage of that invitation. It appeared that he was to be given no peace, no periods of relief from the torment. At least with Johnny in the hospital, there was no possibility of sexual activity between them. Now along came his son, who makes it quite clear to him that he wants him. Jesus, he was sure now that someone with some higher power was certainly out to get him.

A severe headache was developing all of a sudden. He checked his watch. It was after four in the morning. He needed to sleep. He walked back into the washroom and threw the wet washcloth into the sink. Why go back in there and tempt fate?

He went to find Frank. Frank was laughing and talking with Pepi. Angelo was nowhere in sight. Neither were Janet and Mac.

"Drake," Frank said when he saw him approach,

"where you been?"

"I put Tony to bed. He's wasted. I think I'll stay here tonight, Frank. I'm beat." It wouldn't be the first time.

"I was going to suggest it. Everyone else has decided to crash here as well," Frank nodded.

"Everyone else gone to bed, then?" Drake lifted an eyebrow.

Pepi looked a little uneasy suddenly. Frank gave Drake a faint smile.

"What's with you?" Drake asked his youngest brother.

"Nothing. I'm going to hit the bed too. Goodnight," Pepi said. "I'll take the room on the end like usual," he added on the way out.

"Fine," Frank called after him, "Goodnight. Have a drink with me, Drake," Frank added, walking over to the portable bar where he kept his liquor.

Drake shook his head. "Naw. I've had enough, really. I've got a bit of a headache." He sat down, watching as Frank poured himself a scotch.

"This has been a hell of a night," Frank commented as he came to sit down opposite him.

"Sure has."

"I'm so glad Johnny is going to be all right and everything can get back to normal, you know."

Frank kept talking, and Drake let his words drift in and out, filtering though his tired brain. Back to normal...is that what he wanted, for things to be as they had been before the shooting? No. That's not what he wanted at all.

After a few minutes, Drake rose and announced to

Frank that he was going to bed. "I'm beat, Frank. Sorry."

"Go ahead. Sleep tight, my friend. See ya tomorrow," Frank raised a hand, draining the rest of his scotch.

Drake stopped as he reached the room where he had put his nephew. He walked in and stood at the foot of the bed. Silently, he walked around to the side and turned on the lamp.

Tony was fast asleep, his body curled up into a foetal position.

Drake studied his face. Memories of a seventeenyear-old Johnny came flooding back to him. He saw the bedroom they had shared in the old house in Brooklyn, the posters of Air Supply and Boston on the walls, the two beat-up old dressers their father had painted and repaired at least a dozen times, that tired old wallpaper with those ugly gold leaves hanging on the walls.

He closed his eyes. "Johnny," he whispered. Leaning over, he pressed his lips against Tony's forehead. Then he switched off the lamp and left the room, closing the door firmly behind him.

* * * * * *

Janet stretched in the bed and rolled onto her side. She was a little perplexed to find she wasn't alone, and then suddenly she remembered.

With a smile, she wrapped her arm around his waist and pressed her lips to his back.

Mac rolled over to face her, pulling her into his arms. "Hi, beautiful," he said softly. "Sleep well?"

She kissed him, and then nodded. "We should get

up. What time is it, anyway?"

He shrugged, his sandy blond hair in disarray. He looked like such a small boy suddenly. "Who cares," he growled, pulling her closer to him. "I want you."

She laughed, pushing away from him. "Mac, we have to...I mean, I wonder if everyone has left?"

She got out of bed and hurried to put on her blouse. She pulled it down to cover her hips and walked over to the window.

Mac heard her swear softly as she discreetly pulled back the curtain.

"You don't mean did everyone leave...you mean did *he* leave," Mac demanded.

"Who?" she asked sharply, leaving the window and looking at him.

Mac casually pulled another pillow under his head. He sighed. "You know who," he accused. "It's the same old story. Nothing's changed for you, has it? Even after all these years, you..."

"That's not fair!" Janet replied angrily. She marched into the adjoining bathroom and turned on the shower.

Mac jumped out of the bed and came to stand in the doorway. Janet avoided looking at him standing there without any clothes on.

"Janet, he has always stood between us. When you were married to him...well, it was understandable, but now? Drake doesn't love you in that way, Janet, and you're never going to get back together with him, so...."

Stop it!" she snapped. "I know that. I don't expect that from him. I just don't want him to think that...."

"You don't want him to think what, Janet? Should

we ask his permission to fuck? I don't think he worries about what you would think when he's getting laid!" Mac's eyes were angry.

"I didn't say that I needed his permission for anything, Mac. Now you're putting words in my mouth. We do have a son together, you know, and..."

"...a son who is fully grown, and probably knows more about sex than we do. Do you really think that Angelo would be traumatised if he found out that his mother was..." Mac threw up his hands. "Poor little Angelo, might have to send him for counselling."

"You're being ridiculous now. You're way off-base. Just drop it!" Janet peeled off her blouse and stepped into the shower.

He waited a second and then stepped in behind her.

"Then tell him," Mac urged softly from behind her. "Tell him now, tell him that you and I made love last night. Tell him about before...the affair. What are you afraid of?"

"Nothing. It's just that you're his best friend!"

"So what?" Mac replied. He placed his arms around her, pulling her back against him. His hands slid up her belly, cupping her breasts. "We have been friends for years. Our friendship survived your marriage to him, though it broke my heart. Drake can deal with this, I know he can."

She closed her eyes.

He caressed her, then lowered his mouth to her neck. She moaned as she felt his erection press against her buttocks.

"Beautiful," Mac breathed. "I love you, Janet. Don't

you know that? I've loved you since high school."

She turned around in his arms and began kissing him, running her hands down the length of his back.

When a knock came on the door of the bedroom, she pushed away from him. "Who's that?" she asked nervously, stepping out of the shower, reaching for a towel.

Mac swore. He turned off the shower.

She looked at him and placed a finger to her lips.

He gave her a dirty look, then got out of the shower himself. He ripped a towel off the shelf and then pushed the door of the bathroom wide open.

She went to grab his arm. He tore it away from her grasp. He ripped open the bedroom door.

Pepi stood there.

"What do you want?" Mac's blue eyes were stormy.

Pepi winced. "Sorry. I just wanted to warn you that everyone stayed here last night. Drake is in the kitchen having coffee, and..."

"You know...I don't give a fuck where Drake is. In fact, why don't you ask him to come down here!"

"No!" Janet cried out, holding the towel around her. She came running to the door. "We'll be right there, Pepi. Thanks."

She closed the door.

Pepi wished he hadn't said anything. He went back to the kitchen.

* * * * * *

Tony woke up with a super hangover and he had that 'God, what did I do last night' syndrome for real. He vaguely remembered Drake and his son bringing him down the hallway. He also remembered saying something to Drake, but he couldn't remember what it was. He only hoped he hadn't made a fool of himself.

He managed to sit up in bed. His clothes smelt sour. God, did he barf all over the place? He moaned. How could he have let himself get that wasted? He was embarrassed.

He got up out of bed, stripped off his clothes and took a shower. When he got out he felt a little better, except that his head ached like hell. He looked doubtfully at the pile of clothes he had thrown on the floor and shook his head. He couldn't wear those.

As if on cue, someone knocked at the door and then walked in.

Tony wrapped a towel around his waist and poked his head out of the bathroom.

It was his cousin. He looked as if he had just taken a shower himself; his long black hair was still damp.

"Tony?"

"I'm here."

"Didn't mean to disturb your shower," Angelo said, sitting on the edge of the bed. "Dad asked me to check on you."

Tony emerged from the bathroom, holding the towel closed around his slim waist.

Angelo looked at him for a second, then looked away. He had a nice body for a kid. He cleared his

throat and got up off the bed.

"I'm fine, but I need clean clothes. Think you could lend me something?"

"Well, I would, except I don't have any other clothes here. I'll ask Frank. Are the jeans okay?"

"Yes, I guess so, but I really do need a clean shirt," Tony murmured.

"Fine, I'll ask him," Angelo headed for the door.

"Angelo?" Tony said suddenly.

His cousin turned around. "Yep?"

"Did I...well...do anything stupid last night?"

"You threw up all over the place!"

Tony blushed. "Is that all?"

"Isn't that enough?" Angelo growled. "You puked all over my expensive European boots."

Tony laughed slightly. "I'm sorry. I mean...did I come on to anyone?"

"Come on to...I don't know. You didn't come on to me," he snorted. "Who would you have come on to...my father?"

Angelo was teasing, but then he noticed Tony's expression and his smile faded. "He's your uncle, Tony!"

Tony nodded. "I know that, but I haven't really...I mean, it doesn't feel like he is. Do you understand? My head tells me one thing, but my heart...well...and the rest of me...." He broke off. "Angelo, I need to talk to someone...well, maybe to you about some things."

Angelo narrowed his eyebrows. "I'm no therapist, Tony."

"I don't need therapy. It's about you having more

experience in some...well, some things than me. I never had anyone I could talk to before about some stuff."

Angelo could tell his cousin was having a difficult time talking suddenly. "You mean about what you supposedly overheard in the hospital between our fathers?"

Tony sighed. "I don't mean that. I mean...about me personally, but that stuff last night in the hospital. I did hear something which gave me the impression that..." He stopped, took a breath, then said, "Angelo, is your dad and mine...are they lovers?"

Angelo reached out and grabbed the doorknob. He suddenly needed to squeeze something, perhaps even crush it. He wished he was strong enough to break the gold handle he held in his hand. He wasn't.

Something boiled inside him. Was it anger, rage? He didn't know. He only knew that at this very moment he wanted to hit this kid, beat his face in until it was a bloody pulp until he couldn't see him anymore. How dare he? How dare he say such things out loud? Who did he think he was? Who in the hell? He just couldn't walk into this family after all these years and ask these kind of questions.

"Angelo? Are you all right?" Tony was asking him.

Angelo looked as if he were about to keel over. He actually swayed a little.

Then finally, his cousin looked down at his expensive boots and said without expression, "Don't be ridiculous. I'll go now and ask Frank about a T-shirt," he muttered. He left the room.

Tony's jaw hung open. He wasn't sure what had just happened here, but whatever it was, it wasn't good. He shouldn't have said anything. It seemed like he was always putting his foot into his mouth when it came to his cousin.

He left the bedroom. He knew he would have to at some point, so he might as well do it right away and get it over with.

He met Frank walking up the long hallway. "Hey man," Frank slapped him on the back, "how's the head?" He was holding three folded shirts in his hands. They looked brand new.

Tony sucked a breath through his teeth. "Not bad, just don't talk too loud."

Frank laughed. "Look, I got two T-shirts and a sweatshirt here. You can have them. They're left over from the Russo Brothers North American tour last year." He handed them over.

"Thanks, Frank, that's nice of you." Tony tucked the blue T-shirt and white sweatshirt under his arm and pulled a forest green shirt over his head. It had the picture of the four of them on the front. He looked down at it and grinned. "Nice. Where is everyone?"

"In the kitchen. Go ahead. I got to grab a shower. My housekeeper is in there with your uncles. She'll get you some breakfast, or just coffee if you want."

Tony nodded as Frank continued on down the hallway.

"Hey, Frank," Tony turned around suddenly and cast a glance at him.

"Ya?" he called back, pausing at the entrance of his

bedroom.

"What in hell do you put in that stuff, anyway?"

"I'll never tell!" He replied, laughing. "It's an Aussie thing."

Tony laughed, and walked into the kitchen.

Drake was talking to his younger brother as Tony walked in. They both stopped and looked at him.

"First, I want to tell everyone I'm sorry for whatever it was I might have done and don't remember, okay?" Tony came and took a seat at the stainless steel kitchen counter.

Pepi poured him a cup a coffee and slid it across to him. "You didn't do anything to me," Pepi laughed. "What about you, Drake?"

Drake met Tony's eyes. "There's nothing to worry about. It happens. Frank makes a mean brew."

"Angelo warned me, and I didn't pay any attention," Tony took a sip of his coffee.

"Anyway, Drake, like I was saying," Pepi turned his attention back to his eldest brother, "we could stop by, see Johnny and then go on to the studio. I think a few hours today would finish that side of the CD."

Drake sighed, and looked down into his coffee cup.

"If you're not ready, I—" Pepi began.

"No. I know we have a deadline to meet. Okay, let's aim for three this afternoon. I promised Mama I would check her out of the hotel today and bring her home with me."

"I can get Carter to do that," Pepi said.

Drake shook his dark head. "No. I'll do it. I promised her, Pepi."

"Okay...okay..." Pepi waved it away.

Tony looked expectedly at both his uncles. "Can I come...to, well...to the studio with you?" Tony asked.

Both Pepi and Drake looked at him. Drake shrugged. "Sure, but you might find it boring."

"No way!" Tony shook his head, excited now.

His cousin Angelo chose that moment to walk in.

"Can you be at the studio by three today?" Pepi asked him.

"Sure," Angelo replied. He avoided looking at Tony as he poured himself a cup of coffee.

"I want to thank you, Angelo, for helping out on the CD. I really appreciate it. We'll include your name on that song as credit. It will be a real boast to your career, you know?" Drake was saying.

Angelo shook his head. "So, I'm being dismissed after today, is that it?" He sipped some black coffee.

Drake looked at him and then narrowed his eyes.

"The great immortal king of rock and roll returns," Angelo threw up his hand and bowed elaborately from the waist, "and I get put in my place."

Pepi opened his mouth, but Drake put up a hand. "No, Pepi, let me handle this. Look, Angelo, I said I appreciate your input, but..."

"But now I'm to go and play outside with the little boys!" He sneered.

"Your dad didn't mean—" Pepi began.

"Oh, stop sticking up for him, Uncle Pepi. We all know exactly what he meant. Fine," Angelo said stiffly. "I'll finish what I started today, but I want credit on the CD, and on top of that, I want to paid triple scale for my part."

Drake sat back on his stool and folded his arms across his chest. "That's fair. I'll speak to Frank."

Tony looked down at the floor, feeling a little uncomfortable. The tension in the room was thick.

Angelo went to leave the kitchen, then turned and looked at his cousin. He laughed harshly. "And you thought you'd missed so much not being a part of this family," he scoffed. Tony raised his head and looked at him. "Notice all the advantages I have by being the son of the great Drake Russo!"

After he had left the room, Drake looked over at Tony and gave him a slight smile. "Don't pay any attention. He gets this way. He'll probably go running to your dad now, looking for someone to lick his wounds."

"And will he?" Tony enquired.

"Take his side?" Drake's eyes widened for emphasis. "Of course he will. Angelo is your dad's precious little boy. Just wait until we get to the hospital...speaking of which, are you coming?" He looked from one to another. They all stood up.

"Does Mac know what's happening?" Drake walked toward the door. "Someone should tell him."

"I will," Pepi said. "Go ahead. I have my car, I'll meet you there."

Drake nodded. "Say 'bye to Frank for me," he called after Pepi. Then he turned to Tony and asked if he was coming.

Tony followed his uncle outside.

In the car, Drake turned on the radio. The Eagles

were doing 'Hotel California'. Drake turned up the volume. They both began singing along with the Eagles.

"God," Drake said after it was over, "I love that song. It's such a classic...like 'Stairway to Heaven'. I always wished I'd written that one."

"'Wasted Moonlight' is a classic now," Tony said as Drake turned the radio back down to a semi-normal volume.

"'Wasted Moonlight'," Drake smiled softly. "God, I was so young when I wrote that."

"Everyone knows that song. It's as good as any classic." Tony began to sing,

"Standing here alone,

the moon so bright...

wasted...wasted moonlight.

Oh, baby, turn me on,

turn me on tonight.

Save me. Can't stand that wasted moonlight."

Drake glanced over at him. "You're good for my ego, you know that? And you have a voice like your dad."

"I do?" Tony blinked, and then smiled proudly.

"Ya. 'Wasted Moonlight' was a good song, but I still don't think it..."

"Hey, listen," Tony cut him off. "I'm not kidding you, Drake. I mean...you guys...I defy anyone to show me a band that has been on top as long as you guys have and has had as many hits."

"The Rocks," Drake drawled in reply.

"Okay...okay, but they're a lot older than you guys and...they still make records, but when was the last time they had the best selling album or a number-one hit? When is the last time....?"

"Okay...okay..." Drake laughed. "You've convinced me. You're my most loyal fan. I'm flattered. Thanks, Tony."

Tony allowed himself the luxury of looking at Drake while he drove. Yes, he was beautiful. There was a maturity about him, the way he smiled, the look in his eye that turned him on. That sense of self-assuredness could only come with age. Maybe the greatest part of his appeal was that he was thirty-six years old. Tony could imagine all the experiences he had lived in those years, the lovers he had, the people he had met.

He tore his eyes away from him and tried to focus on other things. He was confused, a little frightened and perplexed by his feelings. They seemed to overwhelm him at times. There were things about this family that he didn't understand, yet he didn't feel as if he were really in a position to ask questions.

He wanted to ask him about the conversation he had overheard between him and his father in the hospital but he was afraid, afraid that he would react exactly like his son had. He really regretted having told his cousin what he had earlier. Angelo probably thought he was crazy and maybe he was right. Maybe he would just have to learn to keep his mouth shut.

* * * * * *

Sandy Newton sat on her sofa in front of the television, half listening to what the announcer was saying. She already knew that Johnny had come out of the coma and the latest word from the doctors at the Los Angeles hospital was that 'the prognosis for his full recovery was looking optimistic'."

Drake had been released from jail without much fan fair. Overall consensus: the shooting had been accidental. Surprise, surprise. No one who really knew Drake and Johnny would ever believe that Drake would intentionally harm his precious little brother.

There had been no interviews with any member of the Russo Family. The only pictures of the family that appeared on television were the ones of them before the accident, except for that incident where Sophia had been accosted by reporters at the airport. Security had been tight.

The media had not been very successful in exploiting this whole thing and after a while they gave up, because public opinion began to turn against them. The Russo Brothers were loved by millions of people all over the world. When the media presented them in an unfavourable light, the general public responded with outrage. Some people even threatened to boycott certain magazines and newspapers if reporters didn't stop trying to dig up dirt on their favourite rock group. Overall, there was an outpouring of sympathy and compassion for the Russos. Fans were prepared to forgive them anything.

The announcer was now saying that later on in the week, Frank Carr, manager for the Russo Brothers Band would be making a statement concerning the band's future. He went on to state that early this morning, a spokesperson for the Russo Brothers record company

made an appearance on a popular Los Angeles Radio station to assure the fans that the Russo Brothers were again working on their next CD, which would be available in time for Christmas.

Sandy lit another cigarette. Who in hell cares, she thought. Tony had been gone now for almost three weeks. There had been no word from him at all. You would think that he would pick up the phone to let her know he was all right...or at least Janet would.

She had called Janet's number a dozen times, almost letting it ring and then putting it down just before it did

She had considered contacting Sophia, but changed her mind. First of all, she wasn't sure how to get hold of her and secondly, she really didn't need to hear her lectures.

She got up off the sofa and stubbed out her cigarette. When Sophia had gone on and on over the phone about lies and the damage they cause, it had stunned her. Something in her voice...well, it gave her a little chill. It sounded like the old bag was speaking from experience.

Anyway, after she had hung up with her, she had considered the whole situation. Tony would be of age soon. Actually, next week he turned eighteen. If she sent the police after him, he'd only leave again when he was legally able to do so, maybe before that. If he wanted to see his father, she couldn't stop him.

Sandra walked around the living room. She lit another cigarette and wondered how Tom was. They had a huge fight again last Monday night. Tom had accused her of still being in love with Johnny. She denied it. She told him that she hadn't meant it when she had told him that before.

Then he said, "You still want to punish him for leaving you, don't you?"

She didn't answer him. He turned around and left her standing in almost the same place she stood now.

Sandy closed her eyes and out loud, she cried out, "Do you want an answer, Tom? Here's my answer. Yes, yes, goddamn it, I want him punished. He doesn't deserve his son. I gave him that son, carried him nine months, delivered him in pain and agony, and he abandoned me. He deserted me because he couldn't bear to be without his son of a bitch goddamned brother! He stopped loving me...worse than that, he never did love me. He used me to give him a son. He used me because he wanted me to save him and I couldn't. I couldn't, goddamn it, so he left me!"

Sandy started to cry. Now Tony had left her too, just like his father. He would despise her for lying to him and Johnny would tell him what an evil woman she was.

Sandy took another drag on her cigarette. She stopped crying. She had over five thousand dollars in her savings account. She could leave her employees, Alice and Sondra, to run the bookstore while she was gone. She had to see her son. She had to talk to him face to face and make him understand, see her side of things before that family poisoned his mind against her forever. She couldn't stand the thought of losing her son. She had lost the only man she would ever love, and now Tom. But she wouldn't lose Tony.

She knew she was going to have to compete against the glamorous, exciting world of rock and roll for her son's attention. She knew all about that world. It was different from any other. Like a magnet, it would draw you and hold you there in spite of the fake pretentious bullshit of it. It was a world which ate you up and when it had used you, it spit you back out again.

She had to go to him, not only so she could tell him her side of the story and salvage what was left of their relationship, but so she could protect him from that wonderland his father lived in. She wouldn't allow Tony to be hurt, even if it meant she had to pretend to make amends with the people she despised most. Even that was a small price to pay.

It was going to take her a few weeks to get things together. Then she would fly out to Los Angeles. After seventeen years, she would see her best friend. She would also see Johnny. It was time for a family reunion.

* * * * * *

Johnny held out his hand to Drake as he walked in. Drake took it in his and Johnny pulled him down to him, pressing his lips to his brother's cheek.

Drake stood up straight and allowed Tony to move in front of him, closer to his father.

Johnny smiled at him and reached for his son's hand. "Hey, I missed you guys. Did you have fun at Frank's last night?"

Tony blushed, and his dad squeezed his hand.

Drake grinned but didn't elaborate, except to say, "Ya, we celebrated the awakening of Sleeping Beauty."

"Funny, Angelo was here earlier. He didn't stay long." Johnny sighed.

"Complaining about me?" Drake lifted an eyebrow.

Johnny smiled and then looked at his son and winked. "Naw. He actually came to tell me how privileged he feels to have such a fine, distinguished and gorgeous father."

"Sure," Drake snorted, "and Martians just landed at L.A.X."

"They did?" Johnny's eyes widened.

Tony was laughing now. Drake muttered something under his breath.

"So, are you going to the studio or what?" Johnny asked Drake, who had strolled over to the window.

"At three."

"Good. Tony and I can finally spend some time by ourselves," Johnny declared.

Tony opened his mouth to say that he was planning on going to the studio, but didn't.

Drake turned and met his nephew's eyes across the room.

Tony nodded. "I'm going to stay with my...with Dad," he said.

Drake smiled and nodded back.

"What?" Johnny looked from one to another. "I'm missing something. I get it...you were going to go to the studio to watch them work on the CD. Good, go ahead. That's fine. I..."

"No. I can go another day," Tony said. "Can't I, Uncle Drake?"

"Of course, any time you want."

"Good, that's it, then," Johnny murmured, settling his head down into his pillow.

They made small talk for a while and as pleasant as it was, Tony thought that the conversation seemed a little strained. Drake asked his brother if he needed anything. He didn't. Drake began listing things; personal hygiene items, reading materials and so on and so forth. Finally, Johnny gave in and admitted he could use a few cosmetic items, along with a Walkman and a couple of paperbacks. He told him what cassettes he wanted him to bring with the Walkman; one was The Russo Brothers, Top Hits of 80-84. Drake jotted all this down and said he'd drop it by tomorrow.

It was quiet for a while, and then Drake told him he had to go. "I've got to pick Mama up from the hotel today. I'm taking her home with me."

"She'll like that," Johnny responded.

Drake had remained by the window almost the whole time he had been in the room. Johnny's eyes followed him as he came closer to the bed now. Tony felt his father's hand tighten on his.

"I'll see you tomorrow, okay? I better go. I promised to be at the studio by three, and by the time I get Mama...." he broke off, raised a hand. His lips curved into a ghost of a smile. "Get well, okay."

"Ya," Johnny whispered.

Then he was gone, and his father released his hand. He turned his face away.

Tony leaned over him. "Dad, are you all right? Are you in pain?"

"Yes, I'm in pain, but it's not what you think." When

he turned his head toward him again, there were tears standing in his eyes.

"Why are you so sad?" Tony asked him.

"I don't know. I just am. It's the artist in me. We're a tragic bunch." He laughed now, a laugh that was surprisingly young and boyish.

Tony smiled.

They didn't speak for a while.

Tony sat down in a chair near the bed. "You were lying, of course, about Angelo not complaining, weren't you?" he mentioned suddenly.

Johnny gazed at him and then nodded. He sighed. "It's a long story. I understand Drake's point...where he's coming from, but I think he's being a little too hard on Angelo. Angelo would be a great asset to the group. He's young, and he would capture a whole new generation of fans. He's almost as good a guitarist as his dad and he's got a great voice. Onstage...he's dynamite. He's good-looking, he knows how to smile, how to move, he's his dad all over again."

"So, what's the problem?" Tony shook his head.

"The problem is that Drake wants him to experience what its like to struggle in the industry. He wants him to appreciate success and not to take it for granted, but the whole thing is wearing thin now. I mean...Pepi walked right into the group, even if Drake did put him through hell before he let him in. Poor Pep. But I think Drake is also a little...well...I don't want to say jealous, because God knows Drake can hold his own in this business. I think he's feeling his age a little when it comes to his son. He sees himself eighteen years ago,

you know? It's kind of like people who don't like to see their aging parent...only in reverse?"

Tony nodded. "I understand what you're saying, but Drake doesn't need to feel that way at all. He's got something his son doesn't have yet...he's got that maturity. Those years are a real turn on. It's sexy as hell. Drake is one hell of a sexy man. I mean, Angelo is gorgeous, there's no question. In a couple of years...he's going to be...well...torture to look at, but now although all the necessary parts are there, he doesn't have that look in his eyes that Drake has, that...finish. Maybe that's the right word."

Tony stopped. He realized what he had just said.

Johnny was lying very still. His jaw had gone slack and his eyes had widened a little as he listened to his son.

Tony fell silent.

"Tony," his father said, "did you just say all that?"

"Ya, I did. I...sorry, I don't know what came over me. I-"

"Are you gay?"

The question weighed heavy in the air between them.

"Why...why...do you ask me that?" Tony stuttered. He looked down at the floor.

"Because," Johnny replied gently, "only a gay man would describe another man the way you just did."

There was a long silence, then Johnny motioned to Tony to come closer to the bed.

Tony avoided his father's eyes, but gradually he drew nearer to him.

Johnny noticed the tears glistening in his eyes. "It's all right, you know," he said. "Have you told anyone?"

"No. I mean..." Tony stopped and then met his father's eyes, light brown and filled with compassion. "I'm not sure that I am. I guess I'm struggling with it. I thought about talking to Mom...eh...years ago, and then I decided not to."

"That was a wise choice," Johnny stated, clearing his throat. God, Sandy was the last person you wanted to discuss homosexuality with, especially after their divorce. Johnny let out a sigh.

"Why did you say that? What did you mean?" Tony drew his eyebrows together.

"Your mother walked in on me once when we were...well, it wasn't going well with the marriage. We should have never got married, your mother and I. I blame myself, really. I think I thought she could save me...marriage would somehow take away...oh, it doesn't matter." He turned his face toward the window.

"Ya, it does matter. Please...Dad, explain this to me. Tell me why she never wanted me to know you. Why did she lie all these years?"

He looked at his son again. God, all the time he had missed. If he had any regrets at all about his break-up with Sandy, it was leaving his son. If any one deserved an explanation, Tony did. He was the greatest casualty in this war, but how could he tell him that his marriage failed because he was passionately in love with own brother? No. It would have to be as close to the truth as he could get without...

Tony was speaking again, interrupting his attempt to arrange his thoughts before he spoke them. He was asking now why he didn't go to court, demand visiting rights at least. "Didn't you want to see me?" he asked, his voice sounding shrill now, and deeply hurt.

"Of course I wanted to see you, Tony. You were my son, my little boy. I loved you...I love you."

Tears threatening, Johnny prepared himself to continue. He desperately wanted...needed to convince his son that he didn't abandon him, at least not willingly. He also didn't want to turn Tony totally against his mother. He was walking a tightrope here. "I wasn't fair with your mother. I had feelings for...well, sexual feelings for men. Later on, I discovered that I was bisexual, although I think I lean more toward men. Anyway, your mom got pregnant in high school. We ran off to get married because her parents hated me." Johnny was laughing.

"Why did Grandma and Grandpa dislike you?" Tony asked innocently.

"Why? Well, I was working class, Italian Catholic. I didn't have a regular decent paying job, and I knocked up their daughter before I put a ring on her finger."

"Oh," Tony gave his father a comical smile. "But you must have loved Mother at one time, didn't you?"

Johnny shook his head sadly. "No. That's why I want you to try and see your mother's point of view when I tell you this. She fell in love with me in good faith, and I guess I believed that I would grow to love her in my own way, but I used her. I thought she could save me from my...being gay, and she couldn't."

There, that wasn't so bad, Johnny thought. It sounded good. Lots of gay men in the closet marry in hopes that a woman will help them repress their hidden sexual desires. It certainly was a hell of a lot more acceptable than telling him what he really hoped she would save him from.

"So Mom caught you with a man?" Tony asked.

Johnny nodded. This part wasn't a lie, at least. "The details aren't important." God, he couldn't even remember the guy's name now. He just knew it had happened backstage in the dressing room of some club they were playing. Sandy had decided to surprise him by showing up at the show. It turned out that she was one who was surprised when she saw a man with his head between her husband's legs.

"She asked for a divorce then?" Tony sat down in the chair beside his dad's bed.

"No. I asked for the divorce. Your mother said we could work it out, but there was no working it out. Our marriage had been a mistake. Anyway, she didn't want the divorce, and we had a terrible fight. She told me if I walked out, she would never let me see you again. You would never know that I was your father."

"But you could have fought her!" Tony protested. "You were a star, you had money, clout."

"Not back then. I had nothing. Drake and I shared a room and ate dinner out of a can most of the time. We didn't have a nickel between us. Even when we made it, what chance would I have had? By that time, I had no idea where you were and if I would have sued for custody or visiting rights, she would have painted me

as a screaming queen who would be totally unsuitable to raise a son. Besides, you were better off in the long run. You had a good childhood, didn't you?"

Tony nodded. "Yes. My stepdad was great. I had friends, lots of fun. Mom was a good mother. She really was. I mean, if it wasn't for all the lies and..."

"Tony, forgive her. She acted out of hurt and pain. She did the best she could. I'm not like your Uncle Drake. I wouldn't have made a good father, Tony. I've led a pretty wild life, one lover after another, parties, booze and of course the coke. It almost killed me. You know, of course, that I was in rehab?" He raised an eyebrow.

Tony sighed. "It was in the fan magazines. But why Dad, why did you abuse coke like that when it almost killed you?"

"To kill pain. I live with a lot of pain, Tony, pain I'd rather not talk about just now." He cleared his throat, and then reached out to him.

Tony got up and walked over to the bed. He took his father's hand.

"Now, you're here," he was saying, "and that space in my heart that was empty, is filled. I love you, Tony, I really do. I always have. Let me try and make up for those years, okay?"

Tony bent over and felt his father's arms around him. He let his father kiss his cheek and smooth back his hair.

There was too much emotion suddenly. Tony excused himself and left the room. Air, he needed air.

When he came back in, Johnny smiled at him. "Are you all right?"

Tony nodded, and then a thought occurred to him about something his father had said before he'd left the room. "Dad, what did you mean about not being a good dad like Drake? I mean, he led the same life as you did, didn't he?"

"Yes, but he always handled it better than I did. In fact, he handles everything better." Johnny gave Tony a lopsided smile. "It's funny, really, even though Drake and I are brothers, we're not very much alike."

"Really. How so?" Tony asked, sitting down again.

"Well, in the way we handle emotion, for example. Drake encases his heart in iron, I wear mine on my sleeve. He holds things in until his insides ache and then everything erupts like a volcano, while I let mine out in spurts with short periods of rest in between. I have to kill my pain or it kills me. Drake arrogantly pushes his away like some great warrior who truly believes he can defeat the undefeatable foe. He denies it exists."

"Then you are truly the opposite halves of the same coin, aren't you?" Tony nodded thoughtfully. "It's what makes the Russo Brothers Band what it is."

"Yes, I suppose you're right. I'm the heart of the band and Drake is the head." He paused suddenly as if reconsidering and then said, "Drake is everything." These last three words were practically whispered, as if Johnny was reciting a sacred prayer in a church.

Tony closed his eyes.

"So," Johnny seemed to come back to reality again,

his voice full of life, "have you talked to your cousin about your sexual feelings? He would be the right person to talk to."

Tony started laughing. "What is this? Is Angelo the guru of homosexual love or something?"

Johnny's eyes widened. "Guru?" It was Johnny's turn to laugh.

"Well, you're not the first person who suggested I discuss my sexuality with my cousin."

"Well, I guess it's because he's probably just been through those kinds of feelings not long ago, that's all. Drake talked to him about sex as soon as he began to ask questions. I know Angelo has...you know, he's not a virgin, and I think he's very openminded and laid back about the whole thing."

Tony nodded and then shook his head. He would be embarrassed to talk with Angelo. He'd much rather discuss it with a stranger.

"But you don't want to talk to your cousin about this, do you?" Johnny announced, watching his son's face.

Tony shook his head again.

"Why, because he's a potential lover to you?"

Tony's eyes widened. "No! I mean...he's nice and everything. He's great-looking and well...to tell the truth, I thought about asking him to...you know, show me stuff, but changed my mind."

Tony's face was red. Johnny laughed and then felt guilty about it. Poor kid. He had forgotten what it was like to feel this uncomfortable about sex.

"I can understand the logic of that," Johnny

murmured. "It would be safer and probably less stressful, but not really such a great idea overall."

"Why not?" Tony asked.

"Because the first lover is always special."

"He wouldn't be my first," Tony objected. "I've had a few girls in high school that..."

"Not the same," Johnny smiled. "If you really are gay, then your first will be a guy. You don't ever forget the first one. It could get complicated."

"It wouldn't be like that," Tony replied.

Johnny gave him a doubtful look, and then changed the subject. He hoped this idea about asking Angelo to be his first lover was one of those fly-by-night things. Even if on a practical level the idea made sense, something about it made him uneasy. When Tony left to get something to eat in the cafeteria, Johnny was relieved. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep, but with sleep came dreaming.

In the dream, he saw Tony. He was crying. He looked older, different, more like a guy from L.A. He was swearing at him. "Why didn't you warn me, Dad? Why didn't you tell me about the curse? I love him desperately and my heart is breaking. I don't think I can live another minute without touching him! Why didn't you talk me out of ever letting him touch me?"

"I tried to warn you, I tried," Johnny cried into his pillow. "But there was nothing I could do. It was beyond my control. It is beyond everyone's control! I'm sorry...I'm sorry...it's the way it is. There has never been any escape, no relief from the pain. I'm sorry."

Someone was shaking him all of a sudden, saying his

name.

Johnny opened his eyes.

It was Drake.

"You were having a dream," Drake gave him one of his concerned-older-brother looks. "And what are you so sorry about, anyway?"

"Huh?" Johnny struggled to sit up. "Sorry...oh...I had a bad dream, Drake, a terrible dream." He reached out and clutched onto his sleeve.

"What was it?" Drake reached around and straightened Johnny's pillows.

"Tony fell in love with Angelo, and he was so angry at me. He blamed me for it. He was so heartbroken, and..."

Drake's eyes widened in horror, and then he looked angry. "Johnny, what in hell is wrong with you? Tony and Angelo now? Is this some warped fantasy in your head or what?"

Johnny saw the anger flash in his Drake's eyes. "You don't understand. Tony is thinking of asking Angelo to help him...." he stopped. What was he doing? Tony wouldn't want everyone to know this.

"He's thinking of asking Angelo to help him do what?" Drake demanded.

"Doesn't matter. I must have misunderstood. Anyway, it was just a dream. Forget it."

Drake nodded, giving him a suspicious look. He didn't stay very long after that. He dropped off a few things he had promised to bring him, made some small talk about the recording session that afternoon and left.

He ran into Tony at the elevator.

"Oh, hi," Tony said, blushing a little when he saw his uncle. "Are you leaving already?"

"Ya. I've got a dinner engagement," he said briskly.

"Oh, with that...woman...eh...Francine Thompson?"

He realized as soon as the question was out of his mouth that it was really none of his business. Drake told him politely as he stepped onto the elevator that yes, he was dining with Francine.

Tony wished him a nice evening as he disappeared behind the elevator doors.

* * * * * *

Everyone threw a little surprise birthday party for Tony on his eighteenth birthday in his father's hospital room. It pleased him greatly. The days flowed into weeks and Tony spent most of his time with his father, who now was allowed to take small walks down the corridor each day.

Sophia spent every morning at the hospital with her son. Carter brought her in the limo at nine o'clock and picked her up again at noon. Tony usually arrived around eleven and spent the afternoon. He and Sophia were practically the only visitors his father had, aside from his Aunt Janet, who visited almost every day.

Drake and the others were busy in the recording studio every day, trying to finish off the recording of the new CD. Tony hadn't seen any of them for at least two weeks, including his cousin, who was living in the same house.

This particular morning, only a week away from

Christmas, Tony asked his aunt where his cousin had been hiding.

Janet sat at the kitchen table in her tattered terrycloth robe, sipping on her coffee. She smiled at him. "Oh, you've noticed, have you? Well, let me tell you, when he does come home, it's well past three in the morning, and then he's usually gone by the time I get up. He's really tired."

"They're working all those hours in the studio?" Tony asked, his eyes widening as he went to pour himself some coffee.

"Well, they have been working every day on that CD, but as near as I can find out, Angelo's playing with a bunch of guys at some club downtown at night. So I guess he goes right from one thing to another." She shook her head and lit a cigarette.

Tony swallowed some coffee. "Uncle Drake told me I could go to the studio if I wanted to. I'd really like that, but I thought it was more important to spend time with Dad. Dad is better now, don't you think?" Tony glanced at his aunt.

She smiled. "Yes, Tony, and you know, you should go to the studio. Johnny wouldn't mind. Just tell him you want to take a day off to go to the studio."

"And I'd really like to go out and hear Angelo play. Do you know where he's playing?"

"Nope. No idea, and he won't tell me because he probably doesn't want me to hear him." She stood up and dumped out the coffee that was sitting in the bottom of her cup. She poured some fresh.

"Why not?" Tony laughed.

"Because I'm his mother," she grinned. "Anyway, ask him if you can catch him. He probably wouldn't mind if you went."

Tony was just about to leave the kitchen and head up for his shower when he heard his aunt say, "Tony, just a minute."

He stopped and turned around. "Ya. What is it, Aunt Janet?"

"Next week is Christmas, and I was wondering if you had thought about contacting your parents...going home, maybe?" She raised an eyebrow.

"If it's inconvenient for me to stay here, I..." he began, looking down at his bare feet.

"No, Tony, I love having you here, and you're welcome here and at your uncle Drake's or uncle Pepi's. Family is family. It's not that. I just thought that you know...it being Christmas, and I am getting a little concerned about you missing so much school."

"Aunt Janet, I don't want to go back. I want to stay here in L.A. with my father, and I want to go to school here." There. He had said what had been on his mind for the last few weeks.

She had suspected as much. "Well, with your dad being an American and you being born in New York there shouldn't be any problem with immigration, but Tony, you will have to talk to your parents about this." Her voice softened as she approached him and placed a hand on her nephew's shoulder. "Don't you miss them at all?"

Tony nodded. "Yes. I miss my dad...or the man I thought was my dad. He was good to me and he'll

always be my dad, but Mother...I don't know. I just can't get over the fact that she lied to me. I mean, Dad didn't tell me either, but I think he wanted to, you know? Dad...Johnny Dad," he smiled, "he told me not to be so hard on Mom, but I...I don't want to see her now. Can you talk to her?"

Janet closed her eyes and moved away. "I can try if she'll talk to me, but I can't guarantee anything. You were eighteen two weeks ago, so..."

"Thanks for the gift again," Tony smiled at her. His aunt had opened a bank account in his name in which she had placed a thousand dollars so that he would have some 'pocket money', she said.

She waved that away. "I'll do what I can, but you must promise me that you will go back to school here."

He nodded. "I promise," as he headed out of the kitchen.

* * * * * *

Francine yawned and stretched. The early morning sun was stabbing her in the eyes. She moaned, rolled over and then smiled as she slid her arms around Drake's slim waist. She buried her face in his soft black hair and felt him stir.

She raised her leg, lifting it over one of his muscular flanks. He murmured something about her being a tease and then growled as he rolled over and captured her mouth with his.

He crawled on top of her and wrapped her long legs around his waist. He drove into her hard and deep, causing her to dig her nails into the firm flesh of his back as her tongue merged deep in his mouth.

"Like that?" he breathed, pulling away, lowering his head so that he could take one of her nipples between his lips. With his hand, he tortured the other one while he slowed the motion of his hips, pulling almost all the way out of her and then squeezing himself slowly back in.

She moaned when his hand went down between her thighs to find her clitoris. She was squirming now in his arms.

He laughed deeply. "Should I stop?" he teased.

"Bastard," she muttered, her eyes closed as she arched her back, urging him to fondle her breasts again.

He looked down at her with smouldering eyes. "Beautiful tits," he told her, making her all the hotter. He played with them, torturing her again as his fingers did their magic below and she was coming, the tension building and building to that supreme moment when her body began to shake and shudder and ah...yes...

He began to thrust harder now. They were crying out together. "Ya...ah...oh...God...ya...like that...now!"

Drake cried out one more time, and then he lay still on top of her. He felt her fingers caressing his hair, waiting for his pulse to return to normal, thinking that this was what he called great early morning sex. He smiled at her as she moved her hands down over his buttocks.

"You have a great ass," she told him. More

importantly, she thought, he really knew how to use it.

"Thank you, Madame, and you have..." his eyes twinkled as he kissed one breast, then the other, "great tits."

"I know...I know...you told me," she grinned, getting out of bed. "What time is it? You better had not made me late for court!" Her voice attempted a sternness that she just couldn't seem to carry off.

He looked at her from across the room. "You have a good excuse."

"Sure, I'll tell the judge, 'Sorry, but I was getting laid and I lost total track of time'."

"I'm sure he'd understand if you told him who I was," he gave her a sheepish grin, and lay back naked on the bed.

She laughed. "Oh, ya, sorry, I was being laid by Drake Russo...you know...the rock star." She paused and glanced at him. "And for God's sake, get some clothes on and stop lying there like that, or I'll be late for court."

Francine went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. He came in behind her. She could see his reflection in the mirror. Beautiful. He was so beautiful that it should have been a crime to look as good as he did. The guy could stop traffic.

He came up behind her now and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her back into his embrace. She could feel his erection against her buttocks as his hands slipped around and began to caress her breasts again. Her head went back against his shoulder and she moaned against him as he lifted her hair off her neck

and placed his lips there.

He took her there like that, from behind, forcing her flat against the tiled wall as he lifted her off the floor with his arm, supporting her hips on one of his thighs. It got wild and they struggled to keep thrusting, frustrated by any interruption. Drake kept shifting his weight in order to maintain the connection between them but it was getting to be impossible.

He finally let out a howl of rage in her ear, and then took her down on her knees.

She was down on all fours. He quickly got behind her. He was thrusting now deep inside her, his hands reaching out to gently slap her breasts. He was driving her hard now, so hard she reached out with a hand to keep her from smashing into the wall, but it was good. It was so good. The best sex she'd ever had. He was driving her out of her mind.

She cried out, "Harder! Harder! Fuck me!"

One hand played with her breast while the other reached in between her legs.

He was big and hard, and he stayed that way. It was incredible. He was incredible. He kept going and going until she came not once, not twice but three times and then he came right after, saying a name...some name that wasn't hers, and for a minute she thought she heard him say, "Johnny."

After they had showered, dressed and had coffee, Francine walked Drake to his car. She contemplated asking him what name he had called out in the bathroom, but as he reached over to kiss her goodbye, she put it out of her mind. God, he was a man with a

mouth made for kissing. She could kiss him for hours.

He finally broke away from her, saying that he was late for the studio. She stood in her driveway and watched him pull away from the curb, then went to check if she had locked the door of her five-room condo. With him around, she was easily distracted.

She climbed into her own car and headed to her downtown office. It was supposed to have been only dinner. She had invited him to try one of her famous pasta dishes a few weeks before, but he declined, telling her that he was very busy with the recording of the Russo Brothers new CD. She gave up, thinking maybe he didn't want to come. Then last night, she tried again. She caught him at home around five o'clock. He told her he could come over right away. He hadn't eaten, he was starved and he didn't feel like cooking for himself.

They ate at seven, drank two bottles of wine and were making love by nine. They made love in the living room, went to the bedroom, slept, woke up and made love again, slept and then made love again this morning. He was delicious. There was no question about it. Of course, she knew she was going to regret this in a little while, but not today.

* * * * * *

Janet was just about ready to leave to go to the hospital when the phone rang. She waited, holding her breath as the machine beeped and his voice came over the speaker.

"Janet, if you're there, pick up. I know you're avoiding me. You can't keep doing that forever. Come

on. I have a few minutes before I have to be back. Pick up the phone. I need to talk to you."

She reached over for the phone, and picked up. It was the third time he had called and left a message since the party at Frank's over three weeks ago. She knew that he was right. She couldn't put this off any longer.

"Mac?" she said.

"Thank God, finally. Janet, we need to talk. I don't know about you, but I think we have a pretty good thing, and I...."

"Mac, we don't have anything," she said, gripping the phone. Her hand was trembling. "We had great sex that night and it was nice, but you know that there can never be an us, and it has nothing to do with Drake directly."

"What bull! What in hell is that...nothing to do with Drake directly..."he muttered. "Then what you're saying is that it has to do with Drake indirectly?"

"It's too close to home. It would be uncomfortable, Mac. You're a member of the band, you're Drake's best friend and I was his wife. I'm the mother of his son, for God's sake."

"You want me to quit the band? I will, if that's what it's going to take."

His voice was low and even. She could tell he was dead serious. It shocked her.

"You want me that much...to leave Drake and the guys...your career?"

"I want you that much."

"I could never ask that of you, Mac. I wouldn't want

that," she protested.

"Then let me tell Drake. If Drake comes to you and gives us his blessing, will you marry me?"

"Mar...marry you?" Janet gasped.

"Marry me. I love you, Janet. I can make you happy. You deserve to be happy...to have someone who truly loves you. I've loved you forever, Janet. I don't intend to let you go, because I know deep down you feel the same about me."

Janet sat down beside the phone. She couldn't speak.

"I'm going to talk to Drake today," he said. "I've got to go. I love you, Janet. I'll call you later."

He hung up before she could say anything. Marry him. Marry Mac. Yes, oh yes, she'd marry him in a minute, but she didn't want to come between Mac and Drake. They had been the closest of friends forever. She wasn't sure how Drake would react to the idea of her and Mac being together. She just knew that she had been fighting her feelings for him for a long time now. She did deserve to be happy. Mac was right. She had to give up on the fact that one day Drake would come back to her. He was never coming back.

She stood up on shaky legs and grabbed her car keys. She was taking Tony to see his father. Maybe she should ask Johnny about it. If anyone knew Drake's mind, Johnny did.

When Tony came downstairs, they left immediately for the hospital. Both of them were quiet in the car, lost in their own private thoughts. They were both planning to make major changes in their lives. Both were afraid, both were hopeful.

This concludes Episode Four of The Russos.

Stay tuned next month for the exciting Episode Five:

- Tony and Angelo make love.
- Janet asks Johnny's advice about marrying Mac.
- Tony comes on to Drake senior.
- Tony's feelings are all mixed up.
- Angelo is hurt and angry.



Meet Tony Newton:

7 ony Newton is the estranged son of Johnny Russo who lives in Canada. He has always worshipped the Russo Brothers band. When he finds out who his father is, he comes to Los Angeles to be with him. Tony comes out in Los Angeles and is preparing to spread his wings. He is attracted to Drake Russo, even though he believes him to be his uncle, and is feeling some strong attraction also to his gorgeous cousin, Angelo.

D.J. Manly

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..."

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