



With warmest love and gratitude  
for the ongoing support of  
David, Jenn, Adam,  
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## **CHAPTER ONE**

DEL stood in a sea of scarlet red caps and gowns, receiving congratulations from professors, friends, and acquaintances, his eyes searching for the one dark-haired, muscular figure who meant more to him than anyone else. Only one person could possibly make this day truly complete, yet he was nowhere to be seen amongst the crowds of students and families celebrating together.

“Wendell!” A bellow heard from a short distance away grabbed his attention. Del spotted his father and mother winding their way through the massive throng of bodies that had attended the Boston University graduation exercises. Despite the distance, he could see their broad, toothy smiles.

Today was the moment of truth. He would finally speak frankly with his father and mother, no longer concealing the issue at hand. It was too important to him, to Joey. Del had promised Joey he would be totally honest with his parents about everything so he could start his new life with a clean slate. It was more than just his life; it was now going to be their life together. No more lies, including those of omission.

Del continued to look through the crowd as he awaited the pat on the back his father would certainly offer in his inimitable style. Where was Joey? They were supposed to meet immediately after the program.

As his father approached, Del braced for the inevitable wallop. “Wendell, my boy,” followed by the firm and expected manly smack, “your mother and I are so proud of you.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Del offered the best smile he could muster for them.

“Sweetheart, you look so handsome in your cap and gown. The color goes so well with your fair skin and beautiful blue eyes. Let’s step to the side so we can take some family pictures.”

“Mom, I’ll be with you in a minute. There’s someone I want you to meet.” Del continued to gaze amongst the bodies of celebrants, hoping his six-foot tall stature would aid his search, but there was still no sign of Joey. If he could only make contact with those deep brown eyes that gave him confidence and the feeling that he was important and valued!

Feeling his cell phone vibrating in his pants, Del hoisted up the awkward gown and dug into the pocket of the black jeans he had chosen to wear underneath.

Looking at the caller ID, Del felt a combination of concern and relief. “Hi. Where are you?”

“I got sidetracked by my mother and sisters. Then a couple of professors came by to share what a great talent I am with my mom. It’s fucking embarrassing.” Joey chuckled.

That laugh was an aphrodisiac, and Del could actually feel his cock twitch just listening. Del’s nervous tension began to wither away as he connected with the beautiful voice he’d grown to love. “Okay, well, I’m with my parents now.”

“Are you going to have lunch and tell them?”

“I kind of hoped you’d be with me when I did.”

“Do you think that’s wise?”

Del remained silent, knowing that Joey was much more savvy when it came to communicating anything to anyone, whether it was through words or music.

“Look, talk to your parents. I know your dad can be difficult, but....”

“Difficult!” Del began to tense, gripping the cell phone tight enough to cause his hand to turn red.

“Okay, he’s a shitload more than difficult. But you’re his only child; he’s not going to turn his back on you. Besides, I’m sure your mom will have a say in the matter.”

“My mother has never had a say in anything when my father’s in the room.”

Joey laughed. “Stay cool. I’ll meet you at four o’clock at the student union—our booth in the back.”

Del stood quietly, deeply disappointed that he wouldn’t get to see Joey and spend the afternoon in a group. Instead he would remain uncomfortable, left alone with his parents.

“Are you going to be all right?” Joey’s concern was evident and somewhat comforting.

“Sure. I’ll see you later, at four. Can you come to my room instead? I’m not sure what condition I’ll be in after the big confession.”

“Sure thing. Four o’clock—sharp.”

Del laughed. “Does that mean you’ll show up by four-thirty?”

“I’ll be on time. I know this is an important day for you.”

“And you.”

“I wasn’t referring to graduation.”

“I know; neither was I.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

Del turned back to his parents, who had been chatting about the best way to get to a specific restaurant that they both liked for lunch.

“Everything set with your friend, honey?”

“It’s all set, Mom.” They started walking toward the exit of the immense field that was rapidly emptying of students and their guests. “Listen, Mom, Dad—there’s something we need to talk about at lunch, something important.”

“Well, my boy, I would imagine there’s lots to talk about now that you’re going to be an important mover and shaker in the business world. I have a few important things to bring up too.” Richard Mathers winked at his son and Del was taken aback, a sick feeling developing in the pit of his stomach, wondering what his father could possibly have in mind. Whatever it was, a surprise from his father would surely throw a wrench into Del’s planned revelations.

He felt like he was being smothered and wished, not for the first time, that he had any father other than the one he was about to join for lunch.

## CHAPTER TWO

THE restaurant that the senior Mathers had selected was an elegant bistro tucked into a quiet corner at the farthest end of Newberry Street, away from the Boston University area. The tables had comfortable space between them, unlike most others in the vicinity. It gave the diners the impression they truly couldn't be overheard when having a private conversation.

Del could not have been more pleased. He knew that sharing his post-graduation plans would incite his father's anger, at the very least. The hairs on the back of his neck began to rise as the three ordered their meals and were left on their own to talk.

This was the moment when Del would show he was his own man and demonstrate to Joey just how dedicated he was to their future, out in the open. It was time to leave behind the closet he'd built whenever he was in the presence of his parents.

Del took a deep breath to gather all his strength. "Dad, Mom, there's something I'd like to tell you about my plans for the future."

"That's great, son, but let me go first. Your mother insisted that I hold off until all your school obligations were



completed before we gave you the big surprise.”

“But, Dad, I really need to tell you—”

“Wendell, I’m sure your plans can wait, especially after you hear this.”

Del cringed inwardly, hating his given name, but he nodded, defeated once again in his attempts to take control of any interaction with his father. It was the same old story, already leaving him with a bitter taste in his mouth and a growing sense of dread about what he was about to hear.

“Look, son, I’ve been the President and CEO of Mathers Textiles for twenty-five years.”

“I know; you took over when Grandpa died.”

“That’s right. But I don’t want you to sit and wait in line until I have a heart attack.”

“Dad, that won’t matter because—” Del attempted to interject, hoping to sideline the offer he realized was in the making.

“Now, now, be patient and let me finish.”

Del nodded, wishing that he’d been given the same courtesy.

“I want you to be a part of Mathers Textiles—not starting in the goddamn mail room like my old man forced me to do, but starting as a junior executive. That way, in, oh, say ten years’ time, when I’m ready to retire, you’ll be ready to take your rightful position as—”

“Dad, stop!” Del balled up his fists, trying to stay calm

and still get his point across before things went too far.

“Now, don’t interrupt me, Wendell.”

“You mean the way you always interrupt me?” Del’s parents sat stone still, shocked by their son’s response.

“Please, honey, don’t be rude to your father.”

Del took his mother’s hand. She was always so soft and quiet, wanting to keep the peace and, in turn, never disturbing it, either.

“Mother, Father, I’ve been trying to tell you—I’m not staying in the Boston area. Hell, I’m not even staying in Massachusetts.”

“What do you mean, you’re not staying? Mathers Textiles is just outside Salem. Of course you’re staying.”

“No, I’m not.” Del looked at his parents. His mother’s face revealed her concern. It was evident that she understood his need to get out from under his father’s ruling manner. However, Richard Mathers was far less agreeable.

Turning red in the face, Richard banged one hand on the table. “How dare you disrespect me and my generous offer? I could start you in the mail room, just like I—”

“I don’t need your job, and I don’t want it. I have a position lined up with a really progressive investment firm in New York City.”

“Well, why the hell would you want to go there? I’m sure you’ll make more money working within our family’s business, and you won’t have to deal with all those crazy city

people.”

“Dad, they’re not crazy—they’re just different than you’re used to.”

“And I suppose you’re used to all these nuts from going to your big university.” Richard turned to his wife. “I told you we should never have let him go to such a goddamn huge school. We should have insisted on something smaller with a better class of students and professors.”

“I love this school. It was just what I needed.”

“For what? To learn how to disrespect your parents and all that we’ve given you? Or do you just enjoy mingling with all those disgusting minority groups all over the campus?”

“It’s called diversity, Dad, and I loved getting to know lots of people.” Del knew it was now or never, so he pushed forward. “Speaking of all those diverse groups of people, I need to tell you about me. I’m—”

Seeing the waiter approaching, Del’s mother interrupted. “Oh, here’s our food. Now doesn’t that look lovely.” Then she turned to her husband and put her hand over his. “Let’s just enjoy the rest of our meal peacefully and celebrate Wendell’s achievements over the last four years.”

“Fine, dear, just for you.” Richard looked at Del. “But this discussion is far from over.”

“But, Mom, Dad, there’s something else I need to—”

Del was shocked to feel his mother grab his knee under the table and squeeze it hard. “Not now, honey.” She shook her head. “We don’t want our food to get cold.”

Del slowly nodded his agreement as the realization struck. She knew—he wasn't sure how long she'd known, but she knew. Not sure whether to feel relieved or betrayed by her avoidance of the subject, Del slowly picked up his fork and began to eat, not tasting a single bite as he anticipated how he was going to tell Joey that he had once again lost the battle of the closet.

AFTER lunch, as Del and his parents parted, his father grumbled about his ungrateful son, and Del assured him that he had to try and make his own way in the business world. The two separated with another brick in the ever-growing wall that existed between them.

When his mother leaned in to kiss him good-bye and wish him luck, she whispered, "I know, but he's not ready to hear it." Then she brushed her fingers across his cheek and backed away.

Looking at his watch, Del realized he needed to run if he was to get to his room before Joey arrived. Since the crowds from graduation had dissipated as seniors and their families slowly left the campus, Del was able to make his way rapidly.

Arriving at his room with five minutes to spare, he washed up and changed into a T-shirt. Just a few minutes later, the intercom sounded to announce Joey's arrival. Del buzzed him in and opened his door in anticipation.

Joey ran up the stairs two at a time, entered the room and immediately closed and locked the door behind him.

Without any words, he grabbed Del and pulled him into a tight embrace, kissing him hard and firmly. Both men moaned into the kiss.

“Joey, I have to tell—”

“No talking.” Joey covered Del’s lips with his again. Their mouths opened and tongues pressed together, fighting for dominance.

Joey brushed one hand through Del’s strawberry blond waves and began to make quick work of unzipping his pants with the other.

“Ahhh, Joey.”

“What do you want?” Joey lowered Del’s pants and underwear and then rapidly removed his own, kissing Del all the while.

“Want you—want you inside.”

“That’s what you always want. Slut. Say it; tell me.”

“Ahhh, more.” Joey was rubbing Del’s cock and started to massage his balls while pressing the fingers of his other hand over Del’s pulsing hole.

“That’s not what I want to hear,” Joey whispered and then nibbled on his lover’s earlobe.

“Please, please, please,” Del could barely stand and was beginning to lose himself in all the sensations. Every part of him was tingling with need, want, desire.

“Please, what? Say it for me.” Joey continued to tease Del’s cock and hole while rubbing his own painfully hard

erection up and down against Del's thigh. Del's head fell back: so close, *too* close.

"I'm your slut, only yours; please fuck me now!" Del grabbed Joey and pulled him in, once again crashing their lips together, the heat building to an almost unbearable extreme.

"Bed." Joey pushed Del onto the small twin bed that came with every dorm room. It creaked and groaned with the weight of the two, but the sounds were drowned out by those of the lovers. Their deep moans were all that could be heard as Joey pulled out a lubricated condom, tore it open, and placed it on his dick.

Del wrapped his legs around Joey, wanting to feel and meld with him. He loved this, loved them together and leaned back, overwhelmed with the sensations that were overtaking his entire body as Joey pressed inside. The two wanted to go slow, but their bodies betrayed them as Joey thrust into Del.

"Fuck, Joey, fuck."

"Are you okay?" Joey paused.

"No—yes —more—keep going, keep going!" Del was lost in the moment. His eyes glazed over looking into Joey's face and his fingers dug into his lover's shoulders as Joey plunged in and out, hitting that special spot within over and over.

The sensations overwhelming him, Del's orgasm ripped through his body and he released all over his and Joey's chests. As Del's channel tightened, Joey simultaneously

released his seed into the condom.

The two clung to each other and lay still, drained and sated, until Joey pulled out. Del involuntarily whimpered from the loss and his need to stay connected.

“I hate when you have to pull out,” Del whispered as he clung to his partner. “Maybe someday....”

“We’re not ready yet.” Joey looked Del in the eyes and brushed the hairs from his sticky, sweaty forehead.

“But, why? We’re monogamous. We’re about to move in together.”

“And we don’t want to rush anything.” Joey moved his index finger through the come on Del’s chest and then slowly licked it off.

“God, you are so beautiful, and when you do things like that, it starts to get me hard again.”

“We’re beautiful together. You’re so fair and....”

“You have the most perfect olive complexion. I love your skin and I love running my fingers through your thick, dark hair. Shit, I’m getting hard.”

Joey laughed softly. “Just keep loving it all and we’ll have our time.” He leaned in and chastely kissed Del once more. “Especially now that your parents know you’re gay and that we’re moving in together.”

“Well, my mother knows.”

“What do you mean by that?” Joey sat up abruptly. “What about your father?”

“I tried to tell them.” Del took a deep breath. “I told them about my job and moving to New York. That went over like a lead balloon.”

“I would imagine, but get to the rest—you promised.”

“I know and I tried, but my mother wouldn’t let me.”

“Your mother what? How could she stop you?”

“Believe me, she almost stopped the blood flow in my leg, trying to stop me from saying anything. Before we parted, she admitted that she knew but that my father wasn’t ready.”

Joey started pacing back and forth in the room, like a caged animal. “That’s just fucking great. We wanted to start our life free, clear, open, and honest, and you let your mother slam the door in your, in *our* faces.”

Del stood up and held Joey’s face in his hands. “Please, I know I promised and I really tried. Please don’t leave me. I need you; I love you. Please say we’re still going forward together.”

Del could see Joey’s expression soften along with his adamant resolve. This had been a sore spot between them from the beginning. He knew that coming out of the closet had been hard for Joey too, but he also knew that they couldn’t live a truly happy life together if it was a lie.

Joey shook his head. Del sensed he wanted to leave, to end their life of lies, but with one look into his eyes, Del knew that Joey wouldn’t turn away. They were hopelessly in love with each other, and he began to nod his resignation.



“Okay, we’ll move in together as planned. But you have to tell him soon, or we’ll never be free of this looming shadow.”

The two stood naked in the dorm room, surrounded by packed boxes. Del leaned into Joey and hugged him, murmuring into his shoulder, “Thank you. I can’t live without you.”

Joey held his lover, boyfriend, partner. “I know, and for fuck’s sake, I can’t live without you either.”

## CHAPTER THREE

“I GUESS it’s lucky that I got a Jeep for graduation. At least we have something to pull the U-Haul.” Del was trying to do or say anything to keep the conversation going. It was almost two hours into the drive to New York City and Joey had barely uttered a word other than offering a random direction as they changed highways.

*Del recalled the conversation he’d had earlier that morning. He still couldn’t believe his mother’s revelation the day before.*

*“Mom, I wanted to talk to you after that bombshell you dropped on me at lunch yesterday. How long have you known?”*

*“Long enough, Wendell. I just hoped I was wrong.”*

*“Why?”*

*“Because I want you to have a good life, a life without complications. This will only cause you misery and heartache. I don’t ever want to see you in pain.”*

*“But I’m not in pain. I’m really happy. I have a great life, a terrific new job, and a partner who really cares about me. How could that ever lead to pain?”*

*“Please, sweetheart, I have your best interests at heart*

*and so does your father. This would upset him so much. Please think about the choice you're making. You can always come home."*

*"Mom, it's not a choice, it's who I am... and I am heading home—with Joey."*

Del knew it would be up to him to break the ice. Between his mother and his father, he wasn't sure who was worse, but the person he had to focus on was the one sitting next to him. The one he was in love with.

"Look, I know I fucked up by not telling him, but my father makes it impossible. Shit, you should have heard him when he learned I wasn't going to work for his company. You would have thought I cut his throat. It looked like he was going to pop a vein."

Still more silence. Del understood his partner's anger. They had big plans. Joey was going to write music and Del would sing.

"Okay, you want to hear from me, you'll hear from me."

"There's a rest stop up ahead, let me pull in so we can really talk." Del maneuvered the awkward vehicle into the parking lot, taking the length of two spots at the far end so they wouldn't be disturbed or distracted by other travelers getting in and out of their cars.

Silence prevailed for another minute or two, but Del remained patient, knowing that Joey was trying to formulate his thoughts. Despite his artistic nature, Joey was also gifted with common sense—another thing Del loved about him.

Finally turning to Del, Joey took his hands and held them. “Do you know what first attracted me to you?” Del shook his head, afraid to utter a sound and somewhat embarrassed by the thought that he was attractive at all. “It was your voice and the way you carried yourself.”

“I was in drag at the GLC Campus Night Club.”

“I know. But I could tell immediately that you weren’t like the other guys, putting on all that make-up to add to an act that was stale before it ever started. You were covering up to give yourself a persona that would allow you to feel free to do what you do best.” Then Joey kissed Del on the cheek and winked at him. “Well, second best, but I didn’t know that back then.”

“How come you never told me this?”

“Because I kept hoping that whatever made you hide behind all that shit would go away. That you’d eventually feel free to sing and dance without the mask, without the fear that was obviously holding you back.”

Del lowered his head. How could someone know him this well? He’d let Joey in and this amazing man could see him so clearly—clearly enough for the both of them. Unfortunately, only one was brave enough to move forward.

“Del, you’re a beautiful person inside and out. And what’s more, you’re so fucking talented. I hate that you’re going to get a job that chains you to a desk all day.” Joey wiped away the tears that began streaming down the strawberry blond’s face. “I hate that you’re heading for the bright lights of the big city, and rather than giving it your all

to audition twenty-four seven, get seen, get an agent, you're going to sing my songs, our songs, in a darkened drag club."

Del looked at Joey, his eyes reddened and resigned. "I just can't. Not yet."

"Is this still what you want? If not, we can end this right now, go no further." Del could hear the hitch in Joey's voice.

"Yes, of course I want this, *us*! How can you even ask that? I want to take off all the make-up. I want to sing in front of an audience of people who want more than just to get their dicks up my ass. I want to bring your songs into the mainstream world and let them be heard as they should."

"You know there's only one way to make that happen." Joey kissed away another tear from Del's face.

Del nodded. "If you'd just seen my mother. I don't know why she stopped me. She's always trying to make peace, but maybe she thought it was too much for one day." Now he began rambling, "Maybe I should have started telling them sooner. I know you wanted me to, but I'm just a fucking coward."

Joey pulled Del as close to him as he could, despite the gear shift that rested between the two. "You're not a coward, but the longer you live with one foot in the closet, the easier it'll become to stay there." Joey placed his hand under Del's chin, raising his face so they were looking in each other's eyes. "I can't live in a closet at all—even for you. You know how hard it was for me to come out to my family, but I did it and survived."

"You almost lost them. They didn't talk to you for

weeks.”

“But eventually they did. They may not fully accept it, but we’re talking and they’re trying. Del, we wouldn’t be this far if I hadn’t said a word.”

Del nodded once again, knowing that Joey was right and he was just using any excuse to deny the truth. “I know I have to tell him. Just give me a little more time.”

“I’ll give you time, but don’t let it destroy us. Even more important, don’t let it destroy you and your goals. You can’t follow your dreams if you keep hiding.”

Del tentatively turned to kiss Joey, looking out the car window cautiously first. Joey laughed. “This is Connecticut; it’s almost like being in Massachusetts, only without your father around.” Then he leaned in and kissed Del tenderly on the lips. “I’ve never been this patient in my life, except when I was working on a song that I knew would be worth the effort.”

Del smiled, cheeks riddled with dry tears. “I guess that means you love me,” he whispered.

“I guess it does. Don’t get me wrong—you’re definitely worth waiting for, but I can’t wait forever. Then I’d be betraying myself.”

“I know.”

Del restarted the Jeep and pulled back onto the highway, heading for New York City, hoping that he would somehow gain the confidence and courage to face his future rather than destroy it.

## CHAPTER FOUR

“I CAN’T believe this is the *amazing* apartment that my cousin found for us. It’s a far cry from the mansion you’ve been living in all your life.”

“I may have lived in a mansion, but the first time I really felt at home was the first night we slept together in my dorm room.”

Joey chuckled. “And we didn’t even fuck that night. We just kissed, jerked off, and slept.”

“I never felt more at home.” Del ducked his head.

“You are such a romantic, but I guess we both are in our own ways.” Joey squeezed Del’s shoulder.

Joey looked around the apartment again. It was a tiny one-bedroom apartment with a small utility kitchen and one full bathroom on the fourth floor of an eight-story walk-up.

“At least we’ll get exercise every time we come and go.” Del continued, smiling, “And there is a lock on the front entrance to the building, so it’s safer than some of the other places where we could have ended up.” He walked behind Joey, placing his arms around his waist and leaning against his shoulder. “Most of all, it’s our first home together. It’ll always be someplace special.”

“I guess. It’s a good thing we don’t need those fucking bars on the windows since we’re on the fourth floor. That helps with the, dare I say, ambiance.” Joey chuckled, staring at the stained kitchen sink. “But you have to admit it is a....”

“Dump.” The two laughed aloud together. “We’ll fix it up. Aren’t queers supposed to be good at this shit?”

“I’ve practically lived in your dorm room for the past two years—we’re in trouble if we’re supposed to rely on you to make this a showplace.”

“Hey, we’re in New York City. I have a day job that’ll pay for this place, and we get to live just two blocks from Christopher Street in the West Village. It’s not all bad.”

“Come here.” Joey grabbed Del, turned him around and kissed him deeply. “Now that our stuff is here and the U-Haul is gone, let’s christen this place and make it our own.”

“That’s a brilliant—”

Before Del could finish his sentence, Joey had him on the hardwood floor, tugging off his own T-shirt and then whipping Del’s off so quickly that it seemed to take less than a second. This was all Del needed: Joey loving him and having the opportunity to show his love in return. He pulled Joey’s face down to his and began to kiss him on his lips, neck, earlobes, cheeks—anywhere he could reach.

“Oh God, Del. You are so fucking hot. I can’t get enough of you.” Joey pulled off the sweatpants he was wearing in one smooth motion, releasing his hard, reddened dick and then unzipped Del’s jeans, yanking them down and removing them.



Joey turned Del over and lifted his ass in the air. “Look at your beautiful hole. It’s waiting for me, wanting me.” Joey dove in to lick his target, pointing his tongue at the entryway and pressing. He alternately laved the puckering hole and pushed his tongue into it, not letting up for several minutes.

“Ahhh!” Del was lost. He felt his cock dripping on the floor and began to pump it, but Joey smacked his hand away.

“Not yet. Wait.”

“Oh, God, I can’t. Want you now.”

Joey reached out and found a condom and small lube pack. Then he kissed and licked between Del’s shoulder blades, eliciting moans with every touch. When the condom was in place and fully lubed, he leaned down further to kiss Del and share his taste.

“Please, Joey, please, I want you, want you in me, on me, now.” As soon as he felt Joey enter, Del pressed back, letting him know he was more than ready.

The two grunted as they thrust together hard and fast. The lovers were once again claiming each other and their new home in the most natural way possible. Del knew he wouldn’t last; he’d been waiting for this moment. The sweat from moving all their boxes had just added to his desire. Joey wrapped one hand around Del’s leaking cock and tugged twice, eliciting a cry of, “Yes!” as Del spilled his come all over Joey’s hand and the floor.

Plunging in just a few more times, harder and faster with each thrust, Joey stilled, emptying the results of his

intense passion into the condom. “Fuck.”

The two collapsed in a heap on the floor and remained there, regaining their breath slowly, exhausted from both the heat of their orgasms and moving into the apartment.

All too soon, Joey pulled out to remove the condom and then held Del as he literally whimpered from the loss. “Shhh, there will always be another time.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“Someday without the condoms?”

“Someday.” Joey brushed his lips over Del’s.

Del hoped that was a promise he could count on. Joey had become everything to him, and he couldn’t face the thought that there would ever be a day he wouldn’t be there.

“Come on, baby, let’s go try out our new shower. We really need it now.”

“You’ve never called me *baby* before.”

“A new life together, a new way to show you how I feel. Does it bother you?” Joey looked into Del’s face, brushing the matted hair off his sweat-riddled forehead.

“If anyone else said that, it might, but from you it makes me feel...” Del blushed.

“I know. Now let’s go shower so we can start to put some of this shit away.”

“And clean the floor.”

Joey laughed. “And clean the floor, although I like seeing you, make that *us*, there. This is our place, together.”

Del couldn’t help thinking, as Joey took his hand to lead him to the bathroom, that *baby* and *together* would now be two of his favorite words.

## CHAPTER FIVE

“HEY, do you want me to fix you something for breakfast?”

Del heard Joey calling from just outside the bathroom door as he began to shower. This was to be his first day in the business world, and he felt a little bit shaky—enough so that he was sure his partner had sensed the anxiety. If he hadn’t been so concerned about his well-manicured hands, he would have bitten off all his nails by now.

Joey was as far from domestic as Del could imagine, but he was warmed by the thought that he would care for him, knowing how nervous he was entering the world of high finance. The truth was, for Del, this was a paycheck—a fucking good paycheck that would supply him and Joey with the money they needed to survive until they could make it on their talents alone. “That’d be great,” he called from under the spray. “But you’d better make it dry toast and tea. If I eat any more, I just might puke.”

He heard Joey burst into laughter. “Consider it done.”

Del scrubbed his body raw trying to gather the confidence to meet with not only his new supervisor, but the big boss of the agency, as well. He tried to focus his thoughts on the plans that followed his day of investment banking. He was much more looking forward to their meeting that

evening with the owner of The Wine Cellar, a trendy, upscale gay nightclub that offered high-quality drag shows on Friday nights.

Del knew that Joey wasn't interested in the money he would bring in but understood the need to develop a nest egg, so he hadn't given him a hard time when he'd insisted on taking the *day job*.

"Come on, you're going to miss the early train and then you'll get stuck on the sardine run."

Del ran out to the kitchen and shoved a piece of toast in his mouth, taking care not to get crumbs on his new suit jacket.

"Wow, you look so hot, I just may have to make you late." Joey brushed his fingers over the lapel of the blue pinstripe jacket and kissed Del tenderly on the lips. "Mmmm, toast."

"You know why I'm doing this, right?" Del couldn't help feeling like he was somehow letting Joey down by taking the easy way to money.

"Look, you aren't interested in my theory that struggling artists work harder to achieve their goals." Joey turned around and poured a cup of tea in a travel mug, handing it to Del. "I'm okay with that as long as it doesn't interfere with our ultimate dream."

"You know how much I want to help you bring your songs to the public. They're amazing and you should be heard by everyone, not just the sleazes in a gay bar."

Joey placed his hands on Del's shoulders and looked him in the eye. "First of all, those guys aren't sleazes. They know what they want, and they know where to find it. Second, as soon as you do whatever it is you need to do to build your confidence, then you can perform in mainstream clubs where your real face will be seen and admired. The publicity and word will go out from there."

Del kissed Joey gently. "I want that, I really do. I'm just not ready. Maybe after I make enough to know that I don't have to lean on my parents as back-ups, I'll be able to, well... take off the make-up."

"In the meantime, tonight you'll get all decked out and we can audition. Once we're in the door, we'll be on our way."

"You really have so much faith in us, in *me*. Sometimes I wonder why you're so damn patient."

"I guess because I fell in love before I knew what a coward you were." Del glared at Joey, who held up his hands. "I'm just kidding. Shit, you really are tied up in knots over this new job. Is it really worth it? You know that I've always looked forward to earning those points as a starving artist."

Del saw the smirk across his lover's face and smacked him gently on the arm. "Goodbye. You're a lousy influence on us fine, upstanding gay folk."

Joey grabbed Del and pulled him in for a firm kiss, his tongue breaking through and tasting his partner. "That should hold you for the day."

“It’ll probably keep me hard during the subway ride.”

“Good, something to keep your mind on what’s really important.”

Del stuck his tongue out playfully, took his mug of tea, and left for the office. Walking down the sidewalk towards the subway station, he began to relax, enjoying the late spring weather.

After the ride to midtown Manhattan, Del arrived at his office building with twenty minutes to spare. His first introduction to the investment firm was to be a meeting with his new supervisor as well as the manager of the entire branch of the prosperous company. Del’s job would be number-crunching and following the trends, something he found easy but rather dull; however, the pay would be enough motivation to keep him focused. It had been no different in school. His favorite college courses were those he had taken in the School of Performing Arts, yet he had also excelled in the School of Management. It was a strange dual major, but he’d made it work.

When Del reached the twentieth floor, he was ushered into a conference room and offered coffee, which he took gratefully, and Danish, which he politely turned down. One thing he had no intention of becoming was a fat, flabby man. Nothing could be less appealing, especially when he had to get into a slinky, sequined gown on Friday night if the evening’s audition went off as planned.

Shortly after he arrived, two men dressed in simple, yet elegant business suits came in to join him.

“Welcome, Wendell; it’s a pleasure to have you with us. I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know you at our last interview.”

“Hello, Mr. Reynolds. I’m glad to be here.” Every time he heard the name Wendell, Del thought of his father, a successful businessman with whom he wished he could become closer.

“Call me Roger now that we’ll be working together.” Then he turned to the other man in the room who looked to be about fifty years old—similar to the age of Del’s father. “Wendell, this is Mr. Frank Brown, the general manager of this particular office of The Investors.”

“Hello, sir, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Same here, son. I’ve heard a lot of good things about you, and your grades at Boston University certainly tell a very good tale.”

“Thank you, sir, I tried to do my best.”

“Well, it would seem so.” Mr. Brown sat down at the table, and the other two followed his lead. “I do have one question, young man.”

Del could feel the hair on the back of his neck begin to prickle with sweat. “Yes, sir?”

“Why us? Your father is a major mover and shaker with a huge and well-known company on the Fortune 1000. Why didn’t you go to work for him?”

It would seem that Frank Brown did his homework where his employees were concerned. Del wondered just how



much his employer knew about the extra-curricular activities he took part in during college.

“I want to be where the action is and make it on my own. In both cases, that would make New York City the place to be. In addition, your company allows me the opportunity to measure the pulse of the financial world. This is the type of work I’m looking for. If I worked for my father, I wouldn’t really be doing what I was trained to do, or what I’m best at.”

“I see. Well, we’ll see just how good you are very soon, won’t we?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Roger was very impressed with you, and I trust him implicitly, so that will have to do for now.” Mr. Brown looked to his colleague. “Why don’t you show our eager new employee where his office is and get him on his way.”

“I’ll do that right now.”

Everyone stood and Del extended his hand to Mr. Brown. “Thank you for this opportunity, sir. I won’t let you down.”

“I’m counting on that, young man. Now I have to meet with the manager of Madison Square Garden. It seems he wants to place a few million more of his hard-earned money in a variety of investments, and there are some accounts only I handle.” Del nodded, feeling intimidated and put off.

After reaching his office, Del was guided through his responsibilities. He met his assistant, Jessica, and was left alone in his office, knowing that he didn’t belong there any

more than Joey did. Clutching the doorknob, Del stood poised to leave but then turned back and stared at the stack of files on his desk, sat in his chair, and began to work.

## CHAPTER SIX

EXHAUSTED from his first long day of number crunching, Del dragged himself up the four flights of stairs and entered the apartment, collapsing on the inexpensive futon being used as a sofa.

“Tough day at the office, honey?” Joey couldn’t help smirking as he brought Del a cold beer.

“Shut the fuck up. You know I’m only doing this shit until we can make it with your music.”

“And your talent.”

“That’s still debatable, but I’ll accept the compliment.” Del took a long pull on the beer.

Joey gave Del a quick, chaste kiss on the lips and went over to the undersized stove, giving one last stir to his sautéed chicken and vegetables before dishing it onto two plates.

He brought the dishes over and placed them on one of the small snack tables they had purchased at a clearance sale in a nearby Bed Bath & Beyond.

“Smells great.” Del smiled as he enjoyed the aroma and his first bite of the delicious dinner Joey had prepared. “While I’m not thrilled with the job, I could definitely get

used to coming home and getting pampered every evening.”

Joey grinned as he joined Del on the futon. “Don’t get too used to it. I’m particularly indulgent because it’s your first day, and we have to get out of here in less than an hour to go to The Wine Cellar.”

“Shit, I totally lost track of the time. That doesn’t give me much chance to eat before I put on my make-up.”

“You know you probably don’t have to do it up as if it’s show-ready. It’s only an audition.”

“Hey, we won’t get the job if the guy doesn’t get the full effect. Besides, you know that I don’t like....”

Joey sat up straighter on the futon, distancing himself slightly from Del. “Right, you don’t like walking into or out of any gay establishment where you could be recognized for who you really are.”

Del tried to ignore the hard edge that had entered Joey’s tone. “As soon as I get the chance to tell my father, everything will be out in the open, and I can do whatever I want. But for the time being, I just can’t risk anyone ever making the connection.”

“Jesus, Del, we live in another fucking state. Do you really think that someone is going to know who you are and report back to your father?”

Del lowered his head. He knew he was disappointing Joey, but somehow he just couldn’t completely let go. “Look, I know it’s ridiculous, but if it makes me feel comfortable and helps me focus on my performance without any added

stress, what's the big deal?"

"You know what the big deal is, but since I told you I'd give you a little more time, I'll shut up for now." Joey shoved a large forkful of food into his mouth.

"I'd appreciate it." Del moved closer to Joey and kissed him, pressing his tongue between his lover's lips, mingling their own flavors with that of the tasty meal.

Del could feel Joey relax into the kiss. "Mmmm, you taste like my great cooking."

"It is good and thanks for having it ready when I got home. I'm pretty beat."

"How is it there?"

"The jury is still out, but I think they'd prefer if I stay in the closet at the office."

"That's fucked up. Who cares what you do outside the office as long as you make them money and behave while you're inside their four walls?"

"I didn't ask for the attitude; I just got it from the big boss. My supervisor's not bad."

"I guess that's some consolation."

Del looked at his watch and gobbled down the rest of his food. "I'm going to take a quick shower and then get ready. Care to join me?" He winked at Joey.

"I would, but I don't think we'd have nearly enough time for me to ravage you the way I'd like. Let's save it for later. Why don't you harness all that hot, pent-up energy for your

performance? Then we're bound to get the gig." Joey pinched Del's ass.

Del stuck up his middle finger and overheard Joey laughing as he disappeared into their bedroom to reinvent himself as his stage persona.

When Del first discovered his love of singing, he was just a young boy. He had always participated in school choirs and was frequently awarded with solo, featured parts. As Del grew up, Richard Mathers put his foot down, insisting that his son was wasting his time and true talents singing little ditties and forcing the young man to curb his extracurricular musical activities.

Fortunately, Boston University offered a wealth of opportunities. Del loved exploring his artistic side. Although it wasn't far from his home, living on campus had been just what he needed to feel free to take advantage of the organizations that supported musical talent.

He had had roles in school productions, taken courses in the music department, and become a regular at the GLBT nightclub.

Del's one overriding concern was that his father never connect him with the gay and lesbian community, so he had developed a performing persona for his nightclub act. He wore very dramatic make-up, a long strawberry blond wig, a sequined white gown, and an opaque veil that covered all but his eyes. He had called his alter-ego Venus, after the goddess who was always veiled in beauty and mystery.

It was Venus who Joey first met during their sophomore

year. While Joey appeared enamored with Venus's talent, Del knew that he was the recipient of Joey's love. Joey was a gifted musician and talented songwriter, but he never ceased to tell Del how easy he found it to write for him.

Despite his insecurities, Del started to believe that he inspired Joey. He was constantly writing songs for both Venus and Del, although the songs for Del were rarely released to the public due to Del's hesitancy to draw attention to himself.

Tonight, things were going to turn around for them. Del knew he was going to have to start preparing his move forward and face the demons that were holding him back.

He'd sing his heart out and make sure that at least one or two numbers every night were Joseph Dixon originals. This was their plan and it was now in his hands to impress the owner of the most well-known drag club in the West Village. A number of performers who had started at The Wine Cellar had moved on to movies and theater or had been grabbed by upscale midtown nightclubs as headliners.

The next couple of hours would decide the future of the young couple and Del had no intention of letting Joey down again. He might not have met all his commitments, but he wouldn't hurt Joey's career.

After about forty-five minutes, Del opened the bedroom door and entered the kitchen, waiting for Joey to notice him.

Del was pleased to see the look on Joey's face. His eyes lit up and his smile extended from ear to ear. "You look better than ever! Absolutely stunning."

Del put on a different air of aloofness and spoke with a very husky, breathy voice. “Why thank you, my dear. You say the most lovely things.”

Joey grabbed the messenger bag filled with all their sheet music and the two headed out the door. “Come, my love, let’s go and knock their fucking socks off.”

“My, my, sweet thing, you can be so coarse.” Del stuck out his elbow, waiting for his escort to play his part.

Joey just laughed and took Venus’s arm as they walked the few blocks to the club. When they entered, Venus remained in the shadows as Joey found and addressed the owner.

“Are you Mr. Jensen?”

“That’s me, kid.” Mr. Jensen looked Joey up and down and then glanced to his side. “I thought you were bringing your lady with you.”

“Oh, she’s here, just waiting to make an entrance on your say-so.”

“Then bring her on; I don’t have all night.” Mr. Jensen turned back to his paperwork. “We’re upgrading the sound system, and I want to make sure everything’s in place for Friday night.”

Joey spotted the baby grand piano beneath the stage and off to one side. “May I?”

“I wish you would already.”

Joey nodded and sat at the piano, shuffling through the



sheet music in his bag before pulling out a piece. Del detected his partner's escalating nerves, clearly concerned with Mr. Jensen's impatience.

With the correct music set before him, Joey cleared his throat and spoke into the microphone attached to the piano. "I am proud to present the glamorous, mysterious and extremely talented Venus."

Venus walked to the center of the stage in a most sultry manner, ignoring Mr. Jensen and Joey until she took her place. The lights were dimmed except for one spot on her microphone. She nodded to Joey, who began to play.

Mr. Jensen made no move to indicate whether he liked or disliked what he heard but didn't interrupt when Venus's seductive voice introduced another song and then another.

Finally, after a set of six songs, he began to clap, as did the other members of the staff who had all stopped their cleaning and setting up of the small nightclub tables. The men stocking alcohol at the bar and working in the background with the lights and sound system had frozen in place after the first song and didn't move until Mr. Jensen led the applause.

"Brava, brava, my dear. You are captivating. And from the looks of it, my staff thinks so as well." He approached the stage and gallantly offered his hand to help Venus down the steps and lead her to the table immediately in front. Pulling out a chair, he offered her a seat, which she took, never uttering a word. Then Mr. Jensen turned to Joey. "Hey, kid, come here."

Joey quickly assembled his music, stuffed it back into the ragged messenger bag, and got to the table in under a minute. “So what did you think, Mr. Jensen?”

Venus sat silently and looked off to one side with an almost ethereal gaze. “First of all, I think you should call me Mark. I have a feeling we’re going to have a long and prosperous relationship.” He raised his hand towards the man stocking the bar, who immediately brought them three glasses of club soda. “You have quite a gem here, and your original songs are brilliant.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Now how about telling me your name so I can call you something besides *kid* when I’m bragging about my new discoveries?” Mark chuckled as he sipped his soft drink.

Joey blushed. “Sorry. I’m Joseph Dixon—Joe.”

“Well, Joe, it looks like you and Venus will be the new featured performers at The Wine Cellar beginning this Friday night.” Then Mark turned his attention to Venus. “Does that suit you, my lovely?”

“I’m sure that will suit us all just fine.” Venus offered her hand to Mark as she stood up and he kissed it.

As Venus and Joey left The Wine Cellar, they could hear Mark yelling in the background, “You assholes had better have that sound system in perfect order. I’m about to highlight the best goddamn act I’ve found in years this Friday night, and I want nothing to fuck this up!”

As soon as the door closed behind them and they were

back on the street, Joey lifted Venus and twirled her around. “We did it!”

In the voice of Venus, Del whispered back into Joey’s ear, “We sure as shit did, and now I expect to be duly rewarded.”

“I’ll have you out of that get-up in no time. How fast can you run in those heels?”

“Faster than you could possibly imagine,” Venus winked, hoisting her dress off the ground.

The two laughed and held hands as they ran back to their apartment, too giddy and excited to notice a group of three men in hooded sweatshirts leaning against a building across the street, staring at them.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“YOU were fucking amazing tonight! Better than I’ve ever seen you perform before.” As soon as the apartment door was closed and locked behind them, Joey grabbed Del and swung him around.

Del laughed out loud. “Watch out, I don’t want you to pull something.”

“Afraid I won’t be able to thank you properly?” Joey skillfully unzipped the back of Venus’s gown and it slid easily down the length of Del’s slender body.

Del quickly removed the wig and placed it on one of the nearby snack tables. Joey then halted Del’s hands.

“Now it’s your turn for a show.”

“But—”

“No buts. Just relax right there.” Joey guided Del to their futon and wordlessly gestured for him to sit. Then, moving like a burlesque showgirl, Joey danced seductively, continually moving his hands through his hair and over his well-defined chest and broad, muscular shoulders.

The effect on Del was evident. He slowly began to remove the undergarments he had worn as Venus, gliding the hosiery down his long, lean legs and then releasing his

tightly bound cock from the thong worn to complete the illusion. Del's dick hardened rapidly as he was unable to take his eyes off Joey's seductive movements. He began to rub his lengthening member slowly, following the rhythm of his partner's silent dance.

It wasn't long before watching his lover's performance began to send chills of excitement up Del's spine. His head tipped back and his eyes closed involuntarily as his hand continued to move up and down his full length.

Joey's seductive, husky voice refocused the strawberry blond's attention. "No, look at me, Del. This is for you." Joey began to peel his clothing off painfully slowly, gently running his fingers across each part of his body as it was revealed, over every firmly toned muscle. The silent performer began to moan at his own ministrations, looking directly into Del's glazed eyes.

Soon the two were naked. Del continued to watch his lover's alluring dance. His cock became unbearably hard and reddened. The pre-come began to coat the head and when the two lovers made eye contact, Del gently swiped a finger across the head of his dick and smeared the thick liquid over his lips.

That was all it took. The dance ended abruptly, and Joey aggressively pulled Del off the sofa and onto the rug-covered floor. Joey crushed his lips against Del's, tasting the come and wanting more. Joey's eyes became even blacker with the heat of his desire. He hovered over Del and held him down forcefully. "God, you're so damn hot. I want to bite and lick every part of you while I fuck you."

“Ahhh.” Del couldn’t respond coherently. Lying on his back, he began to rut against Joey, wanting more and more contact. There never seemed to be enough when they were together, but this was different. This was a feral side of Joey he’d never seen. “Please....”

Joey crashed his lips down against Del’s again and again. Del knew they would both be bruised, but he didn’t care. More—all he wanted was *more*, all he could think of was *more*. He wanted Joey to take him. “I know what you want,” Joey whispered in Del’s ear and he shuddered at the thought of what was in store.

Quickly sheathing his cock with a condom and lube, Joey rubbed the remaining ointment in and around Del’s hole as he lifted his legs, guiding them over his shoulders. Then, with one smooth stroke, Joey slammed into Del hard and fast.

“Fuck, oh fuck!” Del was torn in half; the pleasure and pain were overwhelming.

Joey stilled. “You okay?”

Del paused, eyes looking into those of the man he always wanted to give himself to, always wanted inside him, and nodded.

Joey pulled out nearly all the way and then forcefully thrust in again. Del arched, gripping Joey’s shoulders, digging his nails in. There would be marks later, marks that showed their bond—marks to seal their passion.

The two moved together, Del meeting Joey’s rapidly paced pushes. Feeling Joey hit his prostate over and over, it

wasn't long before Del arched one last time and shot his creamy liquid onto their chests with a deep moan.

Feeling the hot tightness around his dick, Joey pressed his lips to Del's one last time as he spilled into the condom.

Exhausted and sated, on the verge of passing out, neither man moved. When Joey softened completely, he pulled out, removed the condom, and continued to rest on top of Del's warm body. With Joey's head pressed against his chest, Del was sure he could both feel and hear his heartbeat. He hoped that he would always be able to bring his hot Latin lover this much bliss, this much pleasure, this much love.

Their bond was special. Del understood that Joey hoped, as he did, that one day they could make it permanent—but Joey continued to remind Del that a permanent commitment was for later, when they were both established.

As their breathing returned to normal, Joey moved to face Del, lying next to him. He swept the sweat-riddled stray hairs off his forehead and kissed him gently. Joey smiled as Del's eyes started to close, still in the throes of the aftershocks of the intense orgasm.

“Del?”

“Mmmm?”

“You do know how much I love you.”

“Uh huh. I do.” Del smiled through his blissfully satisfied fog.

“Don’t ever forget that. You really do mean the world to me.”

Eyes still closed, Del wrinkled his brow, wondering where this line of concern was coming from. “Is everything all right? Of course I know how you feel. I feel the same way. I love you so much that it sometimes hurts because I always want to be with you, near you, have you inside me.”

“Good. I just don’t want you to ever think that just because I want us to wait for certain things that it means....” It was rare for Joey to show his vulnerable side, and Del found it endearing.

“I know, Joey.” Del started ghosting his fingers over his lover’s shoulders and chest. “It means you’re the one who thinks first. It’s a good thing at least one of us does.” Del finally opened his eyes and looked at Joey and started laughing out loud.

“What the fuck? That was not the reaction I expected after what we just did, what we just said.”

“Sorry, hon, but you have Venus’s make-up all over your face.”

Joey got up and jogged into the bathroom to look in the mirror. “You’re gonna pay for that, babe!”

“How about you make me pay while we take a shower?”

“Last one in is a dried up drag queen,” Joey yelled as he turned on the water.

Del jumped up from the floor, a bit sore but in the most pleasant of ways, and ran into the bathroom. “Asshole!”



“That’s just the spot I’ll be rimming.”

The two continued the celebration of their successful audition deep into the night, thinking nothing could touch them. They were on their way.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

THE July heat in New York City was particularly brutal. Joey had every window in the small apartment open and fans running at both ends to help with the circulation. He almost envied Del's daytime workplace, with its generous central air conditioning, but then thought better of it, knowing how his partner came home each night more frustrated than the previous one.

While it was uncomfortable to sit at his keyboard during the difficult heat of the day, Joey knew that Del was miserable in his office. The musician kept hoping that some Broadway bigwig would come to one of the shows at The Wine Cellar and *discover* them. He chuckled at the fantasy and yet continued to hope. But that hadn't happened, and Joey looked on as Del dragged himself reluctantly to work each day.

Although he was hardly a gourmet cook, Joey enjoyed a good meal and had been one of the better cooks in his family. Since his mother had worked full-time and frequently took overtime hours to support her family, Joey had volunteered to take charge of getting a healthy dinner on the table at least four nights a week. With money tight, he'd become creative, and could stretch a meal meant for three to feed his mother, his three siblings, and himself.

It was natural that he took over the responsibility for cooking when he and Del moved in together. He was home much of the day composing, and when he took a break, he had the time to go to the local market on their corner. Both Joey and Del had become familiar faces around the neighborhood and in the little grocery store.

Joey took a few minutes during the worst heat of the day to go to the store and purchase the ingredients for their dinner.

“Hey, Joe, what’s up?” He was greeted by one of the two owners.

“The temperature, mostly. Does it always stay this hot throughout the summer, Kevin?”

“Sometimes. You just have to get used to it.”

“Then you might be seeing more of me than you’d like. At least your store is air conditioned.”

Kevin laughed at the young man. “If it wasn’t, the food would turn to shit in no time, and I’d be closed down.”

Joey nodded and started looking around.

“So, what’s for dinner tonight?”

“I’m thinking rice and beans with a piece of diced chicken cut into it.”

“You know where the rice and beans are. I’ll get you a nice, meaty piece of chicken breast.”

Joey looked at Kevin, trying not to grimace as he added the reminder, “Not too big, we—”

“Have to watch our wallets—I know. You say that all the time. All my customers say that. Not that I’m complaining; at least I still have customers. Some of the smaller grocers have had to go out of business because the big supermarkets are opening all over the city.”

“Well, don’t worry about me. I can barely afford you. If I go into Whole Foods, it’s more as an observer and admirer than a customer,” Joey huffed.

“Enjoy the air conditioning and I’ll get your chicken.” Kevin smiled and went about preparing Joey’s purchase.

When he returned home, Joey started dinner and took a quick shower to freshen up, hoping that Del would be home soon.

Time passed quickly as Joey set the tiny kitchen table they’d found at a street sale a few weeks earlier.

When he heard the key turn in the lock, a smile automatically reached his face.

“Honey, I’m home,” Del called out, his tone light and upbeat.

Joey immediately put his arms around Del and kissed him deeply. “You’re in a good mood.”

“Tomorrow’s Friday, so there’s only one more day I have to go into the office this week. God, I hate that fucking place.”

Joey went back to his cooking, trying not to say anything else. He had thought about Del’s dilemma but didn’t want to bring up his suggestion until they sat down

for dinner. “Why don’t you take a quick shower and wash away the remnants of the office?”

“Not to mention the stink from the subway. The stations all smell like piss. And why the fuck do I always end up in the car with the broken air conditioner?”

Joey chuckled. “I don’t know, but I think your stink is hot, and if you’re not careful, I’ll rip that suit off you and let dinner burn.”

Del snorted. “Okay, I can take a hint. I’ll be back in five.”

As the full dinner plates were placed on the table, Del returned to the kitchen. “Wow, that looks and smells great.”

“It’s another one of those recipes I used to make for my family.”

“Ah, we’re still stretching the budget.” Del took a forkful of his food and let the flavors linger in his mouth as he chewed. “This is amazing. Thank you.”

Joey sat opposite, his fork poised. “Glad you like it.”

Del touched Joey’s hand. “You do know that I don’t expect you to cook for me all the time. You aren’t the little wifey.”

“You bet your fucking ass I’m not.”

Del laughed out loud. “My ass knows better than anyone.”

The two continued eating for a few more minutes, and Joey finally decided it was time to make Del an offer he

hoped he would accept. “Listen, Del, I was thinking....”

“Uh oh. Why am I thinking I won’t like this?”

“It’s nothing bad; call it a compromise to ease our lives.” Joey could see that Del wasn’t following him, so he made his proposal. “I think you should quit your job.”

“What? Are you nuts?” Del stared at Joey, making him feel that he may have introduced this topic too soon, but he intended to persevere. “Then you’d really have to be creative with the cooking, because all we could afford to eat would be air, and stale air at that.”

“Wait a minute. I’m not finished. I think we should each get simple day jobs.” Joey brushed his hand softly across Del’s cheek. “You work so damn hard at the investment firm and you hate that job. It makes you miserable.”

“But it pays the bills with room to spare. We actually have money building in our savings account.”

“I know, but maybe we could both get jobs that pay the bills with a little less room to spare. Then you’d be happier.”

Del’s concern was evident. “And when would you write your music? You can’t stop.”

“I don’t plan on stopping, but there’s nothing wrong with writing my music in the evenings.”

“You’ll be exhausted. I don’t want your music to suffer.”

Joey smiled warmly and tried to reason with his partner. “Del, my music won’t suffer. I’ll keep a tape recorder in my messenger bag, and if I get inspired, wherever I am, I’ll

hit the bathroom and record.”

“I don’t understand. Have I been that hard to live with?”

Joey knew he had to find a way to make his point clear without Del feeling guilty. All those years Del had spent pleasing his parents had taken a toll on his self-esteem. “You are the best thing that ever happened to me, and I hate seeing you so damn miserable. You hate your job, you hate wearing a suit and tie every day, you hate the clients, and most of all, you hate the boss.”

Joey stood up and moved to kneel in front of Del. “I want you to be happy, and I just think we’d both be much happier if we waited tables or worked in a store or something.”

Del looked into Joey’s eyes and nodded. “You’re probably right. Let me think about it over the weekend.”

Joey knew that it would be a major move towards their future if Del could give up his secure position at work. That would seal the focus of their goals. For Del, a move like this would be a huge commitment to them as a couple. It would send a strong message to his parents, a hurdle that Joey knew Del was still fighting to get over.

Del spoke to his mother and father regularly, and all they seemed to care about was his highbrow career. Leaving that career would open the door to the closet Del was living in where his family was concerned. There would only be one more step to revealing everything else.

Joey returned to his chair, holding Del’s hand as he did so. “Del, I think this will be good for both of us. We’ll both be

better off in the long run, and maybe it'll push us to do whatever we can to get recognized sooner."

Del nodded again but said nothing. Instead, he continued eating, clearly lost in thought.

Joey hoped that Del would have the courage to make the decision that would be best for them.

After the two finished eating in thoughtful silence, Joey's phone began to ring. He looked at the caller ID. "It's Mark from The Wine Cellar. Why the hell would he be calling us midweek?"

"Pick it up and find out." Del looked concerned.

"Hi, Mark, what's up?"

Joey listened as Del looked on. When he closed the phone, he looked at it for a moment and then looked at Del. "We have to get to the club. Mark's called an emergency meeting of all his employees, including the talent."

"Why? He's never had a meeting with us before."

"You know the short Latino performer?"

"Yeah, calls herself Charona, right?"

"That's the one." Joey took a deep breath. "She—I mean he—is dead."



## CHAPTER NINE

BY THE time Del and Joey arrived at The Wine Cellar, everyone else was already there milling about, shaking their heads and murmuring phrases like *I just can't believe it! Why would anyone do such a thing? He was so young and beautiful, had a lifetime ahead of him.*

Within a short period of time, Mark entered the room. Del overheard him instruct the club's head bouncer to lock the doors and let no one in unless it was the police.

Mark clapped his hands fiercely to get the chattering group's attention. While an average height, a couple of inches shy of six feet tall, his solid build and firm voice easily took command of the room. However, it was his fair and fatherly demeanor towards all his employees, particularly the younger ones, that garnered him respect. "Okay, boys, everyone take a seat."

The sound tech, who had recently been carrying on a flirtation with Charona, immediately called out, "What the fuck happened? We were supposed to go out after Friday night's show." His voice choked through the last few words.

Mark's face looked weary, as if he'd aged 10 years since Del had last seen him just a couple of nights earlier. Dark circles were under his reddened, lifeless eyes. "I know you all

have questions. If you let me speak, I think I can answer all of them.” He paused momentarily to catch his breath. “Then if you have anything else to say, I’ll address your concerns.”

One of the stagehands brought Mark a glass of water, and he nodded his thanks as he took a few small sips. Standing in front of all his employees, Mark placed the glass on the table nearby. He slowly looked out at the large group seated before him. “Last night, Charona... Gary left the club after he took off all his make-up. He left earlier than anyone else because he was meeting some visiting relative in midtown.”

Mark brushed a hand over his face. “I’m sure all of you have been following the recent news about the rise of bashings in our little community.” There were nods of agreement from everyone in the room. Some sat frozen in their seats. “Apparently, there’s a small group that is targeting gay men—gay men who are alone. Goddamn cowards.” Mark stopped and bowed his head, taking another sip of water. It was obvious to Del that Mark was trying to keep his emotions in check. “That’s what they all are—bullies and cowards.”

Joey was fidgeting in his seat. He interjected, “What did the police say happened?” Del reached for his partner’s hand and held it tight to steady them both.

“The police report states that Gary was dragged into an alley where they beat the crap out of him and shoved a stick up his ass.” Gasps were audible throughout the room. Some of the employees shook their heads in disbelief.

Del shuddered at the revelation of Mark’s description.

He looked at all the people in the room. Several had become good friends. Just the image of the scene that Mark was describing made him begin to feel ill. He held Joey's hand tighter, and Joey turned to Del and brushed his hand softly across Del's cheek, whispering in his ear, "Shhh, I'm here." Del nodded, but his stomach remained queasy nonetheless.

"The cops also said that Gary must have tried to fight back, because those pigs cut his throat." Gasps escalated to moans of pain, and harsh words of anger filled the room. Some of the men lowered their heads and began to cry; others rested their heads in their hands, motionless.

"He went out giving it everything he could, and now we all have to do that in our own way to make sure this doesn't happen again." Mark's voice was weakened, yet it was still tempered with an angry, bitter edge.

"What do you mean? How can we fight back?" Del asked immediately, knowing he had never been able to fight against those who had taunted him in school when he was growing up.

"I don't mean with fists. These bastards are a brutal bunch. I mean with intelligence." That drew the attention of everyone seated. "None of you—and I'm not fucking kidding, so you'd all better listen up—none of you is to leave this place alone. When you leave a gay club alone, you might as well have a target painted on your backside."

Several men nodded and others mumbled their agreement.

"Listen to me, boys; this isn't just a request. It's an

order. I don't ever want to hear of this happening to any of my boys again. Shit! You all mean more to me than just a means to getting customers and cash."

Through his fear and discomfort, Del slowly gazed from table to table, realizing that these were the people who he had come to know as his family. He was always most comfortable with his friends from The Wine Cellar. He and Joey had even gone out to movies or for a drink with a few of them.

If anything happened to any of these men, he'd be devastated. He *was* devastated, thinking about the sweet man behind Charona's garish wig and make-up. Some meant more than others—but these were *his people*, the ones who wouldn't judge, tease, or avoid him.

Then Del felt Joey's hand in his. This was his lifeline. If anything ever happened to Joey, he wouldn't want to go on. Nothing would ever be worth living for without Joey in his life.

Several men asked questions and made suggestions about being armed.

Mark looked at the group. "I'll tell you all something now. I have a pretty powerful gun here at the club. I won't fill any of you in on its location, but trust me, I can grab it quickly if I need it. It was given to me by a friend... on the police force." Mark smiled through his sadness, and Del noted the surprise in everyone's eyes.

"Yes, I've been seeing a police officer for a long time, and that's enough about that. Just suffice it to say that he wants

me to make it clear to all of you that these goons only target isolated gay men. There hasn't even been a report of them threatening or taunting a couple. So no traveling alone at night. Do you all hear me?" Everyone in the room nodded. "No one breaks that rule. Is that clear?" Everyone nodded their agreement again.

"I want to hear you all agree. None of you go out at night alone. Do you *all* agree?"

This time each man firmly responded in unison. "Yes."

"Good." Mark paused briefly and lowered his head for a moment. "When I have the funeral details from Gary's family, I'll let you all know. I'm sure most of you would like to be there."

Mark took one last sip of water, placed the glass back on the table, turned, and walked backstage, his address complete. The Wine Cellar family began to leave in pairs or small groups, everyone heeding their employer's warning.

When Del and Joey were back in the humid night air, Joey took a deep breath. "That was fucking awful. I'm just glad that we've always traveled to and from the club together."

"Me too." Del barely spoke above a whisper, still deeply shaken by all the horror Gary had endured.

Joey stopped in front of their building and sat on the stoop leading to the entrance. He patted the space next to him. "Sit down."

Del nodded and took the offered space.

“What’s up?” Joey placed his arm around Del’s shoulders. “You weren’t that close to Gary, were you?”

Del shook his head. “That’s not it. I was just thinking about how I’d feel if something ever happened to you.” He looked into Joey’s beautiful brown eyes and allowed a stray tear to rest unchecked on his cheek. “I couldn’t bear it.” Del tenderly brushed sweaty wisps of dark hair from Joey’s forehead.

Joey leaned in and kissed his lover equally softly. “Nothing’s going to happen to me. We have too much going for us. Besides, we’re careful.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I know we have a destiny that we haven’t met yet.” This time when Joey kissed Del, it was much more desperately.

“I’ve made a decision.” Del sat up tall, facing his lover.

“Yes?”

“I’m going to tell him the next time I see him.” Joey had a mildly confused look on his face. “I’m going to tell my father that I’m gay and that we’re together, partners... someday husbands, I hope.” The last words were uttered more quietly, but Del needed to get them out in the open.

“Are you sure you’re finally ready?”

“It’s time. It’s our time and I don’t want to waste any more of it being afraid to get what I’ve always wanted.”

“And what’s that?” The corners of Joey’s lips turned

upward, a look of anticipation lighting his eyes.

“Us.”

Joey’s sweet smile began to dissipate as a feral look took over. He grabbed Del’s arm and lifted him off the stoop. “Inside and upstairs, now.”

“I guess my intentions made you happy.” Del grinned, knowing exactly what was in store.

“I’ll show you just how happy.” Joey began to run towards the stairwell after they entered their building. “Last one up the stairs bottoms.”

Del laughed as he ran willingly behind his lover all the way to the fourth floor.

## CHAPTER TEN

IT HAD been less than two weeks since Charona's death and while sadness, anger, and an overall feeling of loss still loomed large, the shows at The Wine Cellar continued to go on. The performers all dedicated songs to the lost member of their family, singing with added enthusiasm as each gave their all during the numbers.

Mark's words at the first show following the murder set the mood and no one dared to betray their spirit. "Ladies and gentlemen, tonight we pay homage to our dearly missed comrade and friend, Gary Santos, better known to all of you as Charona. We plan to dazzle you with our usual numbers and add a few of her specialties. Please join us as we pay tribute to the newest star in the sky." The applause was overwhelming.

Del marveled at the ability everyone had to move forward and get past the pain. He was just glad to know that Joey would always be by his side when the two went out after dark. Del drew confidence from Joey's strength and self-assuredness. It gave him the feeling of invincibility that no one else could possibly supply.

Del awoke on Saturday morning to find himself ensconced in Joey's dark muscular arms. It was wonderful to open his eyes, feeling protected and relaxed. Weekends



were particularly special as both of them slept in without setting any alarms. It was the time of day when Del always knew he was right where he belonged. He loved how the senses of freedom and ownership somehow coincided perfectly.

“Hey, you. I can hear the wood burning.” Joey’s husky tone of voice was laced with waking coarseness. “What are you thinking so intently about?” He had a small smirk on his face. “I’ve been stroking your arm for over a minute and you haven’t even noticed—although I must say that at least your cock is noticing that I’m here.”

Del leaned up and smiled, staring into Joey’s warm, loving eyes, which were beginning to darken with desire. “I can see that you’re up and more alert than I would have expected this early in the morning.”

“Early! It’s almost noon. I’m feeling rather deprived at the moment.” He lifted the blanket, showing Del the rather pronounced woody he was sporting.

Del stared for just a moment longer and then crushed his lips onto Joey’s, forcing his tongue into his lover’s mouth, reveling in the feel of being so connected with his man.

Pulling back almost as suddenly as he had struck, Del gave Joey little time to catch his breath as he tossed off the light sheet that covered their naked bodies and dove for his favorite morning treat.

Joey’s body arched with the intense contact. “Fuck, Del. Oh my fucking God.”

Del lifted his head briefly and smiled at Joey's reaction. "You called? Would you like me to stop?" He nearly laughed, seeing Joey's horror at the question.

"No way—keep going. Don't stop." Joey pushed Del's head down again towards the swollen, purplish member.

Del sucked and licked Joey's balls, hearing the continual moans of desire and need emanating from above as his partner writhed under his ministrations. Del was ravenous, alternating tending his lover's balls with moving up and down the firm shaft. When he felt his own need becoming too strong to deny, Del began to rapidly rut against Joey's lower leg as he deep-throated his partner's beautiful cock.

"Ahhh, fuck!" Joey shot into Del's mouth and he swallowed every last drop, savoring the flavor he loved so much, all the while continuing to rub his own dick along Joey's leg, the pre-come leaving a warm, sticky trail.

Joey tugged on Del's shoulder and drew him up for a deep, hungry kiss. As the two shared the come that still lingered in Del's mouth, Joey began to rapidly run his sweat-moistened hand over Del's stiff shaft. "Joey, Joey, I'm gonna...."

"Gonna what, babe?" Joey smiled into Del's neck as he kissed him, never letting up on the vigorous hand-job.

"I'm, I'm gonna.... Oh, shit!" Del's orgasm ripped through him, and he spilled onto Joey's hand and stomach.

Del stared with glazed eyes, still in his orgasmic daze and trying to catch his breath as Joey drew his finger

through Del's spent seed and across both their lips. He immediately followed by kissing Del passionately, sharing everything—the two combined for the ideal taste.

When they were together like this, Del knew that Joey was his destiny, and he would never love anyone like he loved him.

THE two fell back to sleep, sticky and sated until they were awakened by Joey's cell phone.

He managed to pick it up just before it went to voice mail, not bothering to check the caller ID.

"Hello," he answered, trying to hide the drowsiness he felt.

A strong voice boomed through the earpiece. "Hello. This is Walter Jacobs. I'm a friend of your boss, Mark Jensen."

Joey's eyes opened wide with recognition. "Walter Jacobs... *the* Walter Jacobs?"

Del started tugging at Joey's arm, and he shrugged him off, switching the phone to speaker mode.

"Well, my mother thinks I'm worthy of that title," the man chuckled. "But my guess is you've heard of me."

"Heard of you. Are you kidding? You've helped develop and finance some of the best scores for Broadway musicals in this century!" Joey was shaking the bed with all his

excitement. Del gazed on, seemingly in shock, as the conversation continued.

“Thank you for the glowing bio, but this century isn’t that old, so I hope you can continue to give me that warm intro in a decade or two.”

“I’m sure I can.” Joey still couldn’t believe that this musical genius was a friend of Mark’s and that Mark had given him Joey’s number.

“Listen, kid, I don’t want to keep my family too long; they want to head out for lunch.” Joey waited, unwilling to interrupt and too anxious to hear why Walter Jacobs was calling. “Mark tells me you and your partner are a musical team that can’t be beat by any he’s ever seen or heard before. He actually compared you to Cole Porter and one of his many muses.”

“No shit.” Joey blushed. “Excuse me, sir.”

“I’ve cursed a few times myself, and please don’t call me sir. I’m not that old.” Walter Jacobs laughed once again but quickly turned serious. “Look, kid, Mark hasn’t referred me to anyone from The Wine Cellar since he turned me onto Nathan. If he thinks you’re that good, then I want to take a look for myself.”

“You want to see me, us? When, where—we’ll be there.” Joey was bouncing on the bed, and Del leaned against his pillow, stone still, listening to the two go on. “You know that it’s just my partner that performs on stage, right?”

“Yeah, I’ve got the story. You write the brilliant songs, and he brings them to life like a six foot canary.”

Joey stayed silent, not sure what to say.

“I’ll be at the club Friday night for both shows. I look forward to seeing what you have to offer.” Walter Jacobs paused briefly. “And, kid....”

“Yes, sir... I mean, Mr. Jacobs?”

“You two had better give it all you’ve got. I don’t give second auditions. Either you have it or you don’t.” Although the words were clear and firm, Mr. Jacobs’s tone was even and non-threatening.

“We won’t disappoint you. I can assure you, you’ll be impressed.” Joey was nearly breathless.

“I’ll be the judge of that. See you Friday. I’ll confirm with Mark that I’ll be there, and I expect that you’ll be seated with me as we watch your partner perform.”

“You can count on it for sure! Thank you, Mr. Jacobs; thank you so much.”

“Don’t thank me yet.”

Joey heard Walter Jacobs’s phone disconnect and he followed suit. “Del, can you believe it? We’re there—well, almost there.”

“Holy shit!” Del finally came out of his frozen trance and rose to his knees, bouncing along with Joey as they gripped each other’s shoulders. “Does this mean what I think it means?”

“Honey, if you’re thinking it’s time to get out from behind that veil and into the big time—the mainstream big

time—then you're on the right wavelength."

"I can't believe it." Del stopped bouncing and looked directly at Joey. "Are you sure we're ready?"

Joey held Del in his arms and rubbed his back. "Baby, we're more than ready. Don't sell yourself or us short." Del nodded his head against the crook of Joey's neck and remained in the cocoon of his arms. "You do know what this also means, don't you?"

"I know."

"It's time to tell Daddy Dearest who you really are and where you're really heading."

"Can we wait until after the show? I just want to hear that Mr. Jacobs really wants us. Then I won't let anything stand in our way. I promise."

Joey understood Del's anxious anticipation. He had avoided this moment for so long. He lifted Del's chin and looked deeply into his lover's beautiful blue eyes. "Friday night we get discovered; Saturday you tell your father."

Del's body became stiff, and Joey sensed the tension building at the prospect of coming out completely. This was Del's moment of truth and it was time for him to make the choice—was he with Joey and their life together, or would he remain hidden?

"Joey...."

He sat still, his former self-assurance dwindling at the tone of his partner's voice. "Yes, Del?"

“You know I’m yours. As much as this is scaring me to death, on Friday I’ll perform better than ever before, and on Saturday I’ll leave my goddamn closet and never go in again.”

“Thank you.” Joey brushed his lips over Del’s cheek.

The relief Joey felt permeated the small bedroom as the two clung to each other in celebration and anticipation of the excitement the following Friday would bring.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE week seemed to drag on in a strange combination of joy alternating with panic. Del rose each morning, more and more jittery, yet determined to keep his word to Joey. This was their moment and he wasn't about to fuck it up. Of one thing he was certain: he wouldn't regret leaving The Investors. There was no question that he wasn't cut out for a nine-to-five life.

In anticipation of his imminent new career, Del no longer dragged himself into the office. Once Walter Jacobs heard Joey's music, he'd be able to give his two weeks' notice and get the hell out of the business world for good.

He tried not to reveal the changes in his life, but Del's natural bend for the dramatic betrayed him.

"Good morning, Mr. Mathers." Jessica looked up as Del passed his assistant's desk.

"It is a good morning, isn't it?" Del smiled at his assistant and gestured for her to join him in his office to go over the day's schedule of meetings, deadlines, and responsibilities.

After following him in dutifully, Jessica sat in the chair opposite Del with the desk between them. She placed her notebook on the desk. "Mr. Mathers, do you mind if I ask



you a personal question?”

“Well, for starters you can please try not to call me Mr. Mathers. It reminds me of my father.” Del shuddered at the thought. “I really do prefer Del.”

“All right, Del. If you say so.” The assistant nodded and smiled at her young boss.

Jessica and Del sat quietly for a few moments. “You wanted to ask me something personal?”

“If you don’t mind.”

“I’ll let you know if I mind after you ask.” Del’s voice was relaxed, unlike most mornings at the office.

Jessica smiled and took a deep breath. “Is something going on that’s making you extra... well, extra happy this week?”

Del fondly recalled practicing Joey’s newest song the previous night. It was his most brilliant creation to date. “You might say that.”

Jessica looked across the desk, an expression of interest written on her face.

“I can’t discuss anymore right now, but let’s just say that there may be some changes in my life that will bring a whole new meaning to waking up each morning.” Del grinned as he envisioned sleeping until noon, cocooned in Joey’s arms, after his opening night in a Broadway show. He thought about the warm touches they would share before they fully awakened to explore each other’s bodies.

“Mr. Mathers—Del—are you okay?” Jessica was leaning over the desk, gently jostling his arm.

Del shook his head, returning from his blissful reverie. He was glad he was behind his desk, as he was now sporting a hard-on that was tenting his business trousers. “Sorry; must have been lost in a daydream. I didn’t mean to alarm you.”

Jessica sat down with her pen and appointment planner in hand.

Del nodded at her. “Okay, let’s get down to business. What do I have scheduled for today?” Del sat back and listened to the list of obligations that he hoped would soon be a distant memory.

BY THE time Del got off the subway and started walking the two blocks towards the apartment, the temperature and humidity had dropped. It seemed that everything about this week was on his side, even the weather.

He climbed the stairs two at a time, knowing in just a couple of days he and Joey would be able to start fulfilling their dreams, professionally and personally.

This was one of Del’s favorite times of the day. He relished returning to this world, filled with the man he loved and his music, not to mention the smells of a great meal waiting to be served once he changed out of his suit.

Del walked in the door and was surprised. He didn’t see

Joey anywhere. He proceeded into the small living room and saw sheet music strewn all over the floor and the futon with Joey's signature messenger bag resting in the middle of the mess.

Del went into their bedroom and found it empty as well. He took off his suit, showered, and put on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. When he was comfortable and relaxed, he went into the small kitchen area and searched for a note. It wasn't like Joey to leave for an extended period of time without letting him know where he was going or when he'd be back.

He started imagining Charona, walking alone in their neighborhood and being left in an alley, brutally beaten, to die alone. Del felt a shiver run up and down his spine and he grabbed his cell. Despite his shaking fingers, he was able to punch in the speed dial code for Joey's phone.

"Hey, I'm on my way up. I'm on the second landing." Joey's voice was light and carefree.

Del snapped the phone shut without responding and waited another few moments for Joey to appear through their door. He paced back and forth, tossing his phone on the tiny kitchen counter.

"Hi. Did you have another good day at the office, knowing it'll all be over soon?" Joey didn't look Del's way or he might have seen the look of panic tempered with anger.

"Where the fuck were you?" Del demanded.

"What are you talking about?" Joey finally looked in his partner's direction. "I got completely wrapped up in making

sure we had all the perfect selections for Friday night. By the time I looked at the clock, it was already after five.”

“So....” Del stood, his hands balled into fists, resting stiffly on his hips.

“So, I knew you’d be home soon, and I hadn’t picked up anything for dinner. I went down to the local grocery and got us some food, see.” Joey held up the bag from their favorite neighborhood shop. He placed the sack on the counter next to the sink and slowly approached Del. “Kevin and I got to chatting a bit and must have lost track of the time.” Joey paused and looked into Del’s eyes. “Babe, what is it?” He touched Del’s shoulder and he startled.

Del inhaled slowly, trying to maintain some stability, and grabbed Joey, pulling him in close, desperate to feel his heartbeat. “I thought....”

Joey rested his head on Del’s shoulder, placing his arms around the redhead’s still-shaking body, and said nothing.

Tears began to stream down Del’s cheeks, and he didn’t bother stopping them. He knew he was overreacting, but the frightening images of Joey and losing everything important to him were too much. “I thought the bashers—the ones that got Charona, Gary—I thought they....”

Joey picked up his head and brushed some of the flowing moisture from Del’s cheeks. “Shit! I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you. It never occurred to me that I’d be gone long enough to be missed.”

“Please don’t do that again. It’ll be dark soon. You shouldn’t go out alone when it’s almost dusk.” Del knew he

was babbling foolishly, but he didn't care. He gripped Joey tighter. "I was so damn scared that I'd never see you again."

"Shhh, baby, that's not going to happen. You're stuck with me. And after Friday night, the whole damn world will know it."

Del nodded his head against Joey's, unable to find any more words to match his emotions.

"Del, please relax. Nothing's going to happen to us." Joey gently stroked the wavy mop of hair. "Soon we'll be on the legit stage and you'll be out, so we can do something about making this living arrangement permanent."

Slowly pulling back to see Joey's face and look into his eyes, Del found the truth in his lover's promise. "Do you really mean it? We can make this a permanent commitment?"

"Whatever you fucking well want. I'll even wear a tux if you want to have some sort of formal deal."

"You, in a tux?" Del laughed through his tear-stained face. "Joey, after we have one of those commitment ceremonies...."

"You can say 'married'. 'Committed' sounds like we'll be hospitalized." The two laughed.

"After we get married, I'd really like to take your name."

Joey pulled Del in for a heated kiss. "That would be incredible, but it's certainly not necessary."

"I know, but I want it. Would that be okay with you?"

Joey nodded. “And, Joey?”

“Mm hmm?”

“When we’re married, can we finally feel each other? Can we finally have no barriers between us?”

Joey brushed his hand across Del’s cheek and ghosted his hand over his arm. “You can bet on it. If we’re married, it’ll be all the way. Just the two of us... forever.”

“Forever—that’s a wonderful word.” Del kissed Joey, took his hand, and led him to their bedroom. This was all Del needed or wanted for the rest of his life. The previous panic and the groceries that remained on the counter, untouched, were both forgotten.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

FRIDAY night finally arrived. Del and Joey felt the escalating anxiety and anticipation in every move they made. They were a bundle of nerves and began taking it out on one another.

“Joey, if you keep pacing back and forth, you’ll wear a fucking dent in the floor, and knowing the condition of this building, that’ll be in about ten minutes.” Del clenched his fists. “Besides, you’re freaking me out, and that’s the last thing we need.”

“Shut up, you know how important tonight is. A lot is riding on this performance. I wish I could be on that damn stage with you!” Joey continued to pace and run his hand through his dark, sweaty locks. “Are you sure you know the words to all the songs?” He stopped pacing abruptly and looked at Del. “Do you want to go over any of them? What about that new one? I just gave it to you Wednesday. Maybe we should do one more run-through.”

Del grabbed his frenetic partner by the shoulders and pulled him in for a hug. He began to stroke his hair gently and then moved his hands lower to rub the musician’s back. Del could feel Joey’s tension slowly diminish, and it wasn’t long before he returned the hug and looked into Del’s eyes. “Feeling better?”

“Fuck! I’m sorry. I must be making you crazy, and you’re the one that has to perform this evening.” Joey brushed his fingers over Del’s toned shoulders. “You’re so beautiful. I wish you didn’t have to wear all that make-up tonight. No one could possibly turn down adding you to their roster of performers, with or without that get-up.”

Del smiled. The love he felt for Joey at that moment warmed him and helped to build the confidence he had spent much of his life lacking.

Del’s home life had been far from ideal. He had never been abused or neglected. The truth be told, he had been spoiled in every material way possible, but the love he desired was never available.

Richard Mathers was always wrapped up in the ever-expanding family business. He was a constant reminder of what Del was expected to do and become after he completed his university studies. Lillian Mathers spent much of her time filling her role as lady of the manor. She cared for Del but also had a wide array of sitters and nannies to take on the critical tasks of nurturing and comforting. Her duties as the wife of the President and CEO of a large and prosperous company kept her very busy outside the home.

Del never really connected with any of his caregivers. He learned very early on that once he became attached, it would be time for them to depart, or his mother would find a reason to dismiss them.

The one constant throughout his life was music. Del flourished when he listened to it. He sang songs and pretended to perform in his bedroom in front of his *G.I. Joe*



and *Star Wars* action figures. When Del broke into song, he became someone else—a person with dignity who demanded attention and captivated all with his mere presence.

Nothing in the world could stop Del tonight. He would finally make his dreams a reality. It was even more important because this was a dream he shared with the person he loved most and who loved him in return.

There had been a time when Del thought Joey only loved his talent or their great sex life, but it was so much more. At first, when Joey placed a condition on their permanent commitment to one another, Del questioned the concept of unconditional love. It didn't take him long to realize, after the fifth or sixth time that he failed to tell his parents he was gay, that the condition was Joey's way of nudging Del forward—to enable them to live freely and happily with nothing hanging over their heads. In less than twenty-four hours, they would be on their way, and Del knew he'd succeed. This was their time—he could feel it.

“Joey, look at me.” Del stood tall, feeling an energy from within driving him towards his destiny.

He stepped back and Joey looked into the face of his inspiration. “Yes, Del?”

“Trust me; I won't let you down. I won't let *us* down. I'm ready to knock Walter Jacobs on his ass with my performance tonight.”

“You sound pretty confident.” Joey's voice was quiet and hesitant.

“I know that I have more insecurities than most shrinks

could probably read about throughout their entire med school experiences, but Venus has none. She'll make sure we've got our chance."

Joey started to smile, his furrowed brow softening. "Venus is the fucking ballsiest...."

"Woman?" Del snorted.

"I was going to say, she's the fucking ballsiest, most talented person I've ever seen or heard in my life."

"Even more than Divine?"

"Divine is dead; Venus is alive and kicking, and she owns everyone she performs for." Joey ghosted his fingers over Del's soft hair. "And now it's time for her to get ready." He tilted his head up and brought Del in for a chaste kiss on the lips. "Do you want to get ready in the dressing room tonight? Then you can change back into Del before we go out to celebrate."

Del smiled, seeing and hearing Joey's renewed confidence. "That sounds great, but after two shows tonight, we won't be out of the club until after two o'clock in the morning. I'd much rather come back here and celebrate without taking the time to get out of Venus's dress and make-up first."

Joey stepped back, genuinely grinning. "Okay, go to it."

Del gave Joey one more quick kiss and started to head into the bedroom to don his alter ego but was stopped. Joey grabbed Del's arm and pulled him in for a deep, toe-curling kiss.

Del was stunned. The kiss resonated throughout his body. It was electric and he felt shocked and invigorated by the contact. “Wow, what was that for?”

“I just wanted you to know how much I love you and appreciate what you’re doing for us—not just tonight, but tomorrow too.”

Del nodded and smiled, acutely aware of what his partner was referring to.

He entered their bedroom and sat at his vanity table. One by one, Del added layers to facilitate the transformation. First, he sponged on his base, then the eye shadow, followed by the brow brush, mascara, and liner. He added a touch of shimmering rouge to each cheek, creating a glow to enhance the mysterious look that would show through Venus’s veil.

Finally, he donned the wig, strapped on his falsies—not too large, just enough to add cleavage to the gown—and the sparkling hosiery. Then he carefully stepped into Venus’s gown, covered from top to bottom with silver sequins, slipped into his silver pumps, and placed the alluring veil to complete the picture.

Venus looked in the mirror. “You’re every man’s wet dream, darling,” she commented in her husky, seductive voice, now prepared to step out into the world and own them all.

By the time the odd couple, one in black jeans, a simple fitted T-shirt and sports jacket, the other in an attention-demanding gown, reached The Wine Cellar, Venus was dying to get on stage.

JOEY left Venus backstage and then brought the night's set of music to the accompanist. He caught Mark's eye and joined his employer and Mr. Jacobs at the prime table in the club. They were front and center, practically close enough to touch the stage.

"I'll be watching Venus closely. I want to hear the songs, but I'm also going to pay close attention to the performance and interpretation of the music."

Joey nodded his understanding. Both he and Del were auditioning tonight. "You won't be disappointed. My partner is brilliant. Nothing can stop him."

"Although I'm sure you wouldn't exaggerate, you don't mind if I observe and determine my own opinion, young man?" Mr. Jacobs smirked at Mark and Joey blushed.

"Sorry. Of course, sir."

Mark signaled his crew and the lights dimmed.

The first three performers were adequate and garnered attention and catcalls from the audience along with substantial applause.

"You have quite a good group these days, Mark. Where do you find them?"

Mark raised his glass to his friend. "They all come to me. Reputation is a valuable thing, even in this branch of show business."

Mr. Jacobs raised his glass in return. “To you, my friend. Many successful engagements and actors should always come your way.”

The three men drank to Mark’s continued success as the announcement of the performer everyone had been waiting for came over the loud speaker.

“...So let’s hear it for Venus!”

The crowd went wild. Mr. Jacobs looked around and was somewhat surprised by the unprecedented welcome when Venus took her place center stage. There was an anticipatory silence that enveloped the entire room. The pin drop cliché would have been an understatement.

When Venus began to sing the opening ballad, Walter Jacobs watched her at first, appearing as mesmerized as the rest of the onlookers by the silky, smooth quality of her voice.

The song was delivered perfectly. Joey risked a smile as he noted Mr. Jacobs’s reactions, then turned to observe the audience.

As the first song came to an end, the audience rose out of their seats. Some had tears in their eyes, and others kept yelling “Brava!” as the thunderous applause continued. Then, with a second subtle bow and wave of her arm, Venus silenced the entire room and they returned to their seats to await the next number.

Some pieces were less dramatic, one or two were even light and boisterous, and then one final ballad was executed.

Joey surveyed the audience. Venus owned them all, and he couldn't have been more pleased and proud.

He ventured a glance back at the man he hoped would make them stars in the mainstream world. Joey was shocked as he witnessed a tear streak down the side of the respected producer's cheek. They had done it.

After the set, Venus, escorted by a stagehand, joined the three men at the front table. She offered her hand to Walter Jacobs, who took it and bestowed the appropriate kiss. The older man gallantly pulled out a chair for the still-silent performer, who sat graciously.

"So, Walter, what do you think?" Mark was casual, but Joey could see that he was almost as excited as they were.

"Mark, you clearly underestimated this talent—both of these talents." Mr. Jacobs turned to Joey. "Son, your songs are touching and sensitive and several of them have a humorous edge that not all songwriters are able to grasp." He then turned to Venus. "And you, my dear, are a brilliant undiscovered talent—that is, until tonight."

Venus nodded without uttering a sound.

Joey was at the edge of his seat. "Does this mean...."

"Young man, if you and your partner would like to sign a contract for representation and production, we'll be in business come Monday morning."

"I'll be there to pick up the contracts." Joey could barely contain himself but tried to remain as businesslike as possible.

“Don’t forget to bring your music with you. We’ll need to have copies of everything on file for your protection and ours once the contracts are signed.”

THE remainder of the night was a blur of excitement. Mr. Jacobs left after the first show, and Venus performed with as much heart and soul during the second as she had throughout the first. The audience reaction was the same.

Joey remained backstage during the second set, unable to further control his excitement. Sitting still was no longer a possibility.

When the final number of the evening was completed, Venus left the stage to join her partner.

Joey lifted Venus off the ground and spun her around. “We did it! You did it—you had them all fucking hypnotized. You’re amazing!”

Del pulled away his veil. “You were right the first time: *we did it.*” Del and Joey clung to each other as they stepped out of the club into the cool night air to hurry home and enjoy their celebration.

“You were brilliant tonight, and I’ll brilliantly show my gratitude as soon as we get home.” Joey laughed, his voice filled with glee.

“I’m counting on it, but I have to admit, these new shoes are killing me. I’ll just about make it home and then I need to get them stretched or something.”

“Oh, shit!”

Del looked at Joey. “They’re not too bad; I’ll be able to get home.”

Joey shook his head. “No, it’s not that. I left my bag and all my music in the club.”

“Go get it. That music is our ticket to the stars.” Del looked at his swelling ankles. “I’ll wait here. I can’t take one extra step.”

“Okay. I’ll be back in a minute.” Joey kissed Del. “I can’t wait to get you out of that dress and that fucking make-up.”

Del’s cock twitched with anticipation. “Then hurry the fuck up or I’ll start without you.”

“You’d better not. I have wild and wonderful plans for tonight.”

“Can’t wait. I can never wait to be with you.” Del kissed Joey and looked on dreamily as his partner turned to run back and retrieve the precious music.

Del stood alone, leaning against the building. He closed his eyes, reveling in the cool, peaceful night and thinking of their bright future.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DEL watched as Joey ducked back into The Wine Cellar to retrieve his music. Their dreams were finally coming true, and far sooner than he could have ever imagined. This was their ticket not only to a career but to a commitment to one another that could last a lifetime.

Tonight, Del would show Joey his appreciation in dozens of ways, starting with a hot shower. He chuckled at his own double entendre. If only these new shoes didn't hurt so damn much, he would have doubled back with Joey, but he just folded his arms, leaned against the cool bricks, and closed his eyes, enjoying the relief of the first cool they'd had in a couple of weeks.

"Hey, lookie what I found, boys. A fucking faggot trying to make me think he's a lady of the evening."

"It's one of those fairy songbirds from the wimp cellar."

Del froze in terror as three men shouting catcalls surrounded him. He couldn't quite make out their faces, which were hidden in the shadows of the hoods of their sweatshirts. He looked from right to left, but there was no place to run.

The largest man's first forceful shove literally tossed Del into one of his cohorts. Sweat beaded across Del's forehead

as panic threatened to overtake him.

*Keep your head, Del; don't egg them on.* But his thoughts were reeling as the men, all three of them, shoved Del from one to the other, disorienting him.

"Stop, please!" Del pleaded, his voice strained with fear, not knowing what else to do.

"You want us to stop?" It was the same one who had first shoved him away from the wall. "We'll stop when you assholes stop trying to take over the fucking world with your faggot ways."

He was grabbed and dragged into the garbage-laden alley. Del tried to break free, struggling; he was thrown against some trash cans. The assailant viciously tore the front of Del's dress while the second hit him, bare-knuckled, square across his jaw. Del collapsed backwards against the bricks, feeling the warmth of blood oozing past his lips from the forceful blow.

He became dizzy and confused. *This isn't how the night is supposed to end; I have to be having some awful nightmare!* Joey had been right there just a moment ago; he'd be back to stop this. Del mumbled, almost incoherently, "He's coming. He'll kill you all."

Two of the men grabbed him on either side and lifted him off the ground. Del kicked and made contact.

"Fucking bastard nailed me with one of them high heels."

His shoes were yanked off, thrown rattling to the

ground. The sound resonated louder than it should have, and then he, too, was thrown to the ground, his wig falling away. Lightheaded from the sudden brutal attack, he shook his head, aware of shoes and rancid scents. Opening his eyes, he recognized the alley right next to the club. *How could this happen? Joey's near; he'll be here soon. Please help me.*

“Now you'll get what you deserve, you fucking pansy!” This time one of the men sat on his chest, a crushing weight, flashing a large hunting knife. His father had one just like it in a display case. Del's eyes widened with fear, and he tasted bile but was too terrified to move or vomit.

“See this?” The man held the knife to his neck. Del couldn't move, but he could feel moisture budding in his eyes. “This little baby is going to make sure you don't play girlie again.” With one swift motion, the man sliced through the sequined gown and ripped the rest away from Del's body.

Heart beating rapidly, Del fought the tears, not wanting to reveal his desperation. *Where are you, Joey? You should have been back by now.* Del tried to lose himself in thoughts of his lover. He would be there soon and save him—he had to.

“Faggot, look this way,” another of the hooded assailants called. The man on his chest was getting heavier, and Del had trouble breathing. “Look here now, pansy!”

“I... I can't,” Del whispered, his voice raspy.

“Get behind him. I want him to see what's coming.”

The man lifted himself off Del's chest, and for a second

all Del could do was gasp in a deep breath with relief. *Please, Joey, come now, please!*

The knife-wielding predator grabbed Del from behind his head and held the knife to his throat. “Don’t move too much, pretty boy, or I won’t be able to control what happens with my little toy.”

“Now look, you fucking fudge-packer,” the voice gloated.

Del tried to steady himself as his panic grew, trying to maintain some control. He slowly turned his head to avoid nicking himself on the blade, and then he saw the larger man, clearly the leader, holding a broken broom handle. “See this?”

Del remained silent.

“Answer me, you bastard.” The man kicked Del’s leg before smacking it hard across his bare chest. Del could feel the splintered handle tearing his exposed skin.

Del felt the pain and shock, but somehow he didn’t cry out.

“Didn’t you feel that? Come on, cry, you weenie, cry!” The broom handle came down again, harder this time, bruising, marking him. The pain was ripping through Del’s entire being. He could feel blood welling up on his torso.

The next blow was across his face and Del cried out.

“That’s it, you queer, let me hear your whiny cries. You’re all a bunch of goddamn sissies.” Another blow and Del cried out again.

He could no longer tell where the blows came from or landed. He tried to kick, but his legs were being held down by the third in the violent party.

“Now, I’m going to give you exactly what all you fucking fairies want. Turn him on his stomach!”

Del’s head rang and the voices faded in and out. He was dizzy and could no longer see clearly, eyes nearly swollen shut. Del wanted to throw up, but his bodily functions were frozen with incomparable fear. Then he felt the two men holding him turn him over. Were they finally going to leave him to die in the alley?

The leader grunted, “This is the last thing you’ll ever feel up that fudge-packing ass of yours.” He shoved the broom handle in front of Del’s face as he looked at the man hovering over him on his hands and knees. “That’ll teach you assholes taking over our city.”

Del closed his eyes, knowing now that the last sight he’d ever see was the face of hate. In the background he heard the leader yell, “Spread ’em!” One of the others pried his ass cheeks apart, scratching him, showing none of the care Del had experienced from Joey... and Del tried to imagine his life with Joey, knowing it was all about to end.

RUNNING behind Mark, who had his gun firmly in hand, Joey saw Del lying bloodied on the ground, his attackers poised to shove a broom handle into him. “Del!” he screamed.

Mark fired.

The man holding the splintering piece of wood cried out in pain and grabbed his leg, collapsing and also dropping the broom handle.

Joey grabbed the man who had his filthy hands on Del's ass and punched him, trembling, wanting to kill, while Mark held the gun at the head of the animal holding a knife.

Mark growled, "Drop the knife. If you move away without touching him, I won't blow your brains out."

In the distance, Joey caught the sounds of sirens rapidly approaching and watched Mark toss back each of their hoods. "Take a good look at these pigs, kid. Remember their faces so we can identify them later," Mark told him, rage lighting his voice.

Joey took a long look but then ran to Del, making a soft sound. *No!* He collapsed beside his lover, cradling him in his arms. "I'm so sorry. I should never have left you for a second." Joey sat rocking in pure agony behind his lover, his only love, who lay unconscious in his arms.

The flood of tears streamed down his face uncontrollably. He bent down to kiss Del's bloody forehead. He brushed his hand gently through his sweaty hair, moving the dress over Del's body as best as possible to shelter him from the sudden chill, from the violation of the attack.

Joey looked up and down his lover's body, seeing the marks and bruises and taking them in as if he had been hit as well. Desperate to do something for Del, he yanked off his shirt and draped it over him, trying to protect him somehow.

“Shhh, baby, you’re safe now. No one will ever hurt you again,” Joey whispered. “Soon everyone will want to be you—your name will be in lights just like we always planned! Del M. Dixon will be envied by all.” Joey began to hum the new ballad he’d written especially for their big night.

Oblivious to approaching help, Joey continued to whisper between moments of humming. “Only the M won’t stand for Mathers, it’ll stand for ‘mine’, because that’s what you are; you’re mine forever. But you have to wake up! Please wake up. Please.” His pleading was choked with tears as Joey cradled his beautiful man. “I need you. I love you. You can’t leave me now.” Joey kissed Del’s unresponsive face and rocked him back and forth as the police cuffed and took away the assailants.

The ambulance crew finally arrived on the scene. One of the paramedics touched Joey’s shoulder gently to get his attention. “You have to let him go so we can help him, son.”

Joey only shook his head. “I can’t. I want him to know I didn’t abandon him! He must think I left him—how could I do this? He’s my life.”

“I’m sure he knows that, but we need to help him now.”

A bare whisper, “Is he....”

“He’s alive, but he needs immediate treatment, so please let us do our job. You can come with us in the ambulance.”

Mark appeared almost magically behind Joey. “Come on, kid, you need to let them get to work. They’re going to help him.” Joey looked at Mark, needing to believe, unable to let go of Del. “He’s survived and we nailed those bastards.”

Joey couldn't speak. He kept staring at his brutally beaten lover, numb, as Del was gently placed on the stretcher and wheeled carefully to the ambulance. Propelled by Mark, Joey was helped into the ambulance by one of the paramedics.

He wasn't sure why, but they were taking his pulse too. He heard Mark's voice but could no longer focus on the words.

Joey slid to his knees in the small space next to Del and held him, whispering over and over, "Don't die. Don't leave me."



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JOEY never left the hospital's crowded waiting room throughout the night. Mark and the investigating police officer stayed with him as the paramedics rushed Del into the emergency room.

Mark answered all of the officer's questions, detailing everything he and Joey had seen in the alley next to The Wine Cellar. The police officer looked at Joey and shook his head as he stood up, preparing to leave. "I'll catch him later."

It seemed like hours before a young resident arrived, informing Joey and Mark that there was internal bleeding. Del would need to be taken into surgery immediately if the doctors were to save his life.

Joey nodded, staring blankly at the doctor, still in shock, remembering how he had found Del. Mark remained with Joey as they took his beloved Del to the operating room.

The surgery seemed to go on forever, and the waiting was driving Joey crazy. By the time he could focus, no one was available to answer any of his questions. He began to walk up and down the aisles of empty waiting room chairs, his hands balling into fists, nails digging into his palms, leaving remnants of his pain and anger.

Mark slowly approached the young man and stopped

him with a gentle touch on his arm. “Joe, sit down and try to relax. He’s in good hands. The doctors here are great. They’ll make sure Del is stitched up like new, inside and out.”

Joey turned, glaring at Mark. “I can’t sit. This is all my fucking fault! I should never have left him—*you* told us that. Did I listen? Of course not. I’m so goddamn above it all ‘cause I’m an artist! My music was so fucking important, it couldn’t stay in The Wine Cellar for one damn night.” Joey brushed his hand over his face, continuing to pace.

Mark’s voice was firm and even. “You’re taking credit for something that was not your fault.

“You were so high on Walter’s offer—didn’t think anything could touch you.” He softened his voice. “I’m sure Del felt the same way.” Mark stepped behind the agitated young man and halted him with an insistent hand on his shoulder.

Joey turned around, staring into Mark’s eyes. He stood motionless until his body began to shake, eyes moist with tears threatening to stream down his cheeks. Mark grabbed Joey before he collapsed to the floor and held him, guiding them to a set of chairs in the corner of the room.

Joey couldn’t stop shuddering, the pain so deep he felt like a knife was ripping his own skin apart.

“Shhh, kid, it’ll be okay. Del’s gonna make it. He’s a fighter.” Mark spoke in hushed tones.

“How can you say that? You don’t know. Nobody here knows shit.” Joey lifted his head and looked at Mark through his reddened, puffy eyes. “But Del is fucking strong. Stronger

than even he realizes. I just wish he had the chance to show it.”

“Look at me, kid. He’ll have the chance... plenty of them. Don’t count him out yet; I haven’t.”

“You saw him lying there. How can you be so sure?”

Mark said nothing. He continued to hold the young man silently.

Joey feverishly rubbed his tired, irritated eyes, hoping to block out the image of Del lying there in the alley at the mercy of those bastards. He wanted them to suffer for what they had done—to suffer like Del was suffering right now—like he was suffering.

Mark placed a supportive hand on Joey’s knee. The two sat next to each other in silence; there was no more to be said. Mark sat up straight, a defiant edge to his demeanor, while Joey slumped over, covering his face from the bright lights that were stinging his eyes.

Mark stood up suddenly, startling his young companion. “Hey, Joe, he’s coming. That’s Del’s surgeon.”

Joey got up and rapidly approached the doctor. He was anxious to hear his report, yet dreading the words the surgeon might utter. “How is he? Please tell me everything went well. When can I see him, be with him?”

Mark interrupted, “Let the man speak.”

Joey nodded, looking at the doctor, hoping for a positive response—something he could hold onto.

“He did have internal bleeding, but we were able to get it under control. It’s a good thing you stopped those assailants from doing further damage, or we may not have been able to save him.”

Joey looked from the doctor to Mark and back again. “So he’s going to be all right?” He couldn’t hide his need to hear those words.

“Yes, son, your... friend will be okay, but it won’t happen overnight. Don’t expect a miraculous recovery. Finding and getting him here in time was miracle enough.”

Joey lowered his eyes, embarrassed and riddled with guilt, knowing that his irresponsibility had caused the attack. If only he hadn’t left Del alone. But he’d have to deal with that later. Now, it was all about Del and helping him get well.

“When can I see him?”

“Not right now. You’ll have to be patient. He’s in recovery and will be there for at least another couple of hours.”

The doctor looked directly at Mark. “Why don’t you take him home to change? By the time you come back, he should be in a room and you can sit with him.”

Joey shook his head. “I can’t leave. I want to be with him when he wakes up. I need to be there.”

“Look....”

“Joe. Joseph Dixon.”

The doctor's voice was definitive and curt. "Look, Mr. Dixon, he won't wake up for at least another six hours. I can guarantee that, and you won't be able to help him unless you get yourself cleaned up and refreshed."

Joey looked at his watch. He had called the Mathers's home about three hours earlier. Allowing time for them to wake up and get dressed, he didn't expect them to arrive at the hospital for another couple of hours.

He had only spoken to Del's mother. She had said she would convey everything to her husband and they'd soon be on their way.

Mark took Joey home and waited for him to shower and change. Then he took his young charge to pick up a bite to eat at the local deli before dropping him back at the hospital. "I'll see you this afternoon, kid. Stay calm or you'll be of no use to Del."

Joey nodded. "Will you tell the others?" His voice was weak, and he was having trouble stifling the yawns illustrating his exhaustion.

"I'll let everyone know what happened." Mark smiled. "By tomorrow, this place will be filled with concerned queers who can serenade anyone who needs a special treat during their hospital stay."

Joey smiled at Mark's lame attempt to raise his spirits. "Sounds great. I'm sure Del will love the company and the entertainment." Joey lowered his eyes and whispered, "Can you tell...."

"I'll call Walter this morning. Knowing him, he'll be

patient and wait until Del's ready to sign the contracts. Walter may have the reputation of being extremely selective and ruthless, but he also knows a winner when he spots it, and he's not about to let you two slip through his fingers."

Joey gave a half smile, no longer elated with the knowledge that he would soon have his music heard by the masses. It felt more like a consolation prize. "Thanks for everything, Mark. I'll see you later."

"Count on it. Now go take care of our boy."

Joey walked into the hospital with his still-uneaten breakfast and was directed to Del's room. He was glad to see that Mr. and Mrs. Mathers hadn't arrived, so he could have some private moments with his partner.

He sat down in the chair that was alongside the bed. While Del wore an oxygen mask, the nurse assured him that he was breathing on his own. "Your friend's a real fighter. After what he's been through, most men would be hooked up to a lot more, but not this guy. All of us at the nurses station are in awe of his will to live."

"He's the most amazing man I've ever met." Joey wasn't sure why, but he felt the need to talk to this nurse, this stranger. "He gives his all to everything he does. He excels at whatever he takes on—his day job, his future singing career... and me."

"Sounds like you're both pretty lucky to have each other." Her smile was soft, gentle, and understanding. "The doctor said you should be allowed to know what's happening. You're partners, right?"

“Yeah, we’re partners, in every sense of the word.” Joey held Del’s hand and looked at his bandaged scalp and severely bruised face. His voice hitched. “Today, today he was going to tell his father... about us. We’re planning to get married, or as close to it as we’re allowed in this state.”

“I’m sure you’ll still get your special day and it’ll be worth waiting for.”

Joey nodded. He could no longer speak. All he wanted was to look at and focus on Del.

“He’ll hear you if you speak to him. I’m sure of it.” The nurse walked out of the room and closed the door.

Joey placed Del’s hand over his, lacing their fingers together, and started stroking his arm, taking care not to jostle the IV lines that were giving him nutrition, medication—life.

He looked around the stark, sanitary environment. The lights were bright and the machines beeped continually, keeping Joey alert.

Looking back at Del, uncertain if he would hear him, Joey whispered, “I know I tell you from time to time, but you have no idea how much, how deeply I love you.”

He stood up and kissed Del on one of the few unmarked spots on his cheek. “You have to get better soon. I’m nothing without you. This may sound like a stupid cliché, but we really are two fucking parts of a whole.”

Joey sat back in the chair and gently brushed one of his hands over the hospital gown covering most of Del’s

remaining injuries. “I know you thought you were the weak one, the one who could only come out when hidden under pounds of make-up, but you were wrong.” Feeling his throat tightening, Joey persevered, “It’s me. I’m the weak one. I need to have you by my side or nothing is worthwhile.

“That nurse asked if we were partners. She doesn’t know the half of it.” Joey felt his eyes moistening once more. “I need you, Del; please wake up soon, so I can tell you that again and again. No more hiding for either of us, okay?”

Joey rested his head on the bedrail and let his eyes close, still holding Del’s hand, hoping to feel his fingers move, hoping to reconnect.

Thoughts focused entirely on the sleeping form in front of him, Joey didn’t hear the door open.

“So you’re the one.” Mrs. Mathers glared at Joey.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“THE one?” Joey was too tired to understand what Del’s mother could be referring to. “Yes, I was the one who called you last night.”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it, young man.” Joey looked at Mrs. Mathers, confused by her angry, accusatory tone. “You’re the one who took my son away to live this decadent life. Maybe now, after all this, he’ll see you for what you are and straighten up.”

Joey didn’t miss the choice of words Del’s mother used to express herself. He blinked back and stared at Mrs. Mathers, shocked by her attitude. Joey vividly recalled Del claiming this was the parent who supported him.

He nodded with clarity. “So that’s why you stopped him from telling his father that he’s gay.”

“He’s not gay. Wendell was exploring the world around him in college. He just got involved with the wrong group of kids. I knew he’d wise up someday; I just hoped it would be before he left school.” Joey was dumbfounded by Mrs. Mathers’s ominous declarations. “I’m just glad he’ll have the opportunity to return to a normal life before you get him killed.”

Joey had had enough. Overwhelmed by exhaustion, he

could remain polite for only so long. “Hate nearly got him killed, not me!” He took a deep breath and continued barely above a whisper, “I love him.”

Mrs. Mathers glared, her voice filled with venom. “Look what your kind of love did to him. I love him! I gave birth to him!”

Joey tried to calm the escalating interaction, not wanting Del to awaken to an angry altercation. “And I’m grateful for that, but he’s my life now, like Mr. Mathers is yours.”

“Mr. Mathers isn’t my life,” she huffed. “He’s merely my husband. Wendell is my life.”

Despite his growing aggravation, Joey felt a small fluttering against his hand. He immediately turned away from Mrs. Mathers and stood from his chair, to lean closer to the man he loved.

Forcing down the anger that had overtaken him just moments before, Joey regained his composure and spoke softly, “Del, baby, can you hear me? I need you so much. Squeeze my hand to show me that you’re coming back to me.”

Joey waited and looked at his hand, but there was no movement.

“Let me try.” Del’s mother moved hastily to the other side of the bed. Joey noted that she ghosted her hand over her son’s fingers but never quite made contact. “Wendell, it’s Mama.” She rested her arm on the bedrail. “I’ve arrived to take care of you, sweetheart. It’s time to open your eyes now.

I'll make sure no one hurts you ever again."

Joey didn't move, hoping that somehow Del would hear and listen to one of them and start to wake. Forcing himself to speak more confidently, Joey persevered. "Del, I know you're scared, but I'm right by your side, and I'll never let you out of my sight again. I promise."

Joey felt Del's fingers slowly curl around his own in a frail grip. He lifted Del's hand to his lips and gently placed a kiss on the back of it.

"Stop that. You'll hurt him."

Joey's head shot up, startled by Mrs. Mathers's ridiculous assumptions. "I'm not hurting him; I'm showing Del I'm here for him and with him. He needs to know he's not alone."

"Is that what happened? Did you leave him alone?"

Joey cringed, feeling the guilt he had been hoping to bury wash over him once again. He had to focus on Del, on what was best for his lover at that moment. "We can go into the details of the attack at a later time." Joey spoke in a hushed voice so as not to alarm Del as he began to respond. "Right now all I care about is Del and making sure he feels safe."

"That's all I care about too—keeping him safe from now on." Del's mother turned her back on Joey. "Sweetie, it's time to wake up. I came all the way from Salem to see your lovely blue eyes."

Joey tenderly bussed Del's hand and felt his fingers

wiggle once again. “Okay, baby, I know you’re in there trying to get out. Please don’t make me wait any longer.”

Del’s swollen eyelids slowly began to flutter and then open. He looked bewildered. When he turned his head toward Joey, he grimaced.

“Shhh, baby, don’t move.” Joey hated seeing Del in pain. He moved into his line of vision so Del wouldn’t have to move any further. “Hey, it’s good to see your beautiful eyes.” Joey paused, allowing his emotions to remain steady. “I’m sitting right next to you.”

“And so am I, dear. Mama knows when you need her.” Mrs. Mathers stared at Joey, her lips tightened into a sneer, but he ignored her.

“Joey, why here, why am I here?” Del’s weakened voice was barely audible through the oxygen mask covering his nose and mouth.

Mrs. Mathers jumped in to respond. “It was those awful—”

Without looking directly at Del’s mother, Joey grabbed her wrist to silence her. “It doesn’t matter now. All that matters is that you’re going to be okay and you’re back with us.”

A weak smile appeared under the oxygen mask. “Want this off. Kiss you.”

Joey laughed softly at his partner’s waking thought. “I know you do. I’d love to kiss you too.”

The edge’s of Del’s mouth curled up a bit more.

“I just pressed the call button. Someone should be here soon to check on you now that you’re awake.”

“Hospital?” Del blinked, his smile disappearing. “Hurts.”

“Yes, we’re in a hospital.” Joey tenderly touched Del’s cheek with the tips of two of his fingers. “I know it hurts. I’ll explain everything later.”

It was obvious that Del was still confused, but Joey was relieved that Del didn’t appear to have any memory of the attack—at least for now. It would be too painful to awaken to the recollection of that horror.

Holding Del’s hand when the doctor arrived accompanied by one of the nurses, Joey remained by the bedside.

“I understand our young friend is beginning to wake.” The doctor looked from Joey to the new addition in the room. “You must be Del’s mother.”

“Yes, I am. How is he, doctor? When can I take him home where his father and I can properly care for him?” Joey’s eyes widened. There was no way that he was letting this woman bring his partner, his Del, back to Salem.

The doctor looked back and forth at both visitors. “Why don’t both of you step out into the hallway for a couple of minutes while I examine my patient. When I’m done, I’ll be happy to fill you in on everything.”

Joey gently stroked his finger tips over Del’s hand and looked into his eyes, hoping Del could somehow feel the unspoken words he desperately wanted to convey. Joey

noted the small smile reappear under the mask and he returned it. "I'll be back soon."

After the door to the room closed behind them, Mrs. Mathers looked directly at Joey. "How dare you?"

"How dare I what?" Losing any remaining patience, Joey combed his hand through his matted hair and glared at the woman who purported to love Del unconditionally. "How dare I want to take care of him? How dare I hold his attention and focus more than you? How dare I love him?"

"You have a lot of nerve, trying to usurp my place in his life. You have no right, no right whatsoever." Del's mother looked up and down the hospital hallway. "If I could find a security guard in this godforsaken place, I'd have you removed."

"I have every right to be here. Del's my partner. That's not going to change."

"I know the law. You have no rights in this state—none whatsoever." The woman took a firm stance, holding her purse tightly in her hand. Joey imagined she'd have a mark left from the strap when she loosened her grip.

Joey started to turn away from Mrs. Mathers. He didn't respond immediately, hoping to avoid making a scene but knowing that it was already too late for that when the doctor came out to speak with them.

Del's mother spoke first, cutting off the doctor's first word. "I don't want him here, and I can take care of my son. He has no legitimate place in Wendell's life."

The doctor placed his hand gently on Mrs. Mathers's lower arm. "As a matter of fact, this young man has every right to be here."

"What?"

"Please calm down, ma'am." The doctor spoke softly and evenly. "I'm sorry, but I have to contradict you. When he arrived with your son, Mr. Dixon immediately presented Del's signed Power of Attorney, naming Joseph Dixon as his authorized representative."

"That can't be. He's not even twenty-three yet." Mrs. Mathers started pacing back and forth like a caged animal.

"I'm not sure why this is a problem for you," the doctor nodded toward Joey, "but we have to abide by the law and the paperwork was very much in order."

"What's the world coming to when a mother has fewer rights than, than a *male companion*?"

Joey couldn't believe Lillian Mathers's insensitivity. She seemed to be more concerned with Joey than her own son. He didn't know what to say. Having never met Mrs. Mathers before, he wondered whether this was just a reaction to learning her son had been bashed or if there really was more to it.

The doctor didn't respond any further. "I would like to tell you both about Del's condition."

"Please, doctor, please tell me he's going to be okay." Joey was pleading, hoping to hear all the right words.

"I can definitely tell you he'll recover. With proper

physical therapy, he will regain complete physical movement, although he will not be able to climb stairs for at least four to six weeks.” Joey nodded, wondering what type of arrangements he would have to make for them since it was obvious that their fourth floor walk-up would be out of the question.

“In addition, while he’s in the hospital, he will receive counseling for the emotional trauma he experienced.” The doctor took a deep breath before continuing. “While some never remember their attacks, many do, and he’ll need professional help to get through the wide array of emotions that may evoke.”

The doctor looked at Mrs. Mathers and then back to Joey. “I would advise you to strongly encourage Del to continue therapy after he leaves the hospital. Emotional scars take much longer to heal than physical damage.”

Joey nodded. “I’ll do everything you say, doc. He’ll get all the professional help he needs. When do you think he can go home?”

“I’d like to keep him here for at least four to five more days. At that point, we’ll see how he’s doing. He’s in a step-down room now, and I’ll approve a standard room for him tomorrow if all goes as expected. We have to take this one day at a time.”

Mrs. Mathers chimed in, “He should have a private room. Only the best for my son.”

The doctor nodded politely in her direction and turned to the nurse. “Please note that on Mr. Mathers’s chart.”



“Yes, doctor.” The nurse returned to the room, presumably to make the proper notation on the chart hanging on the end of Del’s bed.

“One more thing.”

“Yes, doctor?” Joey was trying to remember everything he’d been instructed in the hopes of giving Del the best care possible, both in the hospital and especially once he was discharged.

The doctor’s voice took on a firm tone. “It’s clear that the two of you have some differences of opinion. Keep them away from my patient. He does not need to be further agitated or aggravated. He’s been through quite enough already.”

“Of course, doctor. I would never do anything to hurt my son’s recovery.” Joey nodded his agreement.

“Good. Now I need to see my other patients, but I’ll be back this evening to check how your partner is progressing.”

Joey put out his hand and the doctor shook it. “Thank you, sir, for everything.”

The doctor nodded and left the area, followed immediately by the nurse who had reemerged from Del’s room.

Mrs. Mathers and Joey silently walked back into the room to discover that the oxygen mask was no longer covering Del’s face. The IV tubes were still in place, but Joey noted that new bags had replaced those that had been there throughout the night.

Del’s eyes were closed and he was snoring softly.

“Well, young man,” Mrs. Mathers’s voice was quiet and bitterly cold, “you certainly have weaseled your way into my son’s life.”

“I didn’t weasel my way in. I already told you, I love him.”

“We’ll see just how much you love him.” Joey was taken aback, not sure what she could possibly mean.

“I’ve arranged to stay in a friend’s apartment on Fifth Avenue. She’s on a three-month vacation through Europe.” She paused and looked pointedly at Joey. “It has a doorman at every entrance and an elevator.”

“Why don’t you give me the address so I’ll know exactly where it is? I’ll check it out later and start moving some of our things there.”

Del’s mother shook her head. “You really don’t understand, do you? I intend to have Wendell recuperate with me in a safe, secure environment, where he can eventually get around on his own.”

“That’s very generous of you, but we’ll find a place—”

“You are not invited.”

Joey stared in shock and dismay.

“Remember what the doctor said. We have to think of Wendell first.” Mrs. Mathers took a seat on the opposite side of Del’s bed and grinned. “Don’t you want what’s best for him?”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

JOEY remained by Del's bed at all times. He didn't want to miss any of his waking moments.

After the third night of sleeping in the hospital chair at Del's bedside with his feet propped up on the edge, Joey's muscles began to suffer. He was riddled with aches and pains from stiffness and neglect. He pondered taking a long walk outside but couldn't bring himself to leave the building. The need to stand watch over Del outweighing all else.

Mrs. Mathers was spending the nights at her friend's apartment.

Del awoke that morning, more alert than previous days. He was still on IV antibiotics and pain medications, but his smile seemed more genuine. "You look like shit."

Joey laughed and stood up to gently kiss Del. "Glad to see you're returning to your normal, heartwarming self."

Del ghosted his fingers weakly through his lover's hair. "Have you even showered since I was admitted?"

"Yeah, the nurses let me use the shower in your room since you won't be using it for awhile. It seems you're going to be getting the elite sponge bath treatment for a few more days."

“That’s good. I wouldn’t want to deprive all those male nurses of their jollies.”

It felt great to be able to joke with Del. “Well, then you must have noticed that I banned all male nurses from your case. Besides, I think I look fabulous. It must be the pain meds distorting your vision.”

“I never knew you had such a strong possessive streak.” Del smiled through a yawn. “I like it.”

“I’ll just bet you do.” Joey winked at his lover.

Del yawned again and his eyes began to flutter. “These fucking meds keep making me fall asleep.”

“Better that than hurting.” Joey held Del’s hand in both of his. “I hate that you’re in pain, that this happened.”

“I still don’t remember how I got mugged.”

Joey had agreed not to tell Del what really occurred. The staff psychiatrist felt it would be better for him to remember in his own time. Therapy would help him focus on his memory and the horrible reality of that night. “You’ll remember soon enough. I’m just glad I didn’t lose you.”

“Most muggers want only cash. Boy, were they barking up the wrong tree.” Joey gave a half smile. He couldn’t stop the *what ifs* that continually plagued his thoughts.

“The doctor said that you should be able to go home by the weekend if you keep progressing this quickly.”

“I guess that means no more sponge baths for me, unless, of course, you’d like to take over that job.”

“Now there’s an idea worth looking forward to, but....”

“I know, with my mother around it won’t be quite so comfortable.”

“Del, about what happens after the hospital...”

“Yeah, I know. I can’t go back to work for at least a couple more weeks, but you called my boss, right?”

Joey looked at Del, trying to proceed in a way that wouldn’t upset him. “Oh, yeah, that’s all set. It’s part of company policy. If a doctor says you can’t work due to an illness or injury, they won’t argue and your job is secure.” He paused to take a deep breath. “That’s not what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“What’s up?” Del turned to Joey and tried to reach the button to raise the bed into a sitting position.

“I’ve got it.” Joey elevated the bed so Del could hold a conversation more comfortably.

“You seem concerned about something.” Del’s brow furrowed. “Should I be worried?”

“No, no, not really.” Joey lowered the bedrail and sat next to Del, relishing the closeness, yet careful not to disturb any of the tubes leading to his IV bag. “Well, it’s about the apartment. I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to leave it empty too long, and, well, your mother said the place where she’s bringing you—you know, her friend’s apartment—only has two bedrooms....”

“What the fuck are you saying?” Despite the weakness, Del’s concern was evident as he attempted to raise his voice.

“You’re leaving me with my mother?”

Joey stroked his fingers up and down Del’s arm to calm him. “You know your father will be coming down on the weekends, and since he doesn’t know about us.... I just think for everyone’s sanity and security I should probably stay at the apartment while you’re recuperating.”

“That’s totally fucked.” Del pressed his eyes shut, the edge of his brow wrinkling under the turban-style bandage. “You know I was going to tell my father after I performed for Walter Jacobs. We’ll just have to postpone the audition since my mugging fucked that up.”

Joey wanted to put a fist through the wall—or through the head of one of the bashers. The attack had disrupted Del’s memory of the entire night, including Venus’s brilliant performance.

With the psychiatrist present, Del’s primary physician had explained that three people had mugged him and been caught in the act, but that was all. Joey knew it bothered him to feel that there was more to the story that had yet to be learned, but Del didn’t argue and focused intently at each visit from psychiatrist.

On the advice of the hospital staff, Mrs. Mathers and Joey had both encouraged Del to concentrate on healing his body first, so he could start to walk with crutches by the time he left the hospital.

“Walter Jacobs has been in contact with Mark. He told him that he’d be ready to proceed when we are.” Joey selected his words carefully. He didn’t want to lie to Del any

more than was necessary.

Walter Jacobs had actually contacted Joey by phone, explaining that good talent was hard to come by, and he would have the contracts prepared the moment they were able to get to his office.

“Maybe it’s time for me to tell my father now. At least he can’t make me feel more miserable than I already do,” Del huffed.

“The doctors don’t want you to have any emotional upheavals.” Joey was trying to stay strong, but his determination was waning. He hoped that Del would listen to him and not make things more stressful for everyone involved.

Mrs. Mathers had made her opinion quite clear, and the doctors seemed to support her theory that it could emotionally damage Del to add one more major trauma.

As much as it killed Joey, he knew that he had to leave Del in his mother’s hands for a while.

“That’s bullshit. I’m finally ready to let my father know I’m gay and now you’re stopping me!”

“Just until you’re healthier.” Joey looked at Del, pleading with his entire being. “Don’t fight me on this. Trust me, okay?”

Del closed his eyes. “Okay—for now.” Del looked at Joey, a tear running down his cheek. “You’re not leaving me, are you? You’ll visit me, won’t you?”

Joey’s moistening eyes matched his partner’s. “I have no

intention of leaving you. We'll just have to live apart for a short while. In the meantime, Mark offered me a job. I'll be working at The Wine Cellar, trying to resolve all the technical glitches in the sound system. It'll bring in a little extra cash while you're stuck in bed."

Del looked at Joey, his eyes red. "I'd like to make a joke, but I feel like shit right now. I hate the thought of us being apart because of some assholes who roughed me up. This totally sucks."

Joey forced his voice to remain even and firm. "I know, but it's for the best. Maybe this will give you some time to talk to your mother and explain to her who you really are. You've never done that."

Del swept a stray tear from his face. "No, I haven't. I didn't realize she knew I was gay until the day before you and I left for New York."

Joey nodded and turned away, looking out the window. Leaving Del with his mother would be torture. He knew she didn't want him in her son's life and that she blamed him for the bashing. Why shouldn't she? Even he blamed himself.

Del would be safe with his mother. Joey knew in his heart that if it were up to Mrs. Mathers, he and her son would never see each other again. She wanted Del to have the upstanding life she'd always dreamed for him and now that his mother would be with him twenty-four hours a day, Joey feared that she would prey on his insecurities.

Joey's worst fear was that Del would remember the bashing when he wasn't near. He would then know, without



question, that he had been brutally attacked, not mugged—almost beaten to death—because Joey had put his music before his lover.

While Joey had been staring blankly out the window, Del had fallen back to sleep. The pain medication had finally won out. Joey gazed at the face he adored more than anything in the world. Gripping the bedrail so tight his hands began to redden, Joey started to shake. Tears fell unchecked, moistening Del's exposed arm and the hospital gown.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

JOEY stood in the background as the nurse handed Del the release papers. Mrs. Mathers was all smiles, fawning over her son as she held one of the plants that had been sent by friends to cheer him.

While Del had been receiving what they all hoped would be his final in-hospital examination, she had taken Joey aside in the hallway.

In a voice more suited to a prison warden, Lillian Mathers had made her intentions quite clear. “When we leave this hideous place, I plan to take my son, in our hired car, to the apartment where we’ll be residing. His father will be waiting for us there, so there’s no need for you to come. That will just confuse everything and cause my son too much stress.”

She glared directly at Joey. To punctuate her point, she added, “You wouldn’t want to cause Wendell any further anxiety than you already have, would you?”

Joey nodded his resignation. “Just let me have a few moments to say good-bye before we all leave the hospital... separately.”

After the doctor completed the discharge exam, he invited the two back into the room.

The doctor looked from Joey to Mrs. Mathers and back again. “Del has his instructions. He knows he has to take it easy, not rush things. His body will heal at its own pace. I have included a copy of the letter I was asked to fax to his company, insisting that he remain home for six weeks, at which time Del will be re-evaluated. If he’s progressing as well as I expect, he’ll be able to return to work part-time and begin to walk up and down steps.”

Del looked at the doctor. Although he had heard most of the instructions, he appeared to focus on one in particular. “Doc, about those steps. If I work hard with the physical therapist you got for me, do you think I’ll be able to get to those steps sooner?”

Joey smiled hopefully, anxious to hear the answer.

“Wendell, dear, don’t rush your recovery. You heard what the doctor said. You don’t want to end up back here, do you?” Mrs. Mathers moved to Del’s side and gently placed her hand on his shoulder.

“Of course I don’t want to end up back in the hospital, but I also don’t want to live apart from Joey for that long.”

The doctor smiled. “If, and only *if*, the physical therapist confirms your progress, then you’ll be able to try to navigate stairs somewhat earlier than anticipated. You had quite a number of internal injuries. We don’t want to aggravate those and cause a setback. Do you understand?”

Del winked at Joey as best he could through his healing bruises. “I understand completely.”

He paused and touched his head where the larger

bandage had been replaced by three smaller dressings. “Oh, and, doc, once my hair starts growing back, is there any reason you’ll have to shave it again?”

Joey saw the sadness in Del’s eyes. “Hey, you, I think it’ll be a hot change for a few weeks. Don’t worry.”

Del looked questioningly at Joey. “You’ve always told me that my hair is one of the things....” He looked down as his voice faded.

“One of the things I love about you. Yeah, but it’s just surface. As long as the inside’s the same, the outside will get back to normal soon enough.” Joey tried to put a relaxed smile on his face. “Or do you think I’m that shallow?”

Del’s renewed smile warmed Joey’s heart and made it all the harder to do what he knew was best.

The doctor responded calmly, “I don’t see why we’ll have to do any further shaving. By the time your hair grows in enough to cover the wounds, they should be long healed and hopefully a distant memory.”

Del nodded. “So that’s it? I can finally get out of this place?”

“I’ll see you in my office in six weeks. If you have any questions or concerns between now and then, you can always feel free to call. Your physical therapist will also keep me informed if there’s anything that should arise during your sessions.”

“I’ll make sure he’s at your office on time, doctor.” Mrs. Mathers shook the doctor’s hand. “I plan to take very good

care of my son and to ensure that he returns to *normal* as soon as possible.” A discreet glare in Joey’s direction emphasized her point.

The doctor left the room. There was a brief moment of uncomfortable silence.

“Well, as soon as my chariot arrives, we can get the fuck out of here.” Del looked at Joey. “Please tell me you’re coming with us for at least a while.”

Joey bit his lip. He wanted more than anything to see that Del got to his new home safely and to help him settle in, but he knew that would be impossible. “Look, um, Del, I spoke to Mark this morning. Something happened with his new sound system. It seems that someone spilled a drink on one of the speakers, and it’s been acting up ever since.”

“I can’t believe you have to go to work the day I’m finally getting discharged.” Del’s disappointment was evident. He had never been any good at hiding his feelings, and Joey wanted to recant everything he’d agreed to in that one moment.

He looked into Del’s face, brushing his hand across his cheek. It was awkward, as Mrs. Mathers had yet to leave her son’s side. “I’ll see if I can get away later, but apparently Mark trusts me more than some of the others, since he knows I’m a whiz with audio equipment.”

Del held Joey’s hand to his cheek. “You’re a whiz at a lot of things,” he said softly, then slowly turned his head and kissed the palm of Joey’s hand.

Joey forced a chuckle to choke back his pain. “Hey,

none of that in front of your mother.”

“Mom doesn’t mind, do you?” Del looked up at his mother.

“Of course not, dear.” But she never left his side. “However, I do think we should confirm that we have everything. Look at all the flowers your friends sent over. The room looks like a nursery. How are we going to get them all home?”

Del looked at his mother. “We’re not. I told the nurses to take all of them. They can use them to decorate the nurses station or give them to patients who have yet to receive any special attention from friends or family. It’s the only way I can really say thank you for all the help I got here.”

“That’s my boy, always thinking of others.” Mrs. Mathers gently squeezed her son’s shoulder.

Joey wanted to cry or scream or kick something. Del always thought of others, and now his mother was thinking only of herself. How had Del survived and become the decent person he was with a parent like that?

Mrs. Mathers began checking the bedside dresser drawers.

“Mom, could you please leave the room for a minute?”

Del’s mother looked at the two young men before her, expressionless. “Okay, but I’ll be back in five minutes or less. I’m just going to check on the wheelchair and see what’s taking so long.”

Del’s mother left the room, leaving the door wide open in

her wake. He looked into Joey's eyes. "Close it."

Joey nodded, unable to speak. He walked to the door, gripping the handle tighter than was necessary, and slowly closed it until he heard the lock catch.

"Come here." Del was speaking softly, hardly more than a whisper.

Joey turned around. He knew there was about to be some moment of truth between the two, and he wasn't sure if he could handle it. One thing was certain—he would never lie to Del unless it was in his lover's best interests.

Del ghosted his fingers over Joey's hand. "Something's wrong, and you're not telling me." He looked up, eyes pleading. "Does it have to do with the big secret about what really happened to me?"

Joey was surprised by the question. "What are you talking about? There's no secret; you were—"

"Mugged, I know. But it's obviously more than that—something I'm supposed to find out through therapy." Del reached out again and took Joey's hand, drawing him close to sit on the bed next to him. "Tell me what's going on. Something hasn't been right with you for the past couple of days."

"I'd think it would be obvious. I've been worried about you. I haven't slept much and I hate leaving you. I wanted to stay with you, but I have no choice. My hands are tied. I have to go to work, watch the apartment...." Joey had revealed nothing, his voice fading.

“It’s more. Please tell me.” Del’s face was riddled with questions and concern. He leaned over and kissed his partner chastely, love and longing in his eyes.

Joey didn’t know how much more he could take. “It’s just fucking irritating that I can’t take you home to our place and take care of you. But you’ll have your mom for support, and your father will be down on the weekends. I’ll keep in contact whenever I can.”

“Joey, please promise me that this isn’t some insane way for you to say good-bye.”

Joey lowered his head, unable to look at the man who made his life worth living. “Why would you think a thing like that?”

“I don’t know, but I’m just getting this strange feeling that you’re trying to put distance between us rather than help me heal and get back home to you.” Del hadn’t released Joey’s hand. “Does it have to do with the attack? I know I look hideous.”

Joey’s eyes widened. “No, no, it’s nothing like that. It’s just that....”

The door swung open and Mrs. Mathers walked in with a big smile pasted on her face as she looked at Joey and Del sitting next to one another on the bed. She was immediately followed by a nurse pushing a wheelchair.

“Well, Mr. Mathers, I understand you’re leaving us today. Congratulations and take care of yourself.”

Del looked at Joey and then back at his mother. “I guess



I'll be heading out now."

"Come, dear. I'm so looking forward to taking you home."

Del stared directly into Joey's eyes as he spoke. "It's not my home, Mother. It never will be. I know where my home is."

Joey was taken aback by Del's statement, the determined edge in his voice apparent. His heart filled with mixed emotions of longing for this man and pride in his actions. He allowed his expression to betray him, yet Joey couldn't bring himself to utter another word.

The nurse helped Del into the chair and Joey watched as the only man he had ever loved was turned away from him and pushed out the door. Joey was overwhelmed by the emptiness in his heart. Too many unknowns haunted the future. As he watched the distance grow and the wheelchair turn out of sight, Joey felt a cold chill run through him. He allowed his exhausted body to collapse into one of the hard plastic hospital chairs.

Nothing mattered now—nothing except moving forward, moving on—for Del.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

JOEY returned to work shortly after he watched Del and his mother leave. He felt empty, void of any spirit. It wasn't long before his phone began to ring loudly in his pocket. He reached for it, looked at the caller ID, and replaced it unanswered.

He had made a promise to Mrs. Mathers—a promise that was in Del's best interest—and he planned to keep it. A clean break was the best solution. Joey knew that once Del realized that he was the one who was responsible for the attack, the one who abandoned his lover, their break up would only be a matter of time.

The phone rang two more times, and Joey didn't even bother to look at the caller ID, trying to block out all thoughts other than retuning the sound system.

A jovial voice boomed from the far side of the stage. "I knew you were a good worker, but this much attention to a fucking speaker seems a bit ridiculous." Joey startled and turned to find Mark approaching. "Care to share why you're not answering your phone? That goddamn ring is getting annoying."

Joey turned back toward the speaker, unable to look at Mark—unwilling to allow feelings to warm his heart. "Sorry.

I'll silence it."

"That wasn't my point and you know it." Mark walked closer to Joey and placed a supportive hand on his shoulder. "I'll repeat my question. Care to tell me why you're not answering? Even more curious, why the fuck aren't you with Del? Didn't he get released from his sanitary prison today?"

"Yeah, he did," Joey replied, still unable to look Mark in the eye as he continued to work on the speaker.

"Well, pardon me for asking, but why the fuck are you here and not with him? You know this hardware can wait."

Joey dropped the screwdriver he was holding, shook his head, and buried his face in his hands, mumbling, "I can't."

"You can't tell me why you're not with him, or you can't be with him for some fucking insane reason?"

"I just can't, Mark! This is for Del. It's better for him." Joey heard his words coming out too forced and too practiced.

"Come here, kid, and sit your ass down."

Joey plodded over, feeling like he was being summoned to the principal's office. The pain in his gut almost matched the one in his heart—the one he wanted to stifle somehow that always returned as soon as he stopped focusing on the speaker. "This is meaningless. Don't waste your time and mine. Let me get back to my job."

"Don't bullshit me, Joe. I've seen more drama queens over the years than you'll ever come across—even when you two are on the Great White Way."

Joey snorted but said nothing.

“The way I see it, there’s a couple of different scenarios that are playing out right now in that fucked up head of yours.”

Joey continued to stare at the table, virtually motionless, hoping that Mark’s lecture would end soon so he could get back to the speaker.

“Now, I’m not your father....”

“No, you’re not. So why don’t we skip this little fatherly moment.”

Mark glared at Joey but didn’t lose his temper. He continued calmly, “As I was saying, I may not be your father, but you sure as shit need someone right now with a little more life experience than you have.”

Joey looked at Mark, daring him to press on. “For what? Nothing you say will change anything. Nothing you say can change the past, and nothing you say can change what has to be now.”

“What has to be now?” Mark placed his hands on the table and spoke softly, yet firmly. “And what bullshit are you feeding yourself?”

Joey looked at Mark defiantly but offered nothing more.

“Here are the fucking facts, kid. Del got bashed. He was the target of a violent threesome with no respect for human life. He’s fucking lucky he’s not dead, and that’s because you helped save him.”

Joey slammed his fist on the table, his eyes burning with anger as he challenged Mark. “Talk about changing history. You know as well as I do that he wouldn’t have been hurt at all if I hadn’t gone back into the club to get my fucking music.”

“Wow, I had no idea you were still feeling that guilty.” Mark cupped his hand gently around Joey’s reddening fist. “I figured that was one of those pieces of crap we tell ourselves when we want to blame everyone but the people who are really to blame and then we get past it.”

“How can you say that?” Joey choked out. “It was my fault. You were the one that told us never to go out alone after dark, especially in this neighborhood.”

“Did you do it on purpose? Did you leave him there, knowing he’d be attacked?”

“What the fuck are you saying?” Joey shook his head vigorously. “No, of course I didn’t leave him there on purpose. I thought I’d only be inside for a second, but the fucking music was scattered everywhere.”

“And what about Del? Did he beg to come back inside with you? Did you refuse to let him?” Mark’s voice remained calm and his tone even.

Joey hated thinking about that night. He opened his fist and pressed both palms flat on the table to steady himself. He spoke slowly, almost stilted. He gazed beyond Mark; each word he uttered was connected to a painful memory. “No, he did not beg to accompany me back inside The Wine Cellar. In fact, he insisted I go back and get the music while he tended

his aching feet from those goddamn new shoes.”

Mark nodded and paused before he spoke. “So what you’re telling me is that you left your valuable—and it is valuable—music here after Walter presented you with the opportunity of a lifetime. When you realized what had happened, you told Del. I’m quite sure he insisted you immediately go into the club and get it while he waited, so he wouldn’t have to walk an extra inch in those fucking heels.” Mark took a moment to catch his breath. “Do I have that all clear? Is there anything I’m leaving out?”

Joey lowered his head. He rubbed the palms of his hands back and forth forcefully against the table, bracing himself as Mark’s words resonated in his mind.

“I see.” Mark moved his chair closer to Joey’s and squeezed the young man’s shoulder. This time Joey didn’t shrug him off but accepted the comfort. “Does Del remember the actual attack and what precipitated it, or does he still think it happened on the way home from his day job?”

Joey nodded, not trusting himself to speak, the lump in his throat too great.

“Is he still seeing the shrink to help him remember?”

Joey nodded once again.

“When he remembers, he’s going to need you.”

Joey shook his head. “He’ll have his mother with him.”

“That’s horse shit if I’ve ever heard it, and if you were honest with yourself, you’d see it for what it is.”

Joey ventured a look up, his eyes tired and puffy, drawing attention to the pronounced dark circles that were getting darker by the day.

“Joe, I don’t meddle in the lives of my employees if I can help it, but you and Del have become more than just employees, and I think you know it. Del’s mother is manipulating both of you as some fucking means to an end that I’m not sure of.”

“I know she doesn’t want Del to tell his father he’s gay, and she thinks that somehow she can straighten him out.”

“What the fuck business is it of hers when he decides to come out to his old man?”

Joey shrugged, not knowing the answer.

“Kid, this woman has twisted you around to make you think that she can care for her son better than you can. Now you listen up.” Mark waited to confirm he had Joey’s attention. “I’ve watched you two together. At first I thought you were little boys playing house, but I’ve gotten to know you pretty fucking well.”

Mark placed his arm around Joey’s shoulders, encouraging him to lean on him in all respects. “You and Del, you kids—or maybe I should say men—you have what it takes. There’s something gratifying in looking at a couple that really does belong together and that’s you two.”

“Do you really think so?” Joey sat up straight, looking hopefully at Mark, trying to read his expression. “I really thought we had it all, until....”

“Until someone professed to know her son best and convinced you that she was able to care for him better than you ever possibly could.” Joey nodded. “Is that fair to Del?”

“What do you mean?”

“Doesn’t Del get to decide who he wants the most important person in his life to be?”

Mark’s face softened as Joey looked at this special friend with renewed respect and admiration. “I see your point.”

“Oh, and kid....”

“Yeah?”

“While you’re thinking about things and making your way to the place you really belong, try to come up with some reason why Mother Mathers doesn’t want her baby boy to tell his father who he really is and what her ultimate motives are.”

Joey was confused. “Doesn’t that seem obvious?”

“Not to me.” Mark ventured a small smile. “If she knows and cares about him just as he is, why wouldn’t she give her husband that same opportunity? Seems a bit out of the ordinary to me, especially since Del is ready to come out—she’s the only thing standing in his way.”

Joey sat looking at Mark until a thought struck him that was too incredible to be believable. “You don’t mean that....”

Mark relaxed his shoulders and smiled. “Who the fuck



really knows?” He paused for a moment and stared at the young man. “Now, don’t you have someplace to go?”

“What about your sound system? I was right in the middle, and I don’t want to leave you in the lurch.”

“Priorities, Joe, priorities. I know mine; do you know yours?”

Joey stood up and grabbed his jacket. “I think I do, finally.” Mark stood up and offered his hand to shake. Joey looked at the offered hand and instead hugged Mark. “Thanks, Dad. I always wondered what it would be like to have one, and now I’ve got the best.”

Mark gripped the muscular young man and then dared to look at him before whispering in his ear. “I always wanted a son, so we’re even.” Mark released his hold and stepped back. “Now get your tight ass out of here and follow your—”

Joey grabbed his messenger bag and ran off before he could hear the final word.

Mark laughed and mumbled, “heart.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

DEL sat on the sofa in the expensive Central Park West apartment and gazed out the window, his crutches resting on the floor within his reach.

“Here, honey, I have a lovely chicken salad sandwich for you.” Mrs. Mathers placed the offered lunch on the coffee table in front of Del.

“I’m not that hungry, Mom. Why don’t you wrap it up, and I’ll eat it later?” Del was lost and empty. There was a hollow space within him, and food wasn’t the answer. He found himself actually counting the minutes until his therapist arrived, hoping for comfort in his confused world. Del yearned for someone to talk with—someone who would really listen and understand—even if they were being paid to do so.

“Remember what your physician told you, Wendell. He said you need to take care of yourself, otherwise you’ll end up back in the hospital. That includes proper nutrition.”

“I am taking care of myself. I just hate that it has to be here.” Del bowed his head. “And I just don’t understand why Joey isn’t answering my calls. Damn! He should be here with me. This is fucking ridiculous.”

“Wendell Mathers, watch that filthy language.” Mrs.

Mathers sat on an armchair in front of Del, blocking his view of the outside world. “Besides, you know why your friend can’t stay here. Your father will be arriving soon, and we don’t want to upset him.”

“Look, Mom, it’s my fault I waited so long to tell Dad the truth. But I’m ready. It’s time I was completely honest with him.”

Mrs. Mathers shook her head. “No, no, no, that would be the worst thing you could do.” She stood up and began to pace. “Your father is finally at a point where he respects the job you’re doing at the investment house. He’s proud of you. You don’t want to ruin it all by telling him about that other thing.”

Del glared at his mother, his jaw tightening. “It’s not a thing—it’s who I am. Don’t you think it’s important for my father to know exactly who his son really is?”

“He knows what he needs to know for the time being.” Del’s mother sat next to him on the edge of the sofa. “Let’s give him time to learn more about your life in New York City and your job before you fill him in on something we both know he doesn’t want to hear.”

“Mom, none of this makes any sense to me. And I have to admit that it certainly seems like you can barely say the words *gay* or *homosexual*. In fact, you never say them. Is there something I should know?”

“Nonsense, sweetheart. You’re just overreacting because of your delicate physical condition.” Lillian Mathers’s voice softened, but her smile seemed forced as she glanced at Del.

“Okay, Mom, I’ll let it wait for the moment, but I’m going to tell him soon.” Del tried to prop himself up higher, wanting to appear taller and stronger.

“We’ll worry about that at another time. Right now, it’s important for you to eat.” She pressed the lunch plate into his hands. Del reluctantly took the food that was set before him.

Mrs. Mathers walked toward the picture window. “Do you remember when you were a little boy and I used to dice up leftover chicken into tiny bits? I did that especially for you because you didn’t like to eat big chunks in your chicken salad.”

Del smiled, recalling happier moments as a child. “Yeah, that must have been the only thing our cook wasn’t allowed to prepare for me. You seemed to want to make sure it was cut up just right.”

Del’s mother turned to face him, her smile clearly more genuine. “For you, honey—all for you.”

Eating his sandwich slowly, Del looked at his watch. He had called Joey at least three times and left two messages, yet hadn’t heard a word back from him. He sensed there was something bothering Joey, but he couldn’t figure out what had affected him so deeply. When they had been together in the hospital, Del had felt Joey’s emotions being rocked to the core.

People got mugged all the time in New York City. That was something both of them were aware of, but for some reason, Joey had taken this to heart. His lover didn’t

typically respond to anything in an overly dramatic way. Del was the drama queen in their relationship.

Del could feel his partner pulling away. The pain of their separation returned to the surface—a pain incurable with mere medication. He wanted to hear from Joey, to see him, touch him. It was more than that; he needed Joey. Without either of them realizing it, their bond had grown so strong, far beyond the young love of two sheltered college kids trying to experiment with living together. Del was incomplete without Joey.

He snorted, well aware he was behaving like a hopeless romantic, but Del didn't care. Fuck all the medications and psychiatric bullshit—Joey was the key to the future, and if he wasn't in Del's future, why bother?

The doorman alerted Del and his mother that Richard Mathers was on his way up. Del felt the hair stand up on the back of his neck and adjusted himself on the sofa, bracing for the onslaught of his father's grand entrance.

Mrs. Mathers headed for the door to greet her husband. "Hello, dear. I missed you."

"Missed you too." Richard paused for a moment. Del hoped it was to kiss his mother hello. "Where's that son of mine?"

"In the living room, right this way." Lillian brought her husband into the room where Del nervously awaited the first visit with his father since graduation.

"Wendell, my boy," Mr. Mathers bellowed and then froze momentarily as he caught his first glimpse of his son. He

took a quick breath and continued, “I’ve been damn worried about you, but your mother called with a report every day.” He sat cautiously at the end of the sofa near Del’s feet and a surprising calm came over Del.

“Hi, Dad. Mom told me you couldn’t get away from work.”

“She assured me that you were doing fine and that the muggers didn’t get off with anything—they were caught in the act.” Richard looked his son up and down and then glared at his wife. “Looks like they sure wanted to give you a run for your money. But you’re a strong Mathers man and you tried to fight off the asshole who did this.”

Del shrugged. “I guess I did. The police said that there were three attackers, which is why I got so beat up.”

“Shit! Three? I had no idea.” Mr. Mathers gently touched his son’s lower leg. “I’m just glad to see you on the mend and still in one piece.”

Del chuckled. “That makes two of us.” He took a deep breath. “You know I’m still trying to remember exactly what happened.”

“So I hear. Any progress?”

“Not too much, but the shrink is coming shortly, and, Dad, I keep getting flashes of these guys in hoodies.”

“Hoodies?”

Del smiled. “Hooded sweatshirts.”

Mrs. Mathers interjected, “You’re remembering? I hope

it's not coming back too fast. Maybe we should cancel today's appointment. How could it possibly be so important to remember being hurt?" She trailed off, not having taken a single breath.

Del's eyes widened and his brow furrowed. "I need to know what happened. Somehow, I think when I know, when I remember, Joey will be more comfortable being around me again. I miss him, Mom."

Mr. Mathers looked from his wife to his son. "Joey—is that the kid you share an apartment with?"

"Yeah, Dad, but it's more than that. We're—"

"Honey, why don't we get you settled. I'll help you unpack." Mrs. Mathers began to tug at the lowest button on her shirt. "You haven't even gotten a tour of the apartment."

"I didn't come to see the damn apartment; I came to see my son." Richard's face reddened as he followed his wife into the foyer. Although he lowered his voice, speaking in hushed tones, Del heard every word. "Why the hell didn't you tell me he was injured so badly? That's not a few bruises; my son was beaten to a pulp and *you* told me to stay and take care of business until the weekend."

"The doctor said he was going to recover quite well, and I didn't want to alarm you, dear. You have so much on your mind."

"I may have a lot on my mind, but Wendell has always been number one. Did you tell him how proud I've been that he's been making it successfully on his own, or that his cousin will be happy to take over the business so he doesn't

need to feel guilty about leaving Salem?”

Mrs. Mathers was silent.

“I didn’t think so. I’m getting a very bad feeling about all of this. I don’t like any of it—not one damn bit.”

“Shhh, I don’t want to agitate our son. He needs his rest.”

“I’ll keep my mouth shut for now, but it’s about time I spoke to my son directly—alone.”

Lillian’s voice increased in volume. “What do you mean by ‘alone’?”

“I mean that for some reason you’re keeping me from my son, and I haven’t one iota of an idea why. It’s as if you’ve appointed yourself interpreter, but neither one of us is getting clean translations.”

“That’s ridiculous. Why would I do a thing like that?”

“I don’t know, but you can bet your life I’m going to find out.”

Del heard the bedroom door slam as his parents’ voices faded. He pressed his temples, grimacing at the escalating pressure. “I’d like to know what the fuck is going on too, Dad. Maybe we can both get the answers we need—from Mom and Joey.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY

RICHARD Mathers returned to the living room holding two glasses of water. “I thought you might be thirsty.”

Del looked at his father, noting the unfamiliar, gentle demeanor. Trying not to panic, he took a deep breath. “Dad, how bad am I?”

Mr. Mathers sat in the armchair facing the sofa, placing himself in such a way that he and Del were looking directly at one another. “What are you talking about, Wendell?”

“I mean all this.” Del waved his hand dramatically across the coffee table, sweeping it over his battered body. “First, you come in here upbeat and happy to see me, thinking there’s not much wrong. Then you and Mom have a big fight about something she’s keeping from you about me, and now you reappear far calmer than usual with a glass of water.”

“I see you’re still as cued into everything around you as always.” Mr. Mathers picked up his glass and took a sip.

“Well, I’m obviously not as good at it as I used to be, or I wouldn’t be in this mess. I would have sensed the fucking muggers.” Del took a sip of his water and strange flashes began preying on his mind. “Why three?”

“Why three?” Richard questioned. “Not sure what you mean, son.”

“I mean I keep remembering three guys with those sweatshirts. Wait a minute—there was a knife. One of them had a knife.” Del placed the glass of water on the table. His hand began to shake as he brought it to his throat. “He held it here.”

Mr. Mathers began to squirm in his chair. “Wendell, the shrink will be here soon. Maybe you should wait before you keep going with this line of thinking.”

Del looked at his father, a shiver running through him. “There’s something more to this that no one’s telling me. What’s more, I have a sneaking suspicion that you don’t know the whole story either, do you?”

Del’s father moved forward to the edge of the seat cushion, placing his elbows on his knees and clasping his hands together. He looked at his hands as he spoke. “All I know is that your mother made this out to be a simple mugging, but I’m not so sure. She also seems dead set against us having a private conversation—that is until I told her I had every right to spend time with my son unchaperoned.”

“Dad, there are some things we do need to talk about. Stuff I’ve been trying to tell you for a while now but didn’t have the guts. I want to be honest—no more secrets.”

Mr. Mathers smiled. “I know what you’re going to say, Wendell. I guessed a while ago.”

Del stared at his father, his mouth hanging awkwardly

open. “You do?”

Richard Mathers grinned. “I can accept that you like your job and won’t be coming back to Salem to join the family business. That’s okay. You’re making a success of your own life, and I’m proud of you, Wendell.” He sat up straight against the back of the chair. “And here’s the good news—your cousin has accepted the position I was holding for you. You don’t have to feel guilty about abandoning us.”

Del huffed. “Glad to hear it, Dad, but I wasn’t actually feeling guilty. What I wanted to tell you was that I won’t be in my current position at The Investors much longer.”

“That’s great! You’re already up for a promotion. I always knew you were a mover and a shaker.”

Del snorted at his father’s choice of words. “You have no idea.” He took another sip of his drink. Placing the glass back on the table, he took a deep breath. “Look, Dad, there’s no more skirting the issue. I wasn’t cut out for the corporate world.” He looked at his father, hoping to find acceptance and understanding in his expression. “I love you, Dad, and I hate to disappoint you, but I’m a performer.”

Mr. Mathers looked at his son, his face blank. “A performer? As in someone who sings, dances, and plays make-believe on stage? Where the hell did you get the idea that you could be a goddamn actor?”

“I know you probably don’t want to hear this, but I’ve been acting since I was a kid. I just didn’t tell you or Mom.” Del lowered his head for a moment and then raised it again, courageously staring into the pained expression on his

father's face. "Singing is my specialty—nightclub singing, although I did a lot of plays in college."

Del heard his father saying something in return, but it didn't register. Without warning, his head began to throb. He started to recall Venus standing out on the street late at night. He broke into a cold sweat, associating the memory with a feeling of doom.

He began to shiver uncontrollably until his father came to his side and held him. The shivers subsided with the firm connection. Del heard murmurings as the doorman's buzzer sounded.

Richard whispered, "It's okay, son. That lady psychiatrist is coming up. She'll help you."

Del noticed his mother enter the room. He dared to look up and saw a scowl on her face. "What did you say to him? I knew I shouldn't have left you alone."

She slowly approached. "Wendell needs his mother." Nudging Richard aside, Mrs. Mathers took his place and rocked her son. "There's nothing to fear now. I'll get you through this; Mother is with you."

Del became tense, shrugging off his mother's grasp. "Why don't you want me to remember? What the fuck are you afraid of?"

"I just don't want you to have to deal with too much too soon."

Glaring at his mother, Del's anger began to diminish his fear. Coddling was not the answer, and yet that was all his

mother was doing. “Too soon—I’ve been laid up for a week over a stupid mugging. That doesn’t make any sense. I need to know what really happened.”

Del challenged his mother as he never had before. “And I want to know why Joey isn’t here. What did you tell him in the hospital?”

“Wendell, calm down. The doctor should be here any second.” Lillian’s eyes darted from the sad face of her husband to her son’s intense stare.

Richard Mathers looked at his wife. “Why is his roommate so important in all this?”

“He’s not that important—he shouldn’t be.” She lowered her head.

Del was appalled by his mother’s response, and his agitation got the better of him. Without thinking he blurted out, “He’s my partner, my lover.”

Mrs. Mathers backed away from her son. “No, he’s not—not anymore,” as an apparently stunned Richard left the living room to respond to the knock on the door, brushing his hand over his face.

Del could hear murmurings in the foyer. “Hello, I’m Del’s doctor, Marie Thomas. You must be his father. Could you tell me where I might find him?”

Del didn’t hear his father speak. How could he have blurted it out like that?

The doctor walked into the living room and immediately looked at his mother kneeling on the floor next to Del, her

head down, brushing stray tears from her cheeks.

“Del, would you like to tell me what happened?” The doctor quickly took a seat on the chair closest to the sofa.

Del gazed at all those surrounding him, wishing for only one person who wasn’t there—the man who could support him, help him.

With no reaction from either of his parents, Del stammered, “I think I just told my father I’m gay, and for some reason, my mother’s not accepting it, even though she already knew.” Del began to press on his temples, hunching over, wanting to shut out the world for just a moment.

Off to the side, Del could see Dr. Thomas and his father helping his mother to her feet. His father walked her out of the room. When the psychiatrist resumed her seat, Del felt a chill run through his body. He pulled on the afghan, covering himself up to his chin.

Mr. Mathers walked slowly into the room, breaking the silence. He stood to the side of the sofa and looked down at Del. “Wendell, I love you. I don’t say it enough, but there it is.”

Del looked up and saw the truth in his father’s eyes and let relief consume him. He raised his arms, grateful when Richard immediately bent down to hug his son, patting him on the back.

When the two parted, Del felt a wave of nausea. More flashes of memory began unexpectedly. It was as if he were watching a slideshow of stilted actions.—not the actions of a robbery, but those to inflict pain.

He cried out in agony, reliving the strikes from a broom handle. He wrapped his arms across his chest, protecting himself from the blows. Del saw the alley and the trash all around him.

“Del, look at me,” the doctor instructed firmly. Del tried to focus on her but she appeared blurry. “Del, listen to me. I won’t force you to stop remembering, but I can make it less painful—please look directly at me and relax.”

“Why? I don’t understand. It’s too dark. It couldn’t have been right after work. When? Why?” Del mumbled, trying to get a clear picture of the setting, the time.

He heard a loud sound through his confused state, followed by the familiar sound of his father’s voice. “Yes, that’s fine. Send him up.”

Del looked at his father. “Dad, who’s coming up? Please say it’s him, please.”

Richard Mathers looked at his son, his brow furrowing as he pressed on the bridge of his nose. “Joey Dixon is on the way up.”

Del began to rock slowly, trying to distract himself from the memories that were flooding into the forefront of his mind. “He’ll help me; he’ll stop them.”

The doctor sat with her patient and spoke in soothing tones. “I know you’re reliving the attack. Just keep in mind that you’re safe now. These are memories—they can’t hurt you anymore.”

Del looked up when he heard a knock. “He’s here.”

“Yes, Del, he’s here and your father is letting him in now.”

“He’ll save me. Joey knows how to take care of me. He’s always been the strong one.”

Joey walked into the living room, following Mr. Mathers. He immediately looked at Del. Through his panic and fear, Del focused on the face he’d been longing for. In that moment, no one else in the room mattered.

Del saw Joey glance at the doctor. With a subtle nod of her head, he moved directly to Del’s side and held him, whispering, “You remember—I’m here this time.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

DEL and Joey clung to one another silently. Del's body shuddered as tears trickled down his cheeks for the first time since the attack.

"It hurts; it hurts so much." His voice was weak as he relived the terror. "They wanted to kill me. They wanted to...."

Joey cut him off. "They didn't. They didn't take you away from me. You're here and you're whole." He paused momentarily, glancing at the doctor, and then he brushed a tear from Del's face. "Mark had his gun; he stopped them."

Del's body went limp as he lay back on the sofa. He covered his eyes, pressing the palms against his lids, attempting to erase the horror. Emotionally drained, Del dropped his hands onto his lap. He gazed at Joey and sighed. "You came back. I knew you would."

Joey looked at Dr. Thomas and then back at Del, his voice wavering. "I came back, but I never should have left. In some ways, your mother was right—it was my fault."

Marie Thomas glared at Joey, speaking in a practiced, even voice. "I would beg to differ. The reports I read tell a different story."

Joey spoke in hushed tones. “How can you say that? I left him.”

The psychiatrist looked at Del and Joey. She pulled a small folder from her briefcase and opened it, glancing at the pages for a minute or two. “Did Del ask you not to go back inside the club?”

“No.” Joey paused. “He actually encouraged me to go get my music.”

“Were you and Del within sight of The Wine Cellar entrance?”

“Yes.” Joey looked down as he spoke.

“I would imagine neither of you considered yourselves to be acting irresponsibly at the time.”

Joey shook his head as Del watched and listened to the doctor question his partner.

“Finally, did you see the three men before walking back into the nightclub?”

“Of course not.” Joey sat up straighter and glared at Dr. Thomas.

“Then I can only surmise, from what you’ve admitted, that the only ones to blame are the three attackers.” The doctor sounded clinical in her response. Her tone and mastery of the situation lent a calm focus.

Mr. Mathers finally found his voice after remaining silent throughout the entire interaction. “Dr. Thomas, I was led to believe that this was a mugging. I have clearly been

misinformed, haven't I?"

The doctor looked across the room at Del's father. His face was pale and his hands were turning red from the grip he had on the arms of the chair. "Mr. Mathers, I'm not clear on all the specific terminology utilized in the violent crimes division, but I think that from what you've heard here today, you know the answer to that."

Del was beginning to appreciate his therapist more and more. She spoke in a soft, comforting manner, yet got to the point quickly—no bullshit.

As the session was coming to a close, Mrs. Mathers walked back into the living room, appearing more reserved and collected. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I'm not comfortable with him here. This is our home for now. He's an outsider." She looked directly at Joey. "What are you doing here? You should know better."

Joey rose for the first time since he'd arrived. "Look, Mrs. Mathers, I know you wanted me to stay away—"

"What?" Del was astonished, looking at Joey and then his mother. "Mom, why would you want Joey to stay away when you know how much I want him here?"

Richard Mathers slowly approached his wife, taking her hand and holding it briefly. "It seems that there are a great deal of secrets you've been keeping from the men in this family."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm taking care of our son the best way I know how."

“For starters, our son wasn’t mugged. He was attacked, targeted because he’s gay.”

“He’s not gay. He’s just confused. That happens to a lot of young people his age.” She directed herself to Joey. “It’s him—he enticed Wendell.” Joey slowly looked away, focusing his vacant gaze toward the far end of the room.

Del sat up straighter, pressing his shoulders back. He clenched his fists but remained silent.

The doctor stood up. “Each of you needs to take a seat.” Although no one moved at first, she remained silent and simply guided each person to a chair. Del was relieved to see her regain control of the situation.

Once everyone was seated, Dr. Thomas continued. “There is obviously a significant amount of confusion and miscommunication that needs to be resolved so everyone can be on the same page. First and foremost, my responsibility is to Del. He needs to get well, and from today’s demonstration, he’s on his way, but there are clearly some obstacles that have to be dealt with.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Lillian Mather’s kept her voice low and restrained. She rolled the hem of her shirt between her fingers. “I want to take care of my son and help him to recover in the best way possible.”

“I’m glad to hear that, Mrs. Mathers.” Del wanted to chime in, but he kept his tongue and let the doctor do her job. “You do realize that Del was attacked because of his sexual orientation, don’t you? I believe it’s referred to as a hate crime, not a mugging.”

“I know. He was attacked by vicious bigots who think it’s wrong to flaunt a gay lifestyle in public.” Del’s eyes opened wide.

“Did you tell your husband what happened?”

“I wanted to protect him, not have him worry too much. There was no need for him to know. He has the family business to think about.”

“What?”

Dr. Thomas immediately turned to Del’s father. “Mr. Mathers, please try to contain yourself. I will give you a chance to speak very soon.” Del wondered if Marie Thomas had had a previous career as a lawyer.

Mrs. Mathers pointed a finger at Joey. “He convinced my son to date him in college. He influenced Del’s sexual preference. And now look what happened.”

Del wanted to shake some sense into his mother. He could no longer contain himself. “Is that why you wouldn’t let me tell Dad? You don’t believe I’m really gay?” Del clasped the blanket covering his legs. He took a deep breath. “Mom, I’m gay. I’ve always been gay. I knew it long before I went to college and met Joey. It’s not a preference or a choice. It’s who I am and who I’ve always been.”

Del turned toward his father. “I should have told you a long time ago, but I was afraid. When I was finally ready, Mom discouraged me and I let her. I’m sorry you had to find out this way.”

Del looked at Joey, avoiding any eye contact with either

of his parents who now sat in silence. Joey's eyes were bright for the first time and he was smiling. Del welcomed the beautiful smile he hadn't seen since he had woken up from the attack.

Once again, the doctor sat in the chair beside her patient. "Mr. Mathers, do you have anything to say or ask?"

Richard looked directly at his son. "I don't pretend to know anything about being gay, but if that's what you are, then that's what you are. Wendell, you're my son, my only child. I'd be proud of you no matter what." He paused to take a breath. "Although I'm not sure about this ridiculous notion of working in the theater. I want you to be successful, and the theater seems pretty far-fetched. You'd do far better staying with The Investors."

Del smiled genuinely at his father for the first time in as long as he could remember.

"Mr. Mathers, is there anything else of concern you would like to bring up at this time?" Marie Thomas clearly did not want to waste any more time as she pressed forward.

"Yes." He nudged his chair closer to his wife and reached out to hold her hand. "It would seem that you and I have a lot to discuss. I'm not sure how any of this will turn out or how much I will be able to forgive, but I'll try."

"Forgive me!" Lillian released Richard's hand brusquely and stood facing her husband. "You should be thanking me for protecting you all these years while our son tried to find himself. I had to take care of our family. If I could only get him away from that boy," she narrowed her eyes, turning

toward Joey, “then we could all go back to normal. Wendell might even agree to work with you.”

Del’s voice was gentle as he spoke. “Mom, I’m never going to change. And what’s more, I’m never giving up Joey. Don’t ask me to choose between you. You won’t like—”

“You don’t have to choose, son.” Richard Mathers escorted his wife back to her seat and he settled back into his own chair. “I’ll deal with your mother’s concerns.” He leaned forward. “Whether you work with me or not, I do think you should reconsider this singing crap.”

Del rolled his eyes at his father’s professional concerns. He then dared to ask, “Does this mean Joey can stay here with me until I recover enough to return to our own home?”

Richard glanced at his wife but continued to look at Del. “If that’s what you want.”

Mrs. Mathers left the room, a bitter expression across her face.

The doctor placed her file in the briefcase. “Del, it would seem that you’ve accomplished many of our initial goals. I do think we have a lot more work ahead of us; I hope you won’t discontinue your therapy.”

“Why, doc? Now that I’ve remembered everything, can’t we just move on?”

Dr. Thomas uttered a small chuckle. “Spoken like someone who hasn’t dealt with all their feelings yet.” She placed her hands squarely on her knees and faced Del. “The emotions that the attack—”

“Bashing, doc. Let’s call it what it was.”

She nodded. “The bashing will bring up a wide array of emotions that will be difficult to contend with. You can continue in therapy now, or you will most certainly need it later. It’s up to you.”

Joey spoke for the first time in quite a while. “Del, let her help you, us. Can you help me too, doc?”

“Under normal circumstances it might not work out, but in this case I think it’s worth a try.”

“What do you say, Del? It’s up to you.”

Del looked at Joey and saw his lover’s need for support. “Okay, for now.”

Joey sighed as he brushed his fingers over Del’s cheek. “Thank you.” He shook the doctor’s hand and then approached Mr. Mathers, doing the same. “I guess I’d better go home and pack some of my stuff and bring it over.”

“I guess you’d better, Joey.” Richard released Joey’s hand. “By the way, what do you do for a living?”

Del tossed off the afghan, feeling a wave of warmth as he closed his eyes, overtaken by exhaustion.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

*“COME on, baby, just two more steps. I know you can do it.”*

*“I’m not a fucking woman in labor. Stop the damn cheerleading. No one knows if I can ever really do this again.”*

*“I do.” Joey spoke softly, hoping to calm Del.*

*Sweat dripping into his eyes, he glared at Joey. “You don’t know shit!”*

*The single crutch he was using slipped away. Del grabbed the banister with both hands as he clumsily slipped mid-step.*

*“Del, are you okay?”*

*“No! I’m not fucking okay, and who the hell knows if I ever will be.”*

*Joey moved closer, helping Del into a sitting position on the stairs of the hospital’s therapy room. He caressed Del’s cheek. “You will get better. It’s going to take time.”*

*Del leaned into Joey’s touch. “Just promise you won’t give up on me. I can’t believe how damn hard this is. I want to kill those motherfuckers. How will I ever...”*

*“You’ll perform again. I know it.” Joey pleaded with Del, “Don’t give up. I won’t leave you. I’ll be with you every step of*

*the way. Just don't give up."*

*"I miss our home." Del looked at Joey, his shoulders hunched over. "I wish we could get out of that damn apartment—away from my mother and father."*

*Joey continued to rub his partner's cheek silently.*

Del insisted that Joey stay with him during all his therapy visits. Joey took copious notes when the physical therapist gave instructions, and he worked with Del on his follow-up exercises each week. He had no intention of letting Del lose any of his physical capabilities.

Whenever the psychiatrist showed up for an appointment, Del insisted that his parents leave the apartment. There were times Joey wanted to leave, as well, but he watched and listened as his partner remembered and relived every painful moment of the attack, holding his hand through each session.

For two weeks, Joey never left Del's side except to go to work at The Wine Cellar.

"Sorry I'm late."

"No sweat, Joe. The equipment actually seems to be in good order for a change." Mark looked at his young employee. "You look tired, kid."

"I am." Joey didn't know what else to say. He was exhausted emotionally and physically.

"Do you need to take some time off?"

"No, no! I can't." Joey wanted to kick himself for

sounding so desperate.

Mark pushed aside the paperwork he was reading. “Hey, come here and sit down. We have time for a club soda.”

“Something stronger wouldn’t hurt.” Joey mumbled as he sat down at one of the tables and Mark brought over two soft drinks.

“You want to tell me what the fuck has you on edge?”

Joey glared at Mark. “How can you even ask that? My boyfriend—my partner—was nearly killed.”

“I know, but he wasn’t. When are you going to stop punishing yourself?” Mark stared at Joey, who turned away, picking up his drink.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Look, kiddo, we both know you think if you didn’t come back in to get your music, Del wouldn’t have been hurt.”

“So? There’s no news flash there.”

“But we also know you didn’t do it on purpose. There are too many goddamn martyrs in the world. Don’t add your name to the list.”

“I’ll deal with my own issues when I can. Right now helping Del heal is all I can think about.”

“Is it?”

“Of course. What else would I be thinking about?” Joey lowered his head, his face reddening.

“Come on, don’t make me say it.” Mark squeezed Joey’s shoulder. “It’s okay to want things to move forward.”

Joey looked up at the ceiling, which was riddled with spotlights and a couple of sequined globes. His gaze wandered and rested on the piano off to the side of the stage.

“You’re a gifted songwriter.”

A tear streaked down Joey’s cheek. He reached up to swipe it away, clenching his jaw.

“Don’t shove all your dreams onto the damn back burner. That’s not what’s going to help you or Del. Don’t you think he wants something to look forward to besides watching his parents grow farther and farther apart?”

Joey’s head snapped back and he looked at Mark, shocked by his remark. “How did you....”

“You know I’ve been there to visit a couple of times. It’s hard to miss.” Joey nodded. “Those two may be in the same apartment, but they couldn’t be farther apart if they were on opposite sides of the damn world.”

“Del sometimes talks about it at night.” Mark sat silently and sipped his drink. “He blames himself. He actually thinks when he came out so abruptly, that’s what destroyed his parents’ marriage.”

“Sounds like pretty fucked up thinking, but typical. Add the bashing and the pressure of recovery, and anyone could get their viewpoint totally screwed up.”

“So what do I do?” Joey huffed out a pitiful laugh. “You know, when I come to work, I feel more relaxed than when

I'm in that place."

"Are you thinking you and Del are history?"

Joey stood up and slammed his hand on the table. "No fucking way!" Mark smirked. "What's that stupid grin for?"

"Calm down, Sugar Ray, I just wanted to see your reaction—make sure you didn't let those bastards kill what's really important."

"Del and I need to get out of that fucking apartment and away from his parents." Joey sat down, his voice softening. "He makes so much progress in physical therapy and the shrink is great. She got him to talk about everything and to know that *he* didn't do anything wrong." Joey took a sip of his drink. "Then his asshole mother shows up with this twisted, sour look on her face and starts talking to him like he'll never walk without crutches again."

"So what's the hold the old lady's got on him? He already admitted to his father he was gay, and you said he was surprisingly accepting."

"That's the kicker. He doesn't give a shit about who his son has sex with." Mark's eyes opened wide. "He didn't say that," Joey laughed.

"I didn't think so."

"He's giving Del grief about his career."

"What?"

"Del's ready to give his notice at that investment firm. He's hated it from day one, but it was a way to pay the bills."

“But now with Walter ready to sign the two of you, the kid’s ready to quit.”

Joey snorted. “At the executive level it’s called ‘tendering his resignation’.”

“You’re learning all kinds of important pieces of bullshit knowledge from Del’s father.” Mark’s voice was dripping with sarcasm. “The kid wants to quit, and his father’s trying to get him to stay in the mighty world of business and big money.”

“Mr. Mathers says he doesn’t want Del to lose his secure income.”

“What does Del want?”

“The moment Mr. Jacobs signs us, Del wants out, but he’s afraid. The job is stable and it’s something his father approves of.”

“That’s a tough combo platter for anyone to turn away.” Mark placed his hands squarely on the table. “It’s time for you to step up to the plate and take over.”

“What do you mean, ‘take over’?”

“Who’s the man Del lives with and wants to spend his life with? You, right?” Joey nodded. “Well, stop taking a backseat to everyone else in that place. It’s too fucking crowded.”

“So what am I supposed to do? I can’t kick them out. Mrs. Mathers’s friend owns the apartment.”

“Then get out.”

“That’s what I want more than anything. Del will walk and move around more if he has to, but he still can’t go up and down more than one flight of stairs. We can’t move back home.”

Joey gripped the soda glass with both hands, recalling the morning’s exercises.

“Forget about that place for a while. Let me see what I can do for you.”

Joey brightened up for a moment and then lowered his head once again when reality struck. “Del’s on disability from his job, but it’s not enough for some nice place with an elevator.”

“Don’t sweat it. Del’s become a bit of a legend around here. He’s the guy who survived and will send those murdering bastards away for life.”

Not understanding what Mark was leading up to, Joey stared at him, confused.

“Kid, there are guys who’ll line up to help you two. I’ll put the word out, and I wouldn’t be surprised if you’re somewhere else by the weekend.”

Joey looked at his watch. He had another few hours of work and knew that Del would be asleep by the time he got back.

“Get going. You and Del have plans to make.” Joey got up, took one last sip of his soda, and grabbed his messenger bag. “While you’re on your way, give Walter a call. He wants to hear from you.”

Joey stopped short and turned back to Mark, hugging him awkwardly. “I can’t tell you how much your help means to me.”

Mark patted the young man on the back. “Anytime, son, anytime.” Mark gripped Joey tightly.

“Thanks, Dad.”

Without looking back Joey ran out of the club. For the first time in almost a month, he felt alive.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE days were long and difficult as Del proceeded through his physical and emotional recovery, but the nights were far longer.

Joey looked on helplessly as Del woke up screaming from nightmares. His dreams were all similar, exaggerated memories of every brutal moment of the attack. Each nightmare ended the same.

“Oh. God, I was alone, and they were.... Hold me.”

“It’s okay; I’m right here. You’re safe; I’m not going anywhere. I won’t let anyone harm you.” Joey held Del in his arms and rocked him.

The first two nights of nightmares elicited a knock on the door. “Are you two okay? Is Wendell all right?”

Joey’s response was always the same. “We’re fine, Mr. Mathers, thank you. I’ve got him.”

Marie Thomas arrived later that morning. Joey had looked forward to this visit from the psychiatrist. He hoped that Del would open up to her and free the demons that were waking him night after night.

“Del, I notice that you and Joey both look exhausted. More exhausted than when you first returned from the

hospital. Care to tell me why?”

Del stared at his hands, balling them into fists in his lap. He was silent for a couple of minutes but soon mumbled, “The dreams.”

Joey let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding, wondering if Del would divulge the hysteria of the previous nights.

“What dreams?”

Del looked up and grimaced. “You know, bad dreams about....” His voice trailed off and Joey noticed the fists clenching tighter, his knuckles turning white.

“About your attack?” Despite the obvious, the doctor phrased her response as a question.

“Of course, my fucking attack!” Del’s head shot up, eyes glaring squarely into the doctor’s. “Everything is about that goddamn attack, bashing, violation... whatever the fuck you want to call it today.”

Joey was shocked and sat up straighter in his seat, listening to the rage in Del’s voice. While his lover had been frightened, withdrawn, confused, and any number of other emotions when revisiting the bashing, he had never demonstrated anger.

“How are you feeling right now?”

Del turned his face from Dr. Thomas, staring in the direction of the picture window, remaining silent.

Her voice quieted, speaking just above a whisper as she

moved the chair slightly closer to her patient. “Del, don’t deny yourself. What are you feeling?”

He turned his head back so fast, Joey was scared he may have pulled a muscle. However, he was even more concerned when he saw eyes filled with venom.

“How do I feel? That’s such a fucking clinical question. I’m surprised you haven’t asked it more often. Did you forget Psych 101?”

Joey’s eyes widened. This wasn’t his mild-mannered Del; it was a side of his lover he’d never seen. Joey began to shift in his chair. He thought about getting up and leaving the room, giving Del and his doctor some privacy, but didn’t want to distract them with his movements.

Dr. Thomas continued calmly, seemingly unshaken by the outburst. “I haven’t asked you that question because you’ve been fairly forthcoming with your feelings until now. Don’t stop your wonderful progress, Del. This is it. Face what you’re feeling.”

The fists returned, but Joey noted they didn’t appear as strained. “You want to know how I feel? Fine! I’m angry! I’m fucking angry!”

“Who are you angry with, Del?” The doctor leaned in a bit but didn’t move her seat any closer.

Del gazed around the room and Joey noticed his partner’s heightened tension. His brows were furrowed and his shoulders were tense, yet he said nothing.

“I’m angry at....”

Joey froze in his seat, not wanting to draw attention. He detected Dr. Thomas was now very still as well.

Del's voice began quietly and then built like a crescendo in one of their songs. "I'm angry at those bastards, those pigs for hurting me, for wanting to rape me with a goddamn broom handle." He drew in a long breath. "I'm angry at the police for not being a fucking presence in our community."

He paused and looked at Joey, a single tear escaped onto his cheek unchecked as he returned to a whisper. "I'm angry at Joey for not getting back sooner."

Joey sat silently. There it was. All the fears and guilt he had been harboring rushed to the surface. For a moment he was prepared to pack his bags and leave, knowing Del could never forgive him.

But then Del glanced at the doctor, hunching his shoulders and opening his hands, laying them flat on his lap. His voice revealed his resignation. "Most of all, doc, I'm so fucking angry at myself. It's my fault. I should have known better."

Joey was about to speak, but the doctor raised her hand, gesturing for him to remain silent. At the same time she nodded at Del, encouraging him to continue.

"I knew about the bashings, the murders, and I let my goddamn sore feet keep me from doing the right thing—the safe thing." Del took a halting breath. "If it weren't for me, Joey and I would be working on a set for our first real nightclub appearance. Instead, he has to act like a nursemaid to a basket case."

Del turned away, staring blankly toward the wall. “I know he doesn’t really want to be with me. He wants to be anywhere else, but he’s sticking around out of some insane sense of responsibility or maybe even some fucking guilt of his own.”

Joey didn’t wait to get approval from the psychiatrist. “That’s bullshit, and you know it!” He moved to the sofa to sit by Del. “I’m here for only one goddamn reason.” He tilted Del’s chin so he could look directly at him. “I’m here because I love you, and this is where I want to be. When I was at our apartment, I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t eat. I could hardly function—because you weren’t there with me.”

Joey kissed Del on the lips, and after a moment, he felt the kiss being returned in a way they hadn’t enjoyed since the attack.

“This was not your fault,” Del whispered. “You couldn’t have known those assholes would risk an attack right outside the club. We both made stupid decisions that we’ll never make again—most of all because I never want to risk losing you, losing us.”

Joey touched his forehead to Del’s. “You’re my life. You’d better fucking remember that. I won’t ever let you give up on me, on us.” All he wanted to do was touch Del, kiss him, caress him. He ran his hand over Del’s short hair.

Del reached out and clung to Joey—a connection based on love rather than fear.

Del sat up, head held high, and ghosted his fingers over Joey’s cheek, peering into Joey’s eyes. “Shit! I’m sorry, doc.”

He blushed.

Joey laughed. "I guess we kind of forgot you were here."

She smiled sweetly. "That's quite all right. I think we've made significant steps today."

Del nodded his head and combed his fingers through Joey's hair. Joey felt his cock twitch in response to the long-awaited touch.

"Del, I strongly suggest you keep a notepad or tape recorder by your bedside. When you wake from one of the nightmares, describe your dream in as much detail as possible, and we'll try to work together to reduce them. It's a very common occurrence when a person's been attacked as violently as you have."

The doctor looked from Del to Joey. "It's critically important that the two of you remain open and honest. The only people that can be held responsible for the attack are the perpetrators. Neither of you realized the consequences your choices might bring about."

"Thank you, Dr. Thomas." Joey smiled genuinely. He felt somewhat lighter, yet he knew that both he and Del would be dealing with residual issues for a long time to come. However, today they had passed a major hurdle, and everything was finally out in the open.

Joey showed the doctor out and returned to Del in the living room. He sat next to him on the edge of the sofa and kissed him ardently.

When they broke away, Del smiled coyly. "Do you realize

that's the first time I've felt like I could still be attractive to you someday?"

"You never stopped. I just didn't want to push until you were ready."

Joey watched as Del's smile disappeared.

"Del, I know it'll be a while before we can have... make love again. I can wait as long as I know you still want me as much as I want you."

Del leaned against Joey's shoulder. "I'll always want you, only you. That's why I want to do it raw. I've only been with you since our first time together."

"Do you remember how nervous we both were?"

Del nodded, nuzzling Joey's neck.

"We were alone in your room because your roommate was out for the night." He chuckled. "I remember thinking that it was both sweet and corny that you had lit all those aromatic candles."

Del snorted. "It was romantic."

Joey rested his head against Del's, tenderly recalling the night. "Yeah, it was. You were so beautiful in the glow of those fucking candles." Joey breathed in, calling to mind the aromas of the candles and the intoxicating scent of Del.

"We slowly undressed each other."

"And I kissed you at every newly exposed part of your body with each garment I removed." Joey kissed Del's earlobe as he whispered.

“When we made it to my bed, we couldn’t keep our hands off each other,” Del continued.

“When you started to moan and arch into every touch, I grabbed the lube and a condom. Even though we knew what was going to happen, your eyes widened. It was intoxicating and hot.”

“Your fingers opened me for the first time, and you slowly pushed all the way in, making sure you didn’t go too fast.”

“It was bliss having you writhe in my arms, and I welcomed the warmth when I entered you, making you mine from that special moment on. I thought I’d come before the second thrust.”

“But you didn’t. You had me on the edge forever. Every time I was ready to come, you stopped.”

“When it finally happened, we both came at the same time. I’d never had such an intense orgasm or felt so damn satisfied afterwards.”

“Same for me—and you didn’t just leave. You stayed and held me the entire night. I’d never felt so safe and loved in my whole life.”

Joey held Del a bit closer and began to stroke his back gently. “I went back to my room the next morning and wrote two new songs.”

“I remember those; they were incredible.”

“A tribute to their inspiration.”



Del and Joey continued silently to hold one another close. At that moment, Joey knew it was time—time for him to take on the role of a true partner.

“Del?”

“Mmhmm?” Del’s eyes were closed as he continued to rest his head against Joey’s chest.

“Mark thinks he’s found a place for us. It belongs to a friend of his who spends most of his time out of town on business these days.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that the place has an elevator. It’s in the West Village, not far from our own home. We can stay there rent-free until you’re well enough to either move back to our place or we find a new one.”

Del sat up tall, shoulders back. He looked at Joey for a moment. “You mean we can finally get away from my mother?”

“That’s exactly what I mean. Don’t you think it’s time we resumed our life together?”

“Definitely.” Del rubbed his lover’s arm gently. “Joey?”

“Yes?” He was sleepily enjoying Del’s soft ministrations.

“Maybe we can arrange a meeting with Walter Jacobs in the next week or so. I’m getting around pretty well on those damn crutches.”

Joey pulled back to look directly at Del, wanting to see his face. “Are you sure?” He wanted this so much but didn’t

want to push Del beyond his limits.

“I’m positive. I really want something to look forward to, and I can’t wait for us to start working together on your music again.” Joey could see Del’s sincerity.

“That sounds amazing!” Joey gave Del one more kiss and then laughed. “I’ll start to get the gears in motion so we can move out of here as soon as possible.”

“What on earth are you two talking about? You will do no such thing. Wendell is far from ready for that. How selfish can you be?”

Mrs. Mathers stood looming over the two. Neither man had heard her return from her luncheon.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

DEL stared at his mother, taken aback by her territorial outburst. He spoke firmly. “Mom, I’m not sure why you’re so opposed to this. You knew I wasn’t going to live with you forever—especially not in someone else’s place.”

Mrs. Mathers’s eyes darted from Del to Joey, then returned her focus to her son. “That’s just it. This thing between you two,” she pointed her finely manicured nail at the young men sitting before her, “this ridiculous affair has got to end. It’s only going to hurt you, Wendell. You need to be home with your father and me. That’s where you belong.”

Del looked stunned; Joey gripped his upper arm for support. “Where would you get such a crazy idea? I’m never going to live with you and Dad again. I have a home and a life partner.”

“Stop! Don’t say that.” Mrs. Mathers started pacing and then clapped her hands together. “If you choose this lifestyle, it will get you killed; it almost did. Is that what you want?” She dabbed the corner of her eye, stopping a tear before it escaped. Pleading, she faced Joey. “I thought you wanted to keep him safe, but you must know by now you’re incapable of that. You know that he’d be better off with me... and his father. You agreed with me when Wendell was in the hospital. Nothing’s changed.”

Joey flushed, lowering his head as he continued to gently rub the arm he had been holding. "It's true, Del. At first I thought you'd be better off without me. That you'd be safer and happier where you grew up."

Del tilted his partner's chin upward so they looked directly at one another. He hoped Joey could read his anger at hearing of the absurd arrangement. "Why would you ever make a decision like that, especially without consulting me?"

Joey smiled softly, placing his arm around Del. "But now I know I was wrong. We belong together. It's fucking fate or destiny or whatever, but we're stuck with each other." Joey brushed his lips to his lover's cheek, whispering, "You're stuck with me."

Del rested his head on Joey's shoulder, the anger fading. "You jackass, I could have told you that a long time ago."

"I think you did. I just didn't want to listen. Wasn't ready to listen."

Mrs. Mathers stepped closer to the lovers. "No. This isn't right; it can't be happening." She was now so close that her body cast a shadow over Del and Joey, the moisture in her eyes visible. "Wendell, I can't permit you to go away with him. I need to protect you. I've always needed to protect you." She took a breath. "I'll get a restraining order if I have to."

"You most certainly will not!" A booming voice overtook the entire room as two men entered simultaneously. "Have you lost all common sense?"

Del maneuvered himself to face his father. “Dad, we didn’t hear you come in.”

“I’m not surprised, with the way your mother was going on.” Mr. Mathers turned to his wife. “Not a word out of you. We’ll discuss your outrageous notions privately.”

Turning back to the group, he continued, “I met this gentleman approaching the building, and when he announced to the doorman where he was heading, I escorted him up here myself.”

Joey stood up and went over to Mark. “It’s great to see you. Your timing couldn’t have been better.”

Mark whispered into Joey’s ear with a chuckle, “No shit.” He then winked at Del. “So, kid, I haven’t visited in a couple of weeks and wanted to see for myself how you were doing.”

“Wendell’s mother and I will leave you to your visit.” Richard put his arm around his wife’s waist as he guided her out of the room.

Del was relieved to see his parents leave the three of them alone. “Hi, Mark. To answer your question, I’m doing better every day now that Joey’s here.” He gestured for Mark to take the seat closest to him. “I miss The Wine Cellar.” Del lowered his head a bit and blushed. “I miss you too.”

“Glad to hear it on both counts.” Mark looked at Del and Joey. “Sounds like you’ve been going through some rough waters.”

“I don’t understand my mother. She knew I was gay but

never said a word when.... In fact, she didn't want me to come out to my dad at all. It's as if she doesn't care about me in the least. She just wants me to fit into some mold of her own making." Del held Joey's hand. "The weirdest thing is that although he's still trying to get used to the idea, what he really gives a shit about is whether I can make a decent living to support the lifestyle he thinks I should have."

"Whoa, whoa, kiddo. Those are some mighty big leaps you're taking."

Joey piped in, "Mark, you haven't been here. Del's mom is a total homophobe. She wants to take him back to Salem. Mrs. Mathers thinks she can shelter him from the deviant lifestyle he's been drawn into—by me."

Mark looked at the two young men and smiled. He sat back in the armchair and remained silent.

Del wondered what Mark was thinking. He was surprised at the calm he showed despite the scene he and Mr. Mathers had walked in on.

"You know, boys, I think you need to give Del's parents a little leeway."

Del tried to appear as tall as he could manage, glaring at Mark. Joey just stared in shock at his friend and mentor.

Mark snorted. "You two look like I just announced I was a right-wing republican."

Del huffed. "So fill us in: what are you talking about?"

"Look at it this way, boys. When most kids come out of the damn closet, their parents do one of two things. Either

they cope and eventually accept them, or they kick them out.”

Joey nodded and Del imagined the scenario his partner must have experienced telling his widowed mother her only son was gay. But she had dealt with her concerns and accepted him.

“Del, if I’m not mistaken, your mother figured out you were gay without you saying a word. Is that true?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Wait; let me finish.”

Del sat back quietly to let Mark continue.

“She didn’t kick you out, and not knowing what the hell your father might do, she didn’t let you tell him either. Isn’t that right?”

Del nodded his agreement very slowly, trying to figure out what Mark was really trying to say.

“You’re an only child, and from what I can gather, you lived in a fucking wealthy cocoon your whole life until you went off to college.” Mark paused briefly. “I would imagine your family follows current events. Let’s face it, gay bashing and the continual fight for equal rights are always in the newspapers and on TV. Maybe, just maybe, Del, your mother is scared.”

Del’s eyes widened as he caught onto Mark’s train of thought. “She wants to protect me, keep me safe. That’s what she’s continually saying, but I just don’t believe her. My mom has seemed so angry.”

“As I’ve been led to believe, you’ve been pretty goddamn angry yourself since the bashing.” Mark leaned forward in his chair. “But you’ve been able to let it all out with your shrink.”

Joey sat back abruptly. “Shit,” he whispered. “If she was concerned about that crap before you left for New York... well, this proved that her concerns were warranted.”

Mark smiled softly. “I knew you boys were smart, although it took you awhile to catch on.”

Del looked at his friend. “But how did you figure it out?”

“Your mother knows you’re gay. Your father knows you’re gay. They still want to take care of you.” Mark started noting each comment, counting them off on his fingers. “They’re not running screaming out of the apartment knowing you and the musical genius are sleeping together.”

He placed his hands back on the arms of the chair. “The way I see it, your mother’s second-most horrific nightmare about her son being gay came true, and she can’t face that the worst could still happen.”

Joey looked at Del. “And how can she prevent it? By bringing you back to Salem and hoping to convince you that living a straight lifestyle could somehow work and—”

“Keep me safe.” Del looked at Mark. “How could I be so fucking blind?”

Mark chuckled. “Kid, you’re one of the most sensitive people I know. You’re also just twenty-three. Give it time. I have about twenty years of experience on you—watching



people, watching parents, seeing all kinds.”

“How can I fix this? Is there any way I can help her understand?”

Joey looked at Mark and Del. “How can *we* fix this?”

“Just keep doing what you both have to do to keep yourselves safe and looking toward the future. This is one of those times when actions will work much better than words.”

“Then we start by moving into your friend’s place. Is that still okay, Mark?” Del pleaded. “No matter what my parents’ motivation, living with them is getting too... too....”

“Crowded!” Joey huffed.

“The place is all set. One of the reasons I was coming to visit was to give you the keys and the address.”

Richard Mathers and his wife returned to the living room, both clearly calmer. The bitter expression Lillian Mathers had previously worn had eased. Del’s mother looked at her husband and he nodded.

“Wendell, sweetheart, I’m sorry.”

Del looked at his mother, eyes soft and understanding. “There’s nothing to be sorry for.”

Joey moved near Mark, allowing Del’s mother to take the space closest to her son. “Yes, there is.” She paused and tenderly patted Del’s hand. “You’re so precious to me. I just hate seeing you hurt, and this, this attack—I could have lost you.”

“I’m here, Mom. I may be thin, but I have fortitude.”

Mrs. Mathers smiled. “You certainly do. I just wish I could keep you close so I can keep an eye on you.” She looked back at her husband. “But I know I can’t. You need to lead your own life, make your own choices.” She took a deep breath. “Your father has asked me to see a therapist when we return home—maybe I’ll start while I’m still here in New York. Despite my misgivings, I’ve agreed for now. He doesn’t think I can let you go any other way, and I need to... for both our sakes.”

Del looked at his father. “Does that go for you too?”

Richard viewed all the faces in the room, one after another. “Damn, this has to do with singing and acting, doesn’t it?”

Joey turned to Del and smirked after hearing Mr. Mathers’s irritated tone of voice. Del snorted. “At least it’s a step up from digging garbage ditches.”

Mark laughed out loud.

Del grinned, eyeing his friend. “Maybe you should have been a family therapist.”

“I am—I own a nightclub filled with family—*my* family.” Mark tossed Joey the keys to the new apartment. “I always try to take care of what’s mine.”

Mrs. Mathers looked at Mark and then her husband and softly added, “I know the feeling.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“ARE you sure we should be here so soon? I don’t want you rushing your recovery just for me.” Del watched with a glint of amusement as Joey paced the length of the reception area at Unified Productions.

“You’re as good a reason as any to push myself.” Joey stopped short and turned abruptly toward Del, his expression filled with concern. “I’m pushing myself because I want to, this is just one of the added benefits.” Del rolled his eyes and Joey returned to his poor imitation of an expectant father.

They had a scheduled appointment to meet with Walter Jacobs at 10 a.m. To ensure that they wouldn’t be late, Del had insisted they leave extra early to combat the New York City traffic. Unable to maneuver the steep stairways in the subway stations, they had had to take a taxi.

Despite his remaining challenges, Del had made a remarkable recovery once he, Joey, and his parents had come to an understanding. It had been a hard-fought battle but well worth it.

Del’s mother continued to remain in her friend’s apartment uptown while Del and Joey lived in the loaner Mark’s friend had generously vacated at no charge. Mrs.

Mathers couldn't bring herself to leave New York, and she frequently called Del to confirm that he was all right. Del was willing to deal with all the overprotective actions as long as she remained in therapy.

Lillian Mathers made it a point to know Joey's work schedule and would arrive shortly before he left to assume her son's care. While both men tried to explain it was no longer necessary for Del to have twenty-four-hour-a-day support, Mrs. Mathers insisted and the two agreed begrudgingly.

With guidance from both the physical therapist and the psychiatrist, Del began to take short walks, holding a cane for stability and security. He wasn't ready to venture out alone, day or night, and no one pushed, understanding there would be some wounds that would take longer to heal than others.

Stairs were the greatest obstacle, and Del was still only able to walk up and down one flight before the pain overtook him.

Each morning, Del and Joey ventured to a nearby church that had a main entrance up a lengthy flight of stairs.

*"Fuck! I'm never going to make it to the goddamn top landing."*

*Joey covered his mouth in an obvious attempt to hide his smile.*

*"What the fucking hell are you grinning at?"*

*“If you stop cursing on the steps of a church, you might have a chance of getting inside.”*

*“Asshole.” But Del found the corners of his mouth rising as he turned to make the trip back down to the sidewalk from the first landing.*

Both he and Joey knew it would be a while before they could return to their own apartment.

Joey ran his hand over his hair as he crossed in front of Del once again in the reception area of Unified Productions. He stopped and faced him. “You’re not ready for this. You can’t dance yet by a fucking long shot. Why are we here? This was a huge mistake.”

“Would you please sit down already?” Del smirked. “You’re making me dizzy.”

Joey eyed the path he’d been crossing repeatedly and blushed. Sitting down next to Del, he took his hand and squeezed. “I’m sorry. I must be driving you crazy.”

“A little, but you know,” Del paused for a moment, “I’m not really nervous. I thought I would be, but I’m not.”

“I don’t know how you do it. I’m a fucking bundle of nerves.”

Del snorted. “No shit.” He kept his voice down so as not to be heard by the man frantically answering all the calls filtering through the reception desk. “You make me look like Captain Security.”

“I thought I’d get here and feel all cocky about my music. But instead, there’s this damn voice that keeps going

through my head—it's too soon; we're not ready; I'm just kidding myself."

Del squeezed Joey's shoulder gently. "This is actually kind of refreshing."

Joey looked at him, confused. "What?"

"Having you be the one who's afraid of everything and me be the relaxed one."

Joey chuckled softly. "Yeah, we really are one hell of a bizarre team. Neither of us can be on the same damn page at the same time."

"I don't know. It looks to me like we're on the same page. Maybe it's finally my turn to take care of you."

Joey nodded. "Maybe so."

Del turned his body to face Joey. "You know, if today works out, we'll truly be on our way."

Joey sat quietly for a moment and looked at Del.

"We always had a plan. First we'd move in together, we'd somehow get into the mainstream nightclubs or theater and then...." Del gazed into Joey's eyes, hoping that the plan they'd worked out almost a year earlier hadn't been killed in the bashing.

Joey turned away, a faraway look in his eyes, but then returned Del's longing expression. "And then we'd formally commit to one another, and on our honeymoon, or whatever the fuck the equivalent is for us, we'd finally feel each other completely—inside and out—no barriers ever again."

Del nodded, hope and desire flashing through his mind and body.

“Are you sure you’re really ready for a commitment like that? After all, we haven’t, you know... completely, since the attack.”

Del lowered his voice so he could barely be heard. “We haven’t actually fucked; I’m well aware of that. But I’m feeling better now, and I’ll be there soon. We’ll be there soon.” He tentatively entwined his fingers with Joey’s.

Joey was about to respond when a tall brunette woman entered the reception room. “Excuse me, gentlemen. Mr. Jacobs will see you now.”

The two rose, Joey grabbing his messenger bag and Del his cane. They followed the woman down a long hallway of offices. Many of the doors were open, and Del glanced in, noting a number of meetings and a flurry of activity taking place in each pristinely decorated office. Several of the spaces had pianos or keyboards centrally located. He felt a charge of electricity as they approached the corner office at the far end.

The nameplate across the entrance read “Walter Jacobs, President and CEO.” When the assistant opened the door, there was a small outer office they bypassed as they were ushered through a set of French doors.

Walter Jacobs’ office dwarfed Del’s at The Investors. Del grinned as he anticipated tendering his resignation once all the paperwork with Unified was signed.

“Well, hello, boys. It’s a pleasure to see you again. I’ve

been looking forward to our meeting.”

Walter Jacobs smiled and stood up from behind his large, modern glass-topped desk to shake their hands.

“We’ve been looking forward to it too, sir.”

“You must be Del. The last time I made your acquaintance, I believe I met Venus.”

Del felt a rush of heat on his cheeks as he quietly nodded. “That’s right, sir. You met Venus, but I hope you won’t be disappointed with me. I’m Del Mathers.”

“Young Mr. Mathers, I am far from disappointed and quite pleased to see your recovery has been rapid.” Mr. Jacobs shook his head. “Nasty bit of filth, those degenerates. I hope they lock them away for good.”

Joey piped in, “I think they probably will, since they’ve been able to connect them with an earlier murder in our neighborhood.”

“Good, good. Glad to hear it. Don’t need garbage like that on the streets.” Mr. Jacobs started shuffling a couple of papers on his desk. “Now, let’s get onto more pleasant subjects. Please make yourselves comfortable.”

The two sat down. Joey gently ran his hand over the beveled edge of the desk. “Thank you for this opportunity. I’m, we’re really looking forward to working with your company.”

“That’s good to hear, because I like talent, and I don’t like when someone else gets to it before I do.”



Del glanced at Joey. Both men were having trouble keeping their enthusiasm in check. Del gripped the arms of his chair to keep from fidgeting as Mr. Jacobs and his assistant began to make two clear stacks of paper.

“Here you go, boys. Give it a read-through and feel free to ask me any questions. My assistant will be happy to show you to my private conference room.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Jacobs—if it’s all right with you, Mark arranged to have his attorney meet us here shortly to go over all the details of this with us.” Del kept his hands firmly pressed against his knees, hoping Walter Jacobs hadn’t taken offense.

“By all means. Smart move, although I’m not surprised. You two seem like you’re pretty levelheaded.”

As Del and Joey were escorted out of the office, Walter Jacobs picked up the phone. “Ernie, it’s me, Walt. Get your recording studio warmed up. I’m about to sign a couple of hot ones, and I want you to lay some test tracks.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

DEL was in his dressing room at The Wine Cellar. It had been five months since his last stage appearance, but he was ready—more than ready. He smirked, thinking about the morning’s exercise session.

*“What the fuck are you doing?” Del could hear the irritation in Joey’s voice.*

*“I’m doing my imitation of Rocky. Can’t you tell?”*

*“Asshole. This isn’t a goddamn museum in Philadelphia, and there were four times as many steps. This is a neighborhood church.”*

*Del ignored Joey, raising his hands in victory as he jumped up and down at the top of the staircase leading into the building.*

*“Get down here; you’ve already proven yourself. You can run up and down these steps four times without stopping.”*

*Del ran down the steps, sometimes skipping one on purpose, and flew into Joey’s arms. “I’m the king of the world.”*

*Joey burst out laughing. “You’re mixing your movie metaphors, but I’ll forgive you this time.” Joey took Del’s hand in his and began walking back to their temporary apartment*

*for the last time.*

*“You’re suddenly quiet. What’s up?”*

*“Just thinking about some shit.”*

*“Like what?”*

*“Not too much.” Joey stopped to face Del. “When we go back tonight, do you think you’ll be able to go into the subway station?”*

*Del stood completely still, saying nothing.*

*“It’s okay. The doc said that certain things, seemingly unrelated, might still spook you.”*

*Del looked down. “Soon... I hope.”*

*Joey lifted his chin and gave him a quick peck on the lips. “It’s not a big deal. The bus is fine. Now let’s get ourselves home.”*

*Del turned around to look at the church steps one more time, silently raising his hands in victory.*

*“Enjoy every moment, baby! You earned it.”*

After finishing up the last touches of mascara, Del slipped into his new shoes. He had been singing in Unified’s studio for almost two months but hadn’t felt physically or emotionally prepared to get back on the stage until recently.

Del pulled his long sequined gown up the length of his body. For a moment he thought back to the last time he’d become Venus but quickly shoved those thoughts away, looking forward to his grand return.

He stared in the mirror as he orchestrated the final touches of the transformation, powder and lipstick.

Mr. Jacobs had encouraged him to continue at The Wine Cellar until he could arrange for his first mainstream club date. Del agreed willingly. He owed that much to Mark. He and Joey might not be together had he not intervened.

A knock on the door caught his attention as show time was approaching. “Yeah? How much time do I have?”

“Can I come in?”

“Sure, Mark; you’re always welcome.” Del fastened his veil in place.

“You know it won’t be long before you’ll be able to get on the stage as Del Mathers.”

“I know.” Del bit his lip, glad that the veil hid his face.

“Don’t feel bad, kid. That’s why I had Walt come down here in the first place. You’re too good for this joint—you both are. I knew it the first night you auditioned one of Joe’s tunes.”

“He’s really good, isn’t he? He’ll be writing for the biggest names soon.”

“One of them being yours.”

Del chuckled. “We’ll see.”

“So when do you think you’ll be out of here?”

Del stood up and started rummaging through his make-up case silently, looking for nothing in particular.

“That soon.”

He nodded. “We were going to tell you after the show tonight.”

“You just better make sure I get a special invitation to every single one of your opening nights.”

“You think there’ll be that many?”

“I know it.”

Del assumed the persona of Venus. “Darling, parting from you will be the hardest thing I’ve ever done.”

“Then we’ll just say, ‘see you soon’.”

“Sounds divine.”

Another knock halted the bittersweet conversation. “Two minutes, Venus.”

“Thank you, dear. I’ll be there.” Venus stood tall in her heels and sauntered towards Mark. “I’ll always be near, my sweet. I owe you my life and I’ll never forget that.” Her husky voice choked a bit.

Mark kissed Venus on the hand. “You are one in a million, lovely lady.”

“So I’ve heard.” Venus opened the door.

Mark felt a touch of melancholy as his star left the room. Venus sensed him gazing after her, hips swaying as she approached the stage. The house roared with applause as her name was announced.

Del paused to take a deep breath. *Make it good, Venus; your days are numbered.*

Venus glanced around the room. It was a sold-out crowd and she owned them all. She put her heart and soul into each song and could feel her spirit reignited with the thrill of the performance.

Venus spotted Joey standing off to the side by the soundboard. His eyes were fixed on her, only turning away to check an adjustment on the sound system.

After the final number as Venus took her third bow, Joey came up on stage.

Venus glared at the intruder, confused by his unprecedented action. She bowed in his direction and as she rose, whispered, "What are you doing?"

Joey smirked and waved his hand to cue the other employee who was manning the soundboard. "You had your *Rocky* moment, now it's my turn... for my *Jerry Maguire* moment."

Del quietly replied with a glint in his eyes, "If you say 'you complete me', I'll run right off this stage."

"I'm much more creative than that."

Venus scanned the room. The audience was silent, and she noticed Mark in the wings, smiling broadly.

Joey began to speak aloud, "Venus, you are brilliant at delivering my songs, but there's one song I wrote expressly for Del. I hope he's listening because it's not often I sing in public."

Venus's eyes widened, overwhelmed by shock and confusion.

The music began to play through the loud speaker and Joey sang, *"When love comes in, don't turn away. Give and it will only give back. When loves comes in, the world is yours. Make it last, for it may only come once. When loves comes in don't run away. It's time to take the leap."*

The music continued, but Joey stopped singing. "It's almost finished. I know it's still a bit rough, but I'm working on it. It's a gift from the heart."

Joey got down on one knee and took his lover's hand. Venus's eyes glazed over with moisture behind the veil. "What are you doing?"

"Well, I hope that it's getting pretty fucking obvious."

Several chuckles from the audience were heard.

"Del Mathers, I've kept you waiting far too long. Will you commit to being my life partner?"

"Shit."

Joey laughed softly. "That wasn't the answer I was hoping for."

"Oh, God, yes; of course I will!"

Joey rose and hugged the statuesque performer.

Del looked into Joey's eyes. "Fuck this." He whipped off the veil and planted a crushing kiss on his partner's lips.

The audience stood up, the applause deafening. Yells of

“Bravo!” could be heard throughout the club.

When their lips parted, Del looked toward Mark, who raised his wine glass to them and winked.

Joey accompanied Del off-stage and back to the dressing room. The stage lights dimmed and the house lights came up behind them.

“It won’t be long now.”

Del looked at Joey, not following his train of thought.

“You don’t get it, do you?”

“Not really, although my brain isn’t functioning up to par after that little bomb you just dropped.”

“Are you happy?”

“You know I am.” Del brushed his hand over Joey’s cheek.

“Do you remember what we always said we’d finally do once we were ready to commit completely to one another?”

“I’ve been ready for ages.”

“Okay, me—once I was ready. But do you... remember?”

Del thought for a moment and then a thong hanging on a hook in the open closet caught his eye and he grinned from ear to ear. “You mean....”

“Yes, but not until our wedding night.”

“Do we really have to wait so long?”



“What better way to start our married life?”

“I just hope I don’t get pregnant the first night.” Del smirked and Joey burst out laughing, which was followed by a passionate kiss.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

DEL rolled over and blinked, shielding his eyes from the light filtering through the window blinds.

“Good morning, sleepyhead.”

“Morning.”

Joey smiled, gazing at Del. “I’m glad you’re finally up.”

Del glanced down at his lover’s naked body, cock erect, the tip moist. “I see you’ve been up for awhile. Did you start without me?”

“I was hoping you’d be able to catch up.” Joey rolled on top of Del, kissing the hardening nipples and working his way up to his neck and lips.

“Fuck! I think I’m with the program now.” Del wrapped his arms around Joey, returning his kisses, pressing his tongue forcefully into his partner’s mouth.

“God, you’re so fucking hot.” Joey kissed Del’s swollen lips once more and then guided him onto his stomach. “So beautiful.”

Del shivered as Joey ran warm hands up and down his back. Pressing his lips to the nape of his lover’s neck, Joey licked his way down the length of Del’s body, stopping at his

crack. He nibbled at the soft flesh, teasing the tender pucker with twirling motions of his tongue, driving Del toward the brink much too quickly.

Del wanted to stretch this out, but his partner's ministrations, along with the friction of the sheets rubbing against his cock, were too much. He reached back, clutching Joey, and began to beg, urging him on. "Now, Joey, now."

Del heard the tear of the condom wrapper and drew his knees under him. He heard the snap as Joey got ready to slick him with lube and he spread his legs wide, inviting, wanting, and needing more.

Joey thrust, sinking into the warm channel, pausing for a second, allowing Del to adjust to his girth.

Del pressed back, needing to be filled, to be possessed.

Joey began to move, speeding up as Del responded, plunging in and out of his lover, hitting the magic spot that usually had them both groaning loudly.

"Ahhh, shit!" Del cried out, feeling the rush far too soon. He began to stroke himself, trying to find release before the tension he felt so often overwhelmed him, but Joey smacked his hand away and reached for his swollen cock, wrapping warm fingers around it and tugging until he started to come, spilling all over the sheets.

"Fuck, oh fuck!" Del tried to remain steady, feeling the pressure as Joey thrust once more, then stilled, filling the condom.

Collapsing in a heap, the two breathed heavily.

After a minute, Joey carefully pulled out and removed the condom as Del turned away from him.

“I wish I could make it easier, better for you. It hasn’t been that long since we started having sex again; you relax more each time we fuck.”

Del couldn’t look at Joey. “You deserve someone who can satisfy you completely. I don’t want you to stay with me out of obligation.”

Joey brushed his hand over Del’s shoulder and squeezed his arm. “I have the best. Nowhere else to go. This morning was damn hot!”

Del rolled back, facing his lover, and combed his fingers through his matted hair. “It’s better every time. I hope you know that.” He cast his eyes downward. “I want to make you happy.”

“Having you with me—there’s nothing that could make me happier.” Joey paused until Del raised his eyes once again. “Remember what the shrink said. Some parts of the recovery will come more quickly; others will take time.”

“You won’t leave?” Del felt foolish asking, but he needed to hear it, especially today.

“You’re stuck with me, so deal with it.” Joey smirked and winked as he jumped out of bed. “Better get your hot ass in the shower, or you’ll stink on stage.”

DEL was frantically pulling on his costume. He was convinced they had ordered the pants two sizes too tight just to make it a challenge.

“You have plenty of time. Try to relax.”

“How can I relax? This will either be the biggest night of our lives or the absolute worst.”

Joey chuckled. “At least I’m sure the right one is on the stage. You have to be the drama queen of the century.”

“We’re not far into this century—not much competition on that front.”

Joey rolled his eyes, remaining silent.

“Do you know what tonight is?” Del paused in front of the mirror, his shirt and pants in place, smoothing out the wrinkles.

“Of course I know; it’s your opening night.”

“*Our* opening night—but that wasn’t what I was referring to.” Del continued to stare into the mirror. He ghosted his fingers over his hair. It had grown in thicker than before, the color slightly darker, more red than blond.

Joey stood up and walked behind his lover, placing his arms around his waist and resting his head against his shoulder blades. “Don’t think about that tonight,” he whispered.

Turning in Joey’s arms, he glared at him, his jaw tightening. “How can I *not* think about it? One year ago today I was nearly killed.”

“I know it’s lame, but I just wish we could get through one week without that night fucking with our lives.” Joey let go of Del and walked to the vanity, picking up different bottles and tubes of make-up set out neatly on a tray.

“I want that too, but the doctor told both of us it would take years. She was damn impressed that we’ve come as far as we have in such a short time.”

“That’s ’cause we have each other.”

Del nodded. “Yeah, we do.”

“Are you glad we waited?” Del was confused, his expression blank. “I mean to have the commitment ceremony—are you glad we waited?”

“We waited because it took me so fucking long to get used to having sex again.” Del grumbled. He sat at the vanity and started applying his make-up.

“You have a slightly distorted memory. We waited so we could both return to a somewhat normal life and give you time to come closer to a complete recovery.” Joey opened a folding chair, setting it up alongside Del’s. He tenderly placed his hand over his lover’s. “We held off until we both recovered enough.”

Del gazed at Joey. Putting his hands squarely on his cheeks, Del drew him in for a long, ardent kiss. “I love you. I love your talent, your support, your patience. I love everything about you.”

“You didn’t mention my hot bod,” Joey teased.

“That goes without saying.” Del snickered and continued

putting on his eye make-up.

“I don’t know; I think it’s worth mentioning every now and then.” Joey ran his finger down Del’s T-shirt clad chest. “Yours isn’t too bad either.”

“Not too bad! I’ll have you know I’m in the best shape I’ve ever been in.”

“I know, and don’t think I’m not enjoying it. Working with your physical therapist and shrink has been improving our sex life too.”

“Just what they were meant to do.” Del huffed a small laugh. He paused briefly, staring at Joey’s reflection in the mirror. “Thank you.”

“For writing the song that got you a featured role in this show?” Joey turned away but Del heard the concern in his voice.

“For standing by me all the way. For helping me walk up our steps the first time we returned home. For taking everything we did at a snail’s pace when you wanted to move full speed ahead.”

Joey nodded. “It was worth it. And I have to admit that watching you dance on the steps last week was pretty fucking gratifying.”

Del laughed and rolled his eyes. “Every gay actor needs his Astaire moment.”

“At least you didn’t say ‘Garland’.”

Del smacked Joey on the arm. “Asshole.”

Joey straightened Del's street clothes. "You're going to be a big hit tonight."

"So are you. Two featured songs—one being performed by the lead."

"And one by you."

"Do you know if they're here?"

"I didn't see them, but they were just beginning to let the audience in when I arrived." Joey approached the small clothing rack, aimlessly rummaging through Del's other costumes. "I did see Mark. He's with his police hottie."

"He came in uniform?" Del finished the final stroke of lipstick and closed the tube, laying the brush on a towel.

"No, I just remembered from when we finally met him last month at their place."

"I'll have to thank him for the flowers. He must have told the florist to send the most outrageous arrangement he could assemble."

"It's fucking huge. I'll bet it cost a bundle."

There was a knock on the door. "Five minutes, Del."

"Thanks; I'm ready."

"Just like The Wine Cellar." Joey grinned.

"Only now I get to wear pants and jazz shoes."

"You're a totally evolved actor. Congratulations."

"Shut up." Del felt the warmth rise in his cheeks under



the stage make-up.

“I’m heading out front before it’s too late.” Joey kissed the top of Del’s head. “Break a leg.”

Del nodded and took a deep breath, following Joey out of the tiny dressing room assigned to featured performers. He approached the stage and noted two empty seats in the eighth row.

He shook his head, took another deeper cleansing breath, and joined the company, preparing for their entrance.

Previews had gone as well as could be expected, but this was the night the press joined the crowd.

The overture began, and as the company took their places on stage and the curtain rose, he dared one last look. The seats were filled.

The show ran better than it ever had. All the actors were at the top of their game. Del’s featured song, written by Joseph Dixon, received a huge round of applause that continued longer than expected.

After the curtain calls were completed, Del ran backstage and into his dressing room. He sat on the one cushioned chair and started breathing in and out slowly so as not to hyperventilate. They had done it—with a lucrative deal arranged by Walter Jacobs, they had made it to Broadway.

Now all he had to do was change out of his costume as fast as possible so he could meet his friends and family at

the stage door.

The door to his dressing room swung open as he was hanging up the final piece of his wardrobe. Joey ran up to him, lifted him off the ground, and spun him around, kissing him all the while.

“Holy shit! I guess you liked the show.” Del’s face lit up.

“Forget me; I heard that asshole from *The New York Times* whispering to the critic from *The Post*.”

“What did he say?”

“You’ll love this bullshit. He said, ‘The musical was innovative. It’s been a long time since we’ve been given a fresh approach. And that kid who sang the song by the new writer, a definite plus. I heard the CD Jacobs put together with those two—not bad.’” Joey was preening.

“Shit! He loved it, he loved us!” Del and Joey clung to each other, their kisses heating up. Del pressed his tongue into Joey’s mouth and grasped his lover’s hair between his fingers.

“Fuck, I can’t wait.” Joey started pulling off Del’s shirt.

“No waiting; can’t wait,” Del panted.

There was a knock on the door and both men froze. “Hey, Del, there’s a bunch of people asking for you at the stage door.”

“Damn!” Joey brushed his hand over his face.

“Just think about my parents. That should help.”

“It is already,” he huffed.

“Glad to be of service. Let’s go.”

When Del and Joey exited the stage door, a number of audience members applauded. With his make-up removed, Del knew he couldn’t hide the blush on his cheeks. Several of the waiting throng shoved playbills and pens at him, requesting he autograph their precious programs.

After the hubbub died down, Del walked over to those waiting especially for him.

“Oh, honey, you were brilliant. No one else could hold a candle to you. You should have been the lead.”

Del smiled at his mother. “I’m glad you liked it, but I’ll need a lot more experience before I’m ever offered a lead role like this one.”

Del looked over at Mark and his partner. The two approached. “Amazing, kid. I don’t usually check out too many musicals. I get enough of that at work, but you made it worth it.”

“Thanks, Mark.” Del and Mark stared at each other hesitantly and then the two hugged. “I’m glad you were here. You’d better be at all my opening nights. You promised.”

“Count on it. I always keep my word.” Mark turned to Joey. “You were a pretty big hit tonight, yourself.” Joey beamed. “So where are we all heading?”

“Sardi’s. The food isn’t that great anymore, but the tradition continues. The whole cast will be there.” Joey turned to Del and then nodded a silent greeting to Del’s

parents. “Should we meet you there?”

“Yeah, you guys head over. We’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Del ushered his parents off to the side so they could have a quieter place to talk. “I’m glad you made it.”

“We almost didn’t. We were almost in Connecticut when your mother thought she left the dress for your wedding at home. Good goddamn, the thing was in her suitcase when the driver pulled over and we double checked.”

“Well, I just hope it was worth the effort to get here.” Del looked directly at his father, willing him to somehow acknowledge his success. They had spent the better part of the past six months arguing about Del’s abandonment of his ‘brilliant career’.

“What the hell do you want me to say, Wendell?” Mr. Mathers’s words were strong, but his voice didn’t match them.

“Richard, tell him—tell him what you told me right after the lights went up, before you gave it any thought,” Mrs. Mathers whispered, an edge to her voice.

“Dad?” Del stared at his father, longing for something more. “What did you say?”

Mr. Mathers rested his hand on his son’s shoulder. In a hushed tone, he admitted, “I may have said you’re going to be a great actor. You’ll have a more successful career as an actor and singer than you ever would as a businessman.”

Del hugged his father, at first tentatively, but when he

felt firm arms return the hug, he clung tighter for just a brief moment.

“Let’s go to Sardi’s. I’ve always wondered what it would be like to be there on an opening night.”

Del snorted. “So have I, Mom.”

“THIS room is incredible.”

Joey tipped the bellman and closed the door, locking the deadbolt. “It had better be, for what it’s costing us.”

“Now that you’re becoming a big success in the music business, you can afford it.” Del hung his garment bag in the closet.

“You’re not doing so bad yourself. Besides, we’re only going to have one honeymoon—we should make it the best.” Joey came up behind Del and kissed him on the back of his neck. Trembling at the brief contact, Del turned around.

“No, I guess not. The reviews were pretty good. Everyone thinks the show will run at least a year, if not more.”

“But you read what the critic from the *Times* wrote—‘A fresh new face with a superlative voice, featured performer Del Mathers delivers with that rare combination of acting and singing—both at a premium.’ ”

“I can’t believe you memorized that.”

“It wasn’t hard. I’ve always thought you delivered.”

Joey took his partner's hand and walked him to the edge of the California King bed that dominated the deluxe hotel room. He ghosted his hand over Del's and began to run his fingers up and down his arms, eliciting a shiver. "You cold?"

"No, not at all."

Joey glanced away, blushing. "Hey, look." He stood up and walked over to a bottle of champagne set in a bucket of ice on a small table near the window. "There's a card—it's from Mark and his partner."

"He's always been our biggest supporter."

"I know." He looked back at Del. "Want some?"

Del shook his head.

Joey placed the bottle back in the bucket unopened.

Del rubbed his hands over the comforter. "Joey, if you can't do this yet, it's okay."

Joey returned to his place next to Del. "It's not that." He paused, pinching the bridge of his nose. "You've come so far. Everything you ever promised—you followed through. You're the bravest man I know."

Del leaned toward Joey, preparing to kiss him.

Holding up his hand, Joey continued, "Wait, let me finish. I know I made it hard for you. I set up all kinds of goddamn roadblocks to avoid commitment." Joey took a deep breath. "I just want you to know that it wasn't because I didn't trust you, it was because I was afraid. Afraid that I

couldn't sustain a real relationship—but I was wrong.” He gazed at Del. “It took you to make my world complete. I love you.”

“I love you too.” Del smiled broadly. “That’s why I was willing to suffer permanent hand-cramp signing all those documents about civil union, wills, name changes, and whatever the fuck else the lawyer gave us.”

“The name change—you’re okay with that?” Joey caressed Del’s hand, now resting on the edge of the bed.

“I like my names—Del Mathers is a good stage name, and I can’t think of a better life name than Del M. Dixon.”

Joey and Del fell silent, staring intensely into each other’s eyes.

Their first kiss was a tender whisper, a foretaste of things to come. The urgency began to build as they pressed against each other and the light kisses became more demanding, stoking the fire of their need. Hungry lips crashed together as their arousal grew, a feeling so familiar and so intimate, yet tonight it was all fresh and new.

Joey removed Del’s shirt and tenderly took the pink nubs of his nipples in between his fingers and pinched, grinning as Del shuddered, his desire clearly manifesting in his cock, which lay thick and heavy with need. This was their moment —the new beginning Del had never thought they’d realize. Despite everything, here they were, finally about to make it happen.

Kissing and licking his way up Del’s chest to his neck, Joey began to nibble on his lover’s earlobe. Del’s head tilted

back, the hairs on his neck rising. He fisted his hands in Joey's hair, never wanting to let him go.

"Please, Joey," Del whispered, "more."

Del dropped to his knees, running his hands up and down his lover's legs. He began to worship Joey's cock, tugging, kissing, and licking the tender flesh, rolling his balls around playfully, feeling Joey quiver. Del smiled to himself, reveling in his partner's reaction.

"Ahhh, Del, oh, God!" Joey's fingers tangled in Del's hair as he began sucking aggressively. Joey panted, "No, not like this, not now. I want to do this right."

Guiding Del to rise, Joey pulled off the ornate bedspread and laid his lover gently on the bed.

Joey ran his hands over the length of Del's slender body. He cupped his balls, working them in his hand. Del raised his arms above his head, taking hold of the headboard behind him. "More, I need more." He spread his legs wantonly.

Straddling his partner, Joey aligned their cocks, rubbing them together as he leaned down for a kiss. "So incredible. I love how you spread your legs, inviting me, letting me own you."

"Only you, all for you." Del wrapped his arms around Joey's neck, drawing him in, their tongues battling, the heat rising. Pulling back, Joey brushed his hand gently over Del's cheek and lips.

Del's senses were all heightened. "Now, Joey, it's time.



Please,” he begged, staring into the eyes of the only man he ever wanted in his bed—in his life.

“We’ve waited so long. Are you sure?”

Del handed him the lube in response. Joey slowly warmed the gel in his fingers and rubbed some on Del, readying him.

Del writhed as one finger became a tease. When the second finger worked its way in, stretching him, he arched. Joey added a third finger, moving his way toward his lover’s prostate.

Del gripped Joey’s shoulders, digging in his nails, knowing marks would be left. It was too much to bear. “Can’t wait. Need you now.” His voice was husky and demanding.

Joey removed his fingers, rubbing the remaining lube on himself.

Del closed his eyes as he felt Joey push through the tight ring.

“Open your eyes, baby. I want to see you.” Joey moved in deeper. “You feel so....”

“Good? Tell me what you feel? Tell me.”

“So warm, so mine,” Joey whispered.

“Only yours.” Del’s eyes were moist, struck as he was by the depth of his partner’s emotions.

Joey thrust in the rest of the way and began to move in a rhythm that belonged only to them, grazing Del’s prostate.

“Fuck, oh, fuck!” Kissing Joey passionately, Del wrapped his legs around his lover’s back as he came ever closer to the edge. Del arched one last time, overwhelmed by the closeness, this bond that only barrier-free love could provide. His forceful climax seemed to go on forever, marking Joey’s chest. Then he felt it—he felt Joey fill him, possessing him completely at last.

The two lay on the bed together, powerless to move, sated.

It wasn’t long before Del could feel Joey’s breathing return to normal, followed by the loss of intimacy as Joey slipped out, leaving a long, sticky trail between his legs.

Del rested his head on Joey’s chest, the two of them remaining entangled in their intimate embrace. “I never thought it could be so different, so much better, so....”

“Special?” Joey brushed Del’s hair from his sweaty forehead. “I never want to lose you ever again.”

Del tenderly kissed Joey’s nipple. “You never lost me. I was always with you, no matter what. I’ll be yours until....”

“I know that now and I really do believe it.” Joey placed a finger under Del’s chin, tilting his head up for another kiss.

Del smiled and kissed Joey once more as the two remained as one, arms and legs entwined.

“Joey?”

“Yeah?”

“I just want you to know how much I love you.”

Joey’s arms tightened, drawing Del up so they were face to face. Joey kissed Del passionately. He felt everything conveyed in his lover’s one small gesture.

It wasn’t long before Del heard the familiar and comforting sound of Joey’s snore. He gazed at his partner, knowing there was one more thing he had to do to make the day complete.

Del crept out of bed, careful not to disturb Joey, and retrieved his overnight case from the closet. He unzipped a small pocket and pulled out a thin square of fabric, which he brought into the bathroom.

Standing in front of the mirror, Del held the veil in front of his face. “Thank you, Venus. You gave me the chance to find my love, my life, but now it’s time for us to part. Del Mathers Dixon has arrived.”

Del backed away from the mirror and allowed the veil to slip through his fingers and fall gracefully to the floor as he returned to his place at Joey’s side.

Born in Brooklyn, CAROLYN LEVINE TOPOL grew up just outside New York City. Three passions dominated her life: reading, writing, and theater. Having always dreamed of writing her own version of The Great American Novel, it took her many years to discover her most heartfelt stories took their form in the creation of M/M romances. Sharing her writing with a small circle of online friends, Carolyn received advice, encouragement and joy from their feedback.

Spending her days working as an executive assistant in a synagogue, Carolyn relishes the quiet wee hours of the morning to lose herself in writing of the loves, passions, and adventures driving her characters.

With the backing of a supportive husband and two young adult children, Carolyn continues to explore the fabulous world of gay romance with the philosophy "Every person deserves their happy ending."

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