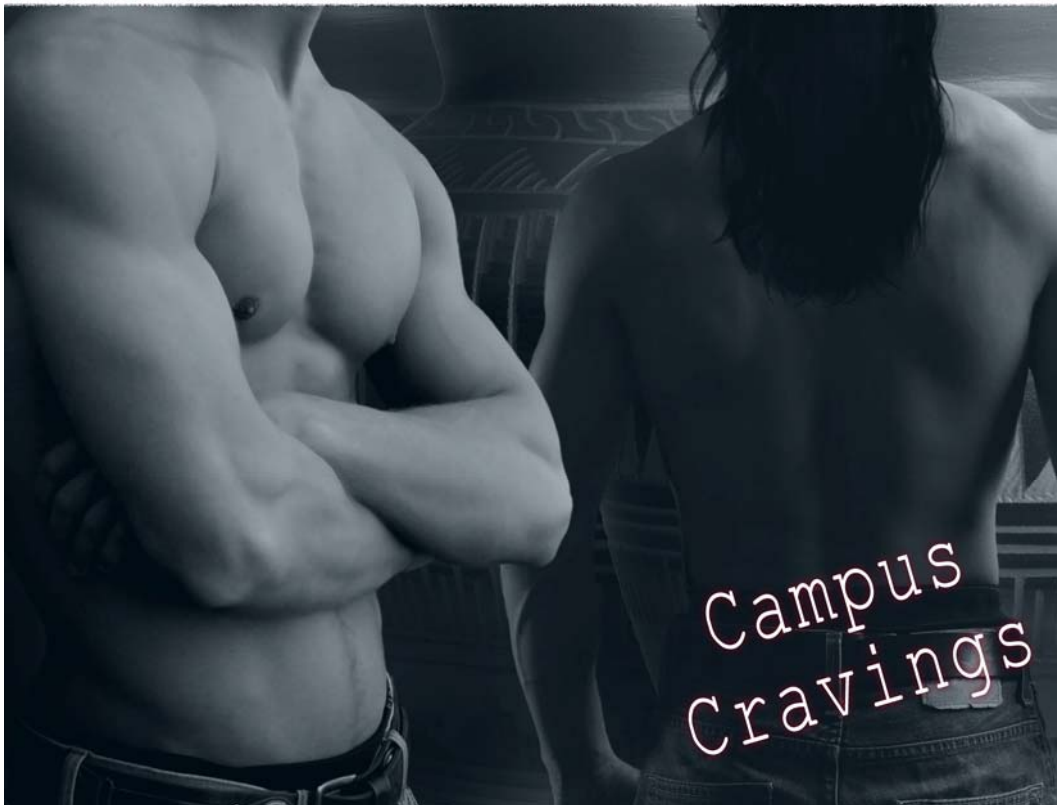


Carol Lynne

FORBIDDEN

FRESHMAN



Campus
Cravings

A Total-e-bound Publication



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Forbidden Freshman

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Warning:

Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

Campus Cravings

FORBIDDEN FRESHMAN

Carol Lynne

Dedication

Dedicated to my new friend, Taige Crenshaw, I hope you like this one.

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Chapter One

Haphazardly tossing the Saturday paper to the floor, Joe reached for the ringing phone. "Hello?"

"Hey, you got a minute?" Collin asked.

"You're my best friend. Of course I have a minute. Great game by the way."

"Thanks, Koby really pulled the team together."

"He sure did. So what's on your mind?" Joe stretched out on the sofa and looked at the hole in the toe of his sock. Damn, he really needed to do some laundry.

"I got home from the game and found Rocco sitting on my front steps with a suitcase in hand. I gather from what little he said that he wants to stay with me."

"Why? What happened at home to make him leave without calling you first?" Collin had always been a long-distance father, only seeing Rocco a week or two a year. Joe didn't think it was Rocco that kept Joe away, but his mother, Janie. From what little he'd heard, Janie had gone back to court several times over the years to increase the amount Collin paid in support.

"That's just it. He won't talk to me about it. All he asked was could he stay a while. I know it's your day off, but I was wondering if you'd take him to a late lunch and get him to open up."

The image of Rocco Williams sitting across from him had Joe's cock filling in no time. Stop it, he thought and reached down to give his cock a good thump. "You know if I take him to lunch and he opens up, I can't tell you about it."

"Why the hell not, I'm his father."

"If I talk to him in a professional capacity he will technically become a patient. I won't break a patient's trust, even for you." He heard Collin grumbling under his breath. Joe could just picture him pacing back and forth, something the other man always did when he was worried.

"I just want to make sure he's okay. Can you at least tell me that much after you talk to him?"

"I think so. I'll have to tell Rocco I'm going to tell you how he is, though."

"Whatever, just come over when you can. He's been sitting on the edge of the bed in the guestroom since he got here."

Joe looked down at his faded jeans and old NCIU Bighorn's sweatshirt. Not exactly professional attire, but maybe it would help Rocco open up more if he was dressed casually. "I'll be over in fifteen minutes."

"Thanks, buddy."

"Don't mention it." He hung up and went into the bathroom to brush his hair and teeth. Running the comb through his short brown hair took all of a second, but he got lost looking at himself in the mirror. It wasn't out of conceit that he stared at his image, but rather disgust.

"You're thirty-five fuckin' years old, you pervert, stop thinking about an eighteen-year old boy."

The memory of his first meeting with Rocco clouded his vision. Joe had agreed to go with Collin the previous summer to the Casino where Rocco's mother worked. Collin always stayed at the hotel next door when he came to town to see his son.

Joe remembered sitting in the lounge with Collin when he first laid eyes on Rocco. He'd seen several pictures of him, but nothing had prepared him for meeting the man in person. All the air in the room seemed to vanish as he stared into the prettiest eyes he'd ever seen, framed by the longest lashes in the world.

Collin stood to embrace his son before turning Rocco toward him. "Rocco, this is my good friend, Dr. Joe Pressman."

Hesitantly, Rocco held out a slender bronzed hand. "Nice to meet you, Dr. Pressman."

Joe took Rocco's hand and watched as Rocco's eyes instantly changed from their light brown shade to a green hue. The jolt of an insane amount of lust rushed straight to Joe's cock, and he had to swallow before he could speak. "Please, call me Joe."

Shaking his head, Joe looked at himself in the mirror. He knew that was the day his libido went dormant for any man who wasn't Rocco. Ashamed of himself, Joe turned away from the mirror and walked back into the living room.

Grabbing his keys from the small table beside the door, he locked up and got into his black Pontiac Crossfire. He knew owning a convertible wasn't practical in that part of the country, but on the rare day when he could ride with the wind in his hair, it was worth it.

Collin lived only about three miles away, so Joe didn't really have time to prepare himself like he should have. He was just going to have to figure out a way to help Rocco without giving away his attraction to the eighteen-year-old. "Yeah right," he chuckled. "Unless you cut off your balls you'll always want him."

After parking his car, Joe headed up Collin's front steps. Before he even had a chance to knock, Collin opened the door.

"Hey, glad you could do this for me," Collin said, letting him inside.

"Not a problem. I was just relaxing." He looked around the room. "Is he still in the bedroom?"

"Yeah. I stuck my head in and told him you were coming over to take him out to eat. I got a small smile and a nod." Collin said, rolling his eyes. "I called and left a message on Janie's answering machine, letting her know he was here and safe."

With a slap to Collin's shoulder, he nodded and went in search of Rocco. He stopped at the guestroom door and knocked. "Rocco? Is it okay if I come in?"

"Yes," Rocco said from behind the door.

Schooling his expression, Joe walked into the room. Damn, Rocco was even prettier than he remembered. How was that even possible? "You feel like getting a bite to eat?"

Rocco stood and wiped his hands on his jeans. The old denim seemed to mould perfectly to his lithe body. "Yeah, just let me change my shirt. Twelve hours on a bus has me smelling pretty rank."

Joe watched as he grinned. Oh that grin would be the death of him.

As he stood there waiting, Rocco pulled his long-sleeved T-shirt up and off. Somehow Joe wasn't surprised to see that Rocco didn't have any hair on his chest or underarms. He wasn't sure if it was the Native American in him or if he purposely removed what hair he

did have. Either way, the effect had his cock twitching. His mouth literally watered as he took in the one small silver hoop in his left nipple.

Moving his attention back to Rocco's face, he flushed. It was clear by the look Rocco gave him he'd caught Joe ogling his body. Joe turned away and went to the door. "I'll be in the living room when you're ready."

Five minutes later, Rocco came out dressed in a short-sleeve green T-shirt with 'I heart pottery' written on the front. Hmm, he didn't know that about Rocco. "You ready?"

"Yeah." Rocco looked at his Dad. "Would you like me to bring you back something?"

Collin squeezed Rocco's slim, fine boned shoulder. "No, but thanks. I've got a steak I'm going to throw on the grill."

Rocco gave Collin a hesitant smile and walked toward Joe. "I'm ready."

Leading Rocco out, Joe caught himself before he opened the car door for him. *This isn't a damn date*, he kept reminding himself.

Rocco eyed his car with apparent appreciation. "I love it," he said in a soft voice.

"Thanks, I do too," Joe said getting behind the wheel.

After buckling his seatbelt, Rocco looked at him. "Um, do you ever ride with the top down?"

"Yeah, when it's nice out. Why? Do you want me to put it down now?"

Rocco gave him a shy shrug. "I've never ridden in a convertible before."

"Well, I guess it's not too cool. If I run the heater we should be okay. Of course everyone we pass on the road will look at us like we're crazy," he said jokingly.

"That's okay. I'm kinda used to getting that look anyway."

He saw the hurt pass over Rocco's face as he said it. Joe hit the button to lower the top, reminding himself to explore the conversation further when they got to the restaurant.

"Anything special sound good to eat?"

"I like almost anything."

"You like burgers? There's a great burger and shake place down the road."

With a smile on his face, Rocco nodded. "I'd like that."

Joe found himself smiling back. "Burgers it is." He pulled out of the drive and headed toward the Shake Shack. He couldn't help looking over at Rocco as he drove. With his eyes closed, Rocco had his head tilted back against the headrest. It was obvious he was enjoying the sunshine on his face and the wind ruffling through his hair. Watching the blue black strands whipping their way around Rocco's face was a sight to behold.

Joe was so entranced by the sight, he almost missed his turn. Stopping in front of the fifties-looking hamburger joint, he glanced back over at Rocco. "Did you enjoy it?"

"Yes," he said opening the car door. Rocco was unable to keep his excitement in check and fairly bounced his way to the diner entrance.

Finding an empty booth wasn't a problem at this time of the day, so Joe purposely found one well away from the other customers. Hopefully Rocco would feel like talking if he felt confident that no one would overhear. Picking up the menu from the table Joe handed it to Rocco. "I already know what I'm getting."

"Wow, there are so many choices. What do you recommend?"

"Depends what you like. I always go for the triple cheeseburger with bacon and jalapeños with a side of cross-cut fries and an extra large strawberry shake."

"Mmm," Rocco said and licked his lips. The action had Joe hard in seconds. "That all sounds good except the jalapeños. My mouth burns if I eat anything too spicy."

"I'll have to remember that," he said without thinking.

After giving the waitress their orders, Joe leaned his forearms on the table. "Feel like telling me why you left home?"

Rocco looked toward his lap and shook his head. Joe watched him shut down before his eyes.

"You know I won't tell anyone what we discuss. It'll be just between the two of us."

"I just needed to go," Rocco mumbled softly.

Something about the way he said it, had alarm bells going off in Joe's head. The tiny hairs on the back of his neck stood out as he studied Rocco's body language. He'd seen similar behaviour before, and he knew he'd get nowhere by pushing. Deciding to change the subject, he studied the front of Rocco's T-shirt. "So, pottery huh? I didn't know you did that. You're Dad never mentioned it."

"He doesn't know," Rocco said, looking up. His eyes lit up like Joe had never seen them, green again, he noticed. They must turn when he got excited, he surmised. Of course that would also mean Rocco had been excited by their first handshake. The information rattled his control more than he cared to admit. He realised Rocco was talking a mile a minute and gave his head a little shake.

"Anyway," Rocco continued. "Lorne gave me my first lesson. He learned how to do it from his grandpa. I had to work out a few deals, but he continued to teach me everything I needed to know."

"I'm sorry. I've missed something. Who did you say this Lorne was?"

"Our neighbour. He and his mom moved in next door to us when I was around fifteen."

"Okay, sorry. So did you bring any of your work with you?"

"No. I knew it would break if I packed it in my suitcase. I have a photo album of my pots though. I'd like to show it to you sometime if you'd like to see it."

"I'd love that."

He sat back as the waitress brought their burgers. Joe chuckled as Rocco's eyes took in the amount of food set before him. "Dig in," he said as he picked up his burger.

The way Rocco ate, Joe guessed it had been awhile. "I take it you were hungry," he joked.

A pink tinge coloured Rocco's high cheek bones. "Famished, it's been a couple of days since I've eaten."

"What!" Joe could feel his protective side coming to the surface. "What the hell have you been doing that you haven't eaten?"

"Coming here mostly. I only had enough money to get me to the Idaho border on the bus. I hitched and walked the rest of the way. Food was the last thing on my mind."

Reaching across the table, he put his hand on Rocco's forearm. "Why didn't you just call Collin?"

"I was afraid he wouldn't let me come," he said, his eyes downcast.

Closing his eyes, Joe fought himself with everything he had. He wanted nothing more than to pull Rocco into his lap and take care of him. *Stop it, you dirty old man.* Opening his

eyes he looked at his hand still on Rocco's arm. He hadn't realised he'd been stroking the soft skin with his thumb. The skin of Rocco's arm was now littered with gooseflesh. He looked at Rocco and saw his green eyes had gone heavy lidded.

Releasing him, Joe sat back and tried to calm his racing pulse. The ringing of his cell phone was a welcome distraction. "Excuse me, but this could be a patient." He flipped the phone open and held it to his ear. "Hello?"

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Rocco continued to eat as he watched Joe talk on the phone. The way the call seemed to be going, he had a feeling his time with Joe was about up. He quickly shovelled the rest of the food into his mouth, not wanting anything to go to waste.

As he chewed, he couldn't help but notice the way Joe's lips moved when he talked. He was so handsome, Rocco could tell by the way his brow knitted and the corners of his mouth turned down that something was wrong.

Ending his call, Joe looked at him. "I'm sorry, but a friend who's also a new patient has had a problem. I told his partner I'd meet him at the police station."

"Nothing serious I hope," it hurt to see the distressed look on Joe's face.

"I hope not, but it means I'll need to cut our dinner short."

He looked down at his empty plate. "I'm done. We can leave whenever you need to."

"Thanks," Joe dug his wallet out of his back pocket and placed a couple of bills on the table. Standing, Joe looked down at him. "Ready?"

"Yeah," he said, following Joe out to the car.

Driving home, he watched the older man out of the corner of his eye. Despite barely knowing him, he treated Rocco better than anyone ever had. He could tell that Joe was equally attracted to him, but was holding himself back. Rocco assumed it was because of his age. Everyone thought he was too young to have real feelings, but he knew differently. With a mother who was never home, he'd learned at a very young age to take care of himself.

His first job had been as a stock boy at his neighbourhood grocery store. There he'd earned enough money before and after school to feed himself and buy his own clothes. Several times, he'd even been forced to pay the rent when his mom had either drunk her pay cheque or gambled it.

Rocco had been more the parent than Janie ever had. He never knew what his mom did with the child support she received every month, but Rocco had never seen any evidence of it. It wasn't until Lorne had moved in next door that he cared about anything but survival. The first day he saw the seventeen-year-old create a bowl on his potter's wheel, Rocco had been hooked. He would have done anything to get the chance to create something so beautiful. That led to his initiation into sex. Rocco wasn't happy about all of the things he'd done, but all that was over now and he had the chance to make a real life for himself, one he could be proud of. He never wanted to go back to the reservation or see the disgust on his mother's face. It wasn't his fault, it wasn't.

"Are you okay," Joe said, breaking into his thoughts.

"Just thinking."

"There's a barbecue tomorrow and I thought you and Collin might like to go. I'll try and call him later if I get the chance. If you mention it to him, just tell him it's at Justin's house."

"Okay," he mumbled and turned to look out the passenger window. The thought of talking to his Dad scared him to death. He knew he was a huge disappointment, and his dad had never hid it well.

"Hey," Joe said, placing a hand on his upper thigh. Rocco knew it was meant as a comforting gesture, but it ignited his body in a heartbeat. Before he could help himself he covered Joe's hand with his own as he turned to face him.

Joe released his hold on Rocco's leg like he'd been burned. "I'm sorry," he said, pulling over to the side of the road.

Shit, he'd made Joe feel uncomfortable. "It's okay, really. It felt...nice."

"You shouldn't let people touch you like that, even when it's out of concern. I had no right, and I apologise."

"I know you think I'm just a kid, but I'm not. I've probably seen more in my eighteen years than you have in your life, and I haven't been a virgin since I was fifteen." He could see the shock on Joe's face. "I like you and I won't pretend I don't, but I can see that I make you uncomfortable, so I'll back off."

Joe closed his eyes and shook his head. "It doesn't matter what I think or feel. It's not right. You're too young, and I'm too old."

"Not right in whose eyes? Society's, my Dad's?" Now it was his turn to place his hand on Joe's leg. "None of whom have ever been there for me when I needed them, so why should I care that they wouldn't approve?"

"Your Dad loves you. I know that for a fact."

"Really? He showed up once a year for a week's visit. I was never invited to his house. I had to call information just to get the address to my own father's home. Never, not once, did he ever come to my house, to see that I was being taken care of, fed, and loved. Part of me wants that from him now, and part of me knows I'll never live up to his expectations."

Joe cupped his cheek, and looked into his eyes. "Were you? Taken care of, I mean?"

"Yeah. By me."

Joe started to lean toward him, his lips parting, but a honking horn stopped him. Sitting up, he closed his eyes and shook his head. "I need to get to the police station."

"Sure," Rocco said removing his hand from Joe's thigh.

Chapter Two

Kicking his shoes off as he walked through the door, Joe threw his keys on the table. He looked around the living room and sighed. "Another night alone." Well, at least he had the weekend to look forward to. He, Collin and Rocco were driving up to the mountains to meet up with their friends for a snowy Halloween weekend.

Speaking of Halloween, he'd forgotten to stop by the store and pick up candy for the Trick-or-Treater's. Shit. They were supposed to head out with the rest of the guys but one of his regular clients was dealing with a crisis and begged for an extra appointment. After a quick call to Collin, they'd agreed to drive up Saturday morning which would still give them plenty of time to ski.

Flipping on the kitchen light, he looked in the fridge, nothing, typical. He opened the pantry door and pulled out a can of soup and a box of saltines. As he opened the can and poured it into a bowl, he began thinking of Rocco. Surprise, surprise, he thought. He put the bowl into the microwave and turned it on. He'd thought of almost nothing else all week.

He'd called Collin's house to check on Rocco a couple of times and they'd had a series of nice conversations. Several days ago, he'd stopped by Collin's specifically to see the pictures of Rocco's pottery work. What he'd seen amazed him. If the pots and vases were half as exquisite as they appeared in the pictures, Rocco had a rare gift.

He also found out Rocco spent a good amount of time in the library working on the computer. The graphic designs Rocco had created appeared professionally done. Joe was amazed at the skills Rocco had. He wasn't surprised when he'd discovered Rocco hoped to attend college starting in January. His wish was to become an art teacher. It was unbelievably unselfish of him considering he could probably make a fortune on his art, but the fact that he was choosing to share his gift with students, warmed Joe's heart.

The annoying beep of the microwave broke into his thoughts. Taking his food to the table, he retrieved an ice cold beer from the fridge and sat down to a lonely dinner for one.



A call the next evening from Luc had him, Collin and Rocco driving up to the cabin within the hour. Luc thought Demitri needed to talk to someone about a near death experience he'd had earlier in the day.

After convincing Demitri that having a fear of death was perfectly normal, he went on to talk to him about not letting those same fears rule his life. Once Demitri left to track down his wayward mate, Joe relaxed in the great room with the rest of the fuddy duddies who weren't going to the party. Just the thought of Rocco in a kinky Halloween costume, like the one he heard Aaron would be wearing, had Joe seeing red. No way. He was better off right where he was.

They talked and laughed for a while until Luc yawned. Justin got that look in his eyes and grinned. "Do you need me to put you to bed, sleepy man?"

"Mmm hmm," Luc said, yawning again.

Standing, Justin pointed up toward the loft. "There's a nice fold-out couch upstairs. The other two of you will have to bunk down out here. I saw a couple of sleeping bags in the closet. I'll bring 'em out."

Joe looked over at Collin. He really didn't think being alone with Rocco was a good idea, but his friend was nearly sixty-years-old and needed the bed more than he did. "Why don't you take the loft?"

"You sure? Because I've done a few nights in a sleeping bag, I can handle it."

"I'm sure," he grinned at Collin who was already heading toward the stairs. His friend sure didn't put up much of a fight.

Dumping the sleeping bags and two pillows on the empty chair, Justin yawned and waved as he headed back to his bedroom.

"I've never gone camping," Rocco whispered as he spread out his sleeping bag. "I've spent plenty of nights on the floor though."

There it was again. Another glimpse into Rocco's past. He wanted to know so much about the man, but was afraid of feeling even more protective than he already did.

Collin had asked him at Justin's party if he'd be willing to talk to Rocco in a professional capacity. As much as he hated to, he had to turn his friend down. No way could he remain objective when it came to Rocco. Of course, he told Collin that he was too close to Rocco for it to work, but he left out the part about lusting after his son's body.

"Do you want me to set up your bed?" Rocco asked, holding the other sleeping bag.

"Sure," he said, focussed on the small hips and ass encased in tight blue jeans.

When Rocco spread Joe's bed out next to his, Joe shook his head and stood. Walking over he looked down at Rocco. "I don't really think that's a good idea."

"Why? I thought we could talk once we got in bed. This way no one will hear us."

Joe looked up toward the loft. He already heard Collin's gravely snore. God, he wanted the same thing Rocco did, but he knew he wouldn't be able to keep his hands to himself. "Why don't we sit on the couch until we get ready to go to sleep? We can still talk, but it'll be safer."

Rocco smiled and winked. "Safer for whom?"

"You, I think." He stared into Rocco's green eyes for a few moments before bending over and moving his bed. Once his bag was more than an arms length away he gestured to the couch. "Feel like talking?" he asked, settling on one end of the couch.

With a roll of his beautiful eyes, Rocco sat on the other end of the sofa where Joe pointed. "How long are you going to deny it?"

"Deny what?" he asked, knowing good and well what Rocco was talking about.

In a split second, Rocco crossed the length of the couch and pressed his hand against Joe's denim-clad erection. "That you want to fuck me as much as I want you to," Rocco whispered against his lips, seconds before he felt a wet tongue probe his mouth.

Oh fuck, Rocco tasted good. In a rush of passion, Joe pushed into Rocco's hand as he cupped the back of his head to deepen the kiss. He twined his tongue with Rocco's and pulled him into his lap. Cock to cock, the two of them rocked against each other as the kiss went on, as needy as any kiss he'd ever received. A cough from Collin snapped Joe back to his senses.

He quickly pulled out of the kiss and lifted Rocco off his lap. "I can't," he whispered, looking up toward the loft. "I just can't. It's not right." In the next instant he watched as Rocco drew back into himself. *He's used to this*, Joe thought.

When Rocco started to stand up, Joe pulled him back down. "Hey, don't go yet." Rocco gave him a puzzled look but stayed seated. "I really need you to try and understand. It's not that I don't want you. I'm going out of my mind thinking about you day and night. But I'm thirty-five and you deserve better. You should be hanging out with people your own age, not some middle-aged psychiatrist."

Reaching out to touch the hem of his old sweatshirt, Rocco shook his head. "You're just like the rest of them. You'll say anything you think I wanna hear just to get rid of me."

"No!" Joe shouted, a little louder than he'd intended. He gripped Rocco by the shoulders and gave him a little shake. "I'm nothing like the rest of them. I'm falling hard and fast, but I can't let it happen. Don't you understand? Collin's my best friend. I could lose everything if I let myself fall completely in love with you, my friends, my practice, everything."

Rocco jerked himself out of Joe's hold. "Not everything, but I guess what you'd get in exchange just isn't enough."

Joe started to answer when he heard a throat clear. Looking toward the sound he realised Demitri and Aaron had come in. He swallowed and tried to paste on a smile that he didn't feel.

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Rocco watched Joe talk to Demitri and Aaron from his corner of the couch. He couldn't even bring himself to smile let alone engage in a conversation. As soon as the pair walked passed him to get to their room, Rocco got up and stripped out of his clothes, leaving him in a pair of black boxer-briefs. Refusing to look at Joe, he crawled into his sleeping bag and turned to his side with his back toward the extra bed.

He heard clothes rustling and knew Joe was getting undressed. Rocco was so tempted to turn around and watch as the man's clothes were peeled away. *Stop it*, he yelled at himself, but his body started reacting to the image of a mostly nude Joe behind him.

"Rocco?"

Refusing to talk anymore about their earlier conversation, he didn't even acknowledge Joe. The zipper on Joe's sleeping bag seemed loud in the quiet cabin. "Rocco, please look at me." Joe pleaded again.

"There's nothing left to say, goodnight," he said, praying Joe would let it drop. Rocco knew he had a lot of thinking to do. He wasn't one to give up just because something seemed impossible. Figuring out loopholes in common sense was his specialty.

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As he sat down for breakfast the next morning, Rocco looked at all the food. He knew Luc had gone to a lot of trouble, but nothing looked good to him. He'd been awake most of the night trying to decide what to do about Joe, knowing he wasn't ready to give up without a fight. Around three o'clock that morning he'd decided maybe it was time to step back and regroup.

He was already registered for the Spring Semester. Maybe after he started college and Joe saw how serious he was about the future he'd come around. A guy could hope at least.

Demitri broke into his thoughts with a question directed his way.

"You ski?"

"No," he said quietly. "I'll probably just sit in the lodge while you guys do your thing."

"Nonsense," Collin grumbled. "You can go up the mountain with me and Joe. If you're going to stay around here, it's time you learned."

Rocco looked down at his plate. Why did his Dad always have to do this to him? There, it was laid out on the table for everyone to see what an inept son he was for the Head Football Coach. He squeezed his eyes shut and prayed for a little composure. Why couldn't he just be himself instead of always being what other people wanted? Hearing Joe try to defend him almost broke his heart. No one had ever defended him.

"Let him alone. If he decides to try once we get up there, great, if not, no harm done," Joe said.

"It's okay," Rocco said, still in his soft voice. The last thing he wanted was to call even more attention to his lack of athletic ability. "Dad's right, I'm going to have to start trying new things if I'm going to fit in up here."

"Maybe you'd better take some lessons first, before you try to follow me and your dad up the mountain. The instructors will help you learn the basics, and then if you want to try you can come up with us."

"Thanks." He could at least try, he decided. If he broke something at least his Dad would get off his back for a while.

Picking at his food a little longer he decided he just didn't feel like eating. Besides, now the table was quiet and it was all his fault. He set his napkin on the table and stood, holding his near-full plate. "I'm gonna clean up before we leave."

Taking his dishes into the kitchen, he heard his Dad start in on Joe. Suddenly he couldn't take it. He walked as fast as he could to the bathroom, grabbing his duffle bag on the way.

"I can do this," he said to himself as he stepped into the shower. He'd sign-up for lessons and at least make the effort before calling it a day and sitting in the lodge like he'd wanted to do all along. He'd be alone, but what else was new?

Chapter Three

Spending time with Rocco was starting to become a habit. One he didn't care to break. Joe leaned back in his office chair and ran his finger over the bowl Rocco had given him for Christmas. It held a prominent spot on the credenza behind his desk. He'd had several patients' remark on it, asking where they could get one.

"Nowhere," he'd tell them, "it's a one of a kind."

Just like Rocco, he smiled to himself remembering the day Rocco had stopped by his office. It was two days before Christmas and he was trying to get everything lined up so he could go back to Chicago to see his family. A knock on the door surprised him. "Come in."

Rocco opened the door. "Hey, I brought something for you," Rocco said, as he turned around and picked a large package up off the floor. It was beautifully wrapped in plain white paper with an emerald green ribbon and bow.

"Wow, is that for me?"

"No one else," Rocco replied, setting the present in the centre of his desk. "I know you're flying out in the morning so I thought I'd bring it by."

Joe fingered the silky ribbon, "I was planning to give you your gift tonight when you and Collin come over for dinner."

"Open it." Rocco had such excitement on his face Joe chuckled. He'd seen people this happy over receiving a present but never giving one.

Untying the bow, he took his time to fold it and stick it into his pocket. Rocco rolled his eyes and motioned for him to hurry and get to the good part. In an attempt to make Rocco happy, he ripped into the white paper. Inside was a large shallow bowl. "Did you make this?" he asked in awe. The graduating colours of blue stunned him as much as the smooth as glass surface.

"I did," Rocco said, looking very proud of himself.

Joe picked the bowl up and studied it from all angles. "How? Where?"

"I went to the Art Department and talked to the professor about testing out of a few of the lower level pottery classes. He asked me to demonstrate what I could do and after a week of working on it, this was the result. Professor Willis was so impressed he told me in another year or two he'd be happy to have me as a teaching assistant. I think he's going to talk to the Dean about getting some of my lower level art classes waved."

Setting the bowl down, Joe reached out and pulled Rocco into his arms. "I love it. You could've never given me a better gift." He squeezed Rocco tight against his chest, wanting desperately to kiss him, but they'd both been very well restrained since that night at the cabin.

Instead, he kissed the top of Rocco's head as he gazed at the bowl on his desk. Just knowing the hands pressed against his back could create something so beautiful, made all the expense and trouble he'd gone through for Rocco's present worth it. He couldn't wait to see Rocco's face when he and Collin showed him the garage at Joe's house. They'd set up a mini-workshop for him, complete with a used electric pottery wheel he'd found on the Internet. There were drying shelves and pot after pot of glaze. It would be a little while before they could afford the kiln, but he hoped to have that by Rocco's March birthday.

"I love you," Rocco whispered against his chest.

God help him but he found himself saying the words back. "I love you, too. Someday, we'll figure out a way to be together."

Joe shook his head, bringing himself back to the present. It was already the middle of January and he still hadn't come up with a way for the two of them to see each other openly.

Rocco had started college the previous week and seemed to love it. Whenever Joe asked him about it, Rocco's eyes lit up as he told him about his professors and all the projects he was planning.

As he gathered his coat and briefcase, Joe started to worry about the conversation he'd had with Demitri the previous night. He couldn't believe he'd told him about Rocco and the mutual love they felt for each other. His friend had been very understanding and tried to console him in his dilemma, but now his feelings for Rocco were out, he was afraid Collin would catch wind of them. He knew Demitri wouldn't gossip, but sometimes things slipped, and this was one secret he couldn't let Collin find out on his own. He decided to talk to

Demitri at the poker game about keeping his secrets until after he had a chance to talk to Collin.

Stepping into his snow boots, he stuffed his loafers into his briefcase and locked up the office. If he was lucky, Rocco would be at his house when he got there. Converting the garage into a studio was the best thing he'd ever done. He could spend hours watching Rocco's hands work the clay. Of course he usually had to excuse himself at some point to go in and get his body back under control, but it was worth it to see that much skill at play.

After scraping fresh snow off his windshield he settled inside and buckled his seat belt. It was his turn to pick up the beer so he swung by the liquor store on the way to Alec's.

The evening went fine until his phone rang. Damn, he was just getting ready to up the bid, too. He looked at the caller ID and saw it was Collin. Looking over at the clock on the buffet table he realised it was already ten thirty. Why would Collin be calling so late? Excusing himself from the table, he walked into the living room. "Hello?"

"I kicked the cocksucker out," Collin's voice growled.

"What? Where'd he go, what are you talking about?" he asked bewildered.

"I don't know where he went, and right now, I don't care. I got a call from his mother. Although I'm sure Janie called to yell at me for stopping the child support, she told me some very interesting things about Rocco."

What the hell could Janie have said that would make a father turn his back on his only child? "And?"

"He was fuckin' some neighbour of theirs. Rocco broke it off with the boy and refused to listen to him when he tried to talk to him about it. Seems the kid killed himself. That's why he ran away. Everyone on the reservation thinks maybe something was fishy about the supposed suicide. Rocco was there when it happened. How do you stand there and let someone just shoot themselves? I tell you, Joe, I don't think I ever even knew my son, only the Rocco he led me to believe he was."

Joe felt the bile rise in his throat. Not for what Rocco had done or not done, but for the way Collin reacted to it. "Did you at least try to talk to him about it? Did you ask him for his side of the story?"

"Hell no. I'm sure he'd have just played me for a fool again."

"You say you don't know Rocco, well I'm beginning to wonder the same thing about you. What happened to the dad who pretended to love him? You hear one persons view on an issue and all the sudden you're ready to kick him out of your life? Maybe you should question whether you ever really loved him in the first place, because I *do* love him and right now, I'm only concerned for him."

"What the hell did you just say?"

Fuck it, he thought. It was too late to back down now. "I'm in love with Rocco and have been for several months. I haven't done anything about it because I was afraid of losing your friendship and respect, but right now I couldn't give a flying fuck about either one." He disconnected the call and looked toward the dining room.

Justin stood in the doorway with a look of concern. "Everything okay?" he asked, gesturing toward his friends. "Sorry, we couldn't help overhearing."

"No. Collin kicked Rocco out. I've got to go find him. It's snowing out for Christ's sake. How can a father kick his own child out into the cold?"

Biting his lip, Justin shook his head. "I don't know. Doesn't sound like Collin."

"No it doesn't, but maybe I don't know him as well as I thought I did."

Justin walked over and put a hand on Joe's shoulder. "Give it some time. It took awhile for me to accept Alec and Max's relationship."

Joe felt his face flush. "So you heard that part, huh?"

"Yep. And before you ask, no, it won't change the way your friends see you. Well, except maybe Collin, but he's looking at the situation as a father not a friend."

Joe nodded, "Thanks. I'm gonna head out and hope Rocco's at my house. Say goodbye to the guys for me."

"Will do. Call if you need to talk."

"Thanks, I might just have to do that." He waved as he walked out the door toward his car.

As soon as he walked into the house, he spotted Rocco's duffle. "Thank God," he whispered to the ceiling. Throwing his keys down, he stripped out of his boots and coat and

went to the garage. He was glad he'd given Rocco a house key at Christmas so he could get into his studio whenever he wanted.

Opening the door to the garage, he stopped and stared. Curled in a foetal position on the floor, Rocco was covered in clay. It looked to Joe as if he'd smeared the stuff all over himself. His small, lean body shook as he sobbed on the cold concrete floor.

Taking a deep breath, he walked over and scooped Rocco up into his arms, without a care to his expensive suit. Rocco buried his face against Joe's chest as he carried him in through the living room and straight to the master bath. He sat on the closed toilet lid and just held his man for a few minutes. Finally, he pulled back enough to look down at Rocco. "I'm so sorry your dad treated you that way."

Part of him really wanted to know what exactly happened with his friend back home. He guessed the friend had been Lorne, the one who'd taught Rocco how to throw pots. As much as he wanted to know, he knew it would need to be information Rocco volunteered. Joe had no doubt in his mind that Rocco didn't help the boy kill himself, and if Rocco refused to talk to Lorne he must've had a damn good reason.

Right now all that was important was getting his love calmed down enough to get him into the shower. How much hurt and anger had to be inside a person for them to do something like that to themselves?

"Rocco? Honey? Do you feel like taking a shower?"

Shaking his head, Rocco looked at him. "I don't want you to let me go."

"I won't. Only for as long as it takes to get us both undressed." He watched as Rocco's eyes widened at the statement.

"You'll get in with me?"

"You bet your sweet ass. I'm done hiding. I love you, we'll get through this."

Rocco gripped his suit lapels in his fists. "But you don't even know what happened. Why would you help me without knowing?"

"Because I love you, and that's what love's all about. You'll tell me when you're ready." He received the strangest look from Rocco, like he was trying to figure out why a person would love him unconditionally. Oh, he could see his man had some issues he needed exorcised.

Standing, he walked to the shower and waited for Rocco to open the glass door and turn on the water. "I'm going to put you down so we can both get undressed."

Rocco nodded and stood. After a few calming breaths, Joe pulled Rocco's muddy T-shirt up and off. He actually swayed in reaction to the sight of the silver hoop running through Rocco's dark brown pebbled nipple. Bending over he drew the temptation into his mouth, giving it a good pull before releasing it.

With a moan, Rocco looked into his eyes and peeled his tight jeans down his legs. He bent over and removed them completely before standing in front of Joe totally nude. "Sweet Jesus, you're beautiful," Joe whispered in a soft reverent tone. His mouth began to water looking at the silver beaded hoop that decorated the area where cock met balls, a lorum he thought they called it.

In a hurry to feel Rocco's smooth, hairless skin against his own, he stripped in record time, nothing fancy, no teasing. Nude, he held out his hand as he stepped under the hot spray of the shower. Rocco went immediately into his arms as Joe picked up the bar of soap and started washing away the sorrowful clay. "I'm gonna take care of you," he said in a gentle manner.

Rocco's head remained downcast. Joe didn't know if he was looking at the clay running down the drain or if he should be flattered that his erection held Rocco's fascination. All he knew was that he wanted Rocco clean and in his bed within the next few minutes.

After washing his arms and face, Joe poured shampoo into his hand and started washing all that blue black hair. He wanted to kiss Rocco so bad his lips twitched. He knew though, once he started he wouldn't stop until he was inside the man he loved and Rocco deserved better than a quick fuck in the shower.

Washing the remainder of his soon-to-be lover's body had him almost vibrating with need. The second he deemed Rocco clean he turned off the water and opened the shower door to grab a couple of towels from the shelf.

Biting his lip, Rocco finally looked up at him. "Don't you want to kiss me?"

"Hell yes, but I'm trying my best to show some restraint until I take you to my bed." He handed a towel to Rocco as he quickly dried himself off.

As Rocco swiped the towel in a haphazard fashion across his bronzed skin, Joe felt his cock begin to throb with want. "Enough," he said, leading a naked Rocco by the hand toward the bedroom.

With a quick flick of his wrist the bedspread was thrown off the bed as Joe pulled Rocco down with him. "Kiss me," he said against Rocco's lips.

The push of Rocco's tongue against his own, hurled Joe headlong into a passionate haze. Situating himself on top of the smaller man, he ground his aching cock against Rocco's steel-hard shaft. Oh, how had he lived thirty-five years without ever being this horny?

When Rocco broke the kiss, Joe chased his lips trying to reattach himself. A gentle nudge had him opening his eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Don't you hear that?" Rocco asked with a worried expression.

Lifting his head, he heard someone pounding on the front door like they wanted to break the damn thing down. "Shit," he sighed. He buried his head in Rocco's neck. "Twenty bucks says it's Collin. I don't suppose he'll go away until he punches my lights out."

"Do you want me to go?" Rocco asked.

"Not unless you want to." He held his breath waiting for Rocco's answer.

"I never want to be without you again."

"That's all I needed to hear."



With a bag of frozen corn over his eye, Joe knocked on the bedroom door. "It's me," he called, "he's gone."

The door flew open and Rocco rushed into his arms. "I was so worried when I heard all the yelling. I heard stuff breaking and I didn't know if I should call the police or come out and help..." Rocco stopped talking and buried his face in Joe's chest.

"It'll be okay, honey," he said, running his free hand down Rocco's robe-clad back. He didn't know how in the hell it was going to be okay, but he knew it was what Rocco needed to hear. Collin had reacted like a madman. As soon as he'd opened the door a fist struck out

catching him in the eye. Reacting like any male would, Joe reciprocated with a punch to Collin's jaw.

The entire time they scuffled he didn't think about Collin being his best friend. He thought instead of the way the man had treated the man he loved. Threatening to call the police did little to dissuade Collin's anger. It wasn't until he brought up his coaching job and the threat a police record would have on it that Collin finally stormed out.

Soft fingers traced the side of his face and he looked down into Rocco's brown eyes. "Let me see," he said.

Removing the makeshift ice pack, he winced when Rocco touched his sore eye and cheek. "Does it feel like any bones are broken? I know Dad's a strong guy."

"I'm fine," he grinned. "I knew it was bound to happen. I'm just glad he used me as a punching bag because I'd have killed him if he'd laid a finger on you."

With the bag of corn still in his hand, he let Rocco lead him back to the bed. His T-shirt was pulled off first and tossed to the side. Once they were settled in each other's arms, Rocco took the ice pack from him and placed it back on his eye.

"Will you be terribly disappointed if I we just snuggle tonight?" Joe asked, running his fingers through Rocco's hair as it fanned out over his chest.

Rocco's answer was to kiss his neck and snuggle in deeper. "I'm good."

Please don't leave me, he thought. He suddenly realised that had been his problem all along. Rocco was so young. He had his entire life ahead of him. Why would he want to tie himself down to a middle aged man?

He vowed to do his best to make sure Rocco never felt like he was missing out on life by being with him. Hell, he'd even go to dance clubs in the city if that's what Rocco wanted. All he knew at that moment was he'd give up anything to make his man happy, even his best friend. He kissed the top of Rocco's head. "I love you."

"I know, but the question is, will you love me enough."

Lifting Rocco up to rest against the pillow with him, he stroked his jaw. "Hey, what's this? You don't have faith in me? I'm not like your dad, honey. Other than you saying 'Fuck you, get out of my life' there's nothing you can tell me to make me leave you. No skeletons too scary, no tale too bizarre will change that."

"My dad was right, ya know. I was there when Lorne killed himself, and I didn't do anything to stop him. I don't think he even really meant to do it. It was just his way of getting me to listen to him. Something I'd refused to do for two months."

"Shhh, we don't have to talk about this now."

"Yeah, we do. I can't walk around waiting for the other shoe to drop. I need to get it out in the open."

"Okay," he placed a kiss on Rocco's nose. "I'm listening."

"Lorne was my first, my only, besides you. It started when I was fifteen and he moved in next door. He was a couple years older. I already told you about the day I saw him throw a pot for the first time. It's all I wanted in life at that moment, just to be able to create something so beautiful. I'd have done anything, and I did. Lorne told me the price for lessons would be...favours, sexual ones. Since I already knew by that age that I was gay, I agreed. For three years I let him use me any way he wanted. Instead of hating him like I probably should have done, I learned to love him." Rocco stopped talking and rose up to look into Joe's eyes. "I'm sorry if this is hard for you to hear."

"I'll survive because I think it's even more important for you to get it out. Something tells me you've never told anyone this story before."

"You're right. I was ashamed." Rocco scooted back down to rest his head in the crook of Joe's neck. Joe suspected it was so he didn't have to look him in the eyes anymore. After a few deep breaths, Rocco continued.

"One day I came home from working at the grocery store and heard laughing. I followed the sounds back to my mom's bedroom. At first, I figured she just had another of her million boyfriends in with her." Rocco looked up at him. "Mom always had a man, sometimes more than one, and let's just say, she wasn't a very discreet woman. She used to say it was her life and she had the right to live it any way she chose."

"So where did that leave you?" Joe asked.

"It didn't, but I don't want to talk about her lack of parenting skills right now. So anyway, I heard mom's loud voice carrying out from the bedroom. I went to ask her to quiet down so I could study, but then I heard Lorne's voice. I was shocked. I could totally believe my mom would fuck Lorne given half a chance, but I thought he loved me. I should have

broke in right then and demanded to know what was going on, but instead I sat on the floor and listened. They were laughing at me. Lorne kept telling my mom things that led me to believe their affair had been going on for a long time. He was telling her all my secrets and the two of them were making fun of me. Mom said she'd always been either ashamed of me for the way I looked and acted or jealous. I guess several of her boyfriends asked if they could get with me. She'd refused, not out of love but jealousy. Lorne laughed and thanked her for letting him have both. That was the last thing I heard before I stormed out of the house. After that, I refused to speak to either of them. I just kept telling myself that soon it would be time for me to go away to college and get the hell away from them."

Rocco started shaking in his arms. Joe knew he couldn't listen to anymore without breaking down himself so he wrapped his body around Rocco and kissed the top of his hair. "That's enough, honey. We can talk more about it later."

"I haven't told you about the day Lorne died, though. Don't you need to hear it?"

"No, not now. We have a lifetime to talk. I'd like to hold you and get some sleep. Who knows what tomorrow will bring. I'm assuming Collin will be back with reinforcements."

"I won't let him hurt you again," Rocco said in a harsh tone.

To think of this small man standing up for him melted his heart. "I sure hope it doesn't come to that, but even if it does, it'll be worth it. You're eighteen and legally an adult so he can't tell you what to do."

"Yeah, but he's also paying for my college."

"We don't need his money to get you through school. There are grants you should be eligible for and Demitri said something about The BK House Foundation offering scholarships. Anything else, we can work out together."

"Maybe I could get a job? Ya know, help pay for stuff?"

Hauling him up, Joe gave him a deeply passionate kiss. When they finally broke apart after several minutes, he smiled. "Your job will be to get good grades and become the best teacher this town's ever seen."

"I'll figure something out. I can't let you pay for everything around here."

"How about this, when I'm an old man and want to retire, you can use your huge teacher's salary to buy me cans of Ensure."

“Ensure?”

“Christ, I am old. Ensure is a vitamin mineral supplement that old people drink to stay somewhat healthy.”

“Oh,” Rocco’s eyes got big and he smiled. “I guess I could do that. I need to keep you healthy.” He settled back in against Joe’s chest. “Thank you for listening.”

“Thank you for trusting me enough to talk to me.” He said as Rocco yawned. When Rocco’s breathing evened out, Joe ran his fingers through the silky strands of black hair. He promised himself come hell or high water, he’d never abandon this special man in his arms.

Chapter Four

The next morning, Joe woke to a pair of soft lips working their way down his abdomen. He buried his fingers in Rocco's hair and smiled down at him. "What a great way to wake up."

As he took his time pushing the sheet from Joe's body, Rocco made sure to pay homage to each bit of skin he uncovered. Joe's knees fell apart naturally as Rocco buried his face in his dark brown nest of curls.

"You smell good," Rocco said inhaling.

A nuzzle to his sac had him spreading his thighs further apart. "Feels good," he moaned, threading his fingers through Rocco's hair.

Taking one of the sensitive orbs into his hot mouth, Rocco sucked. Joe gritted his teeth and prayed for restraint. "Suck my cock," he ground out.

With a final lick to his balls, Rocco worked his tongue up the length of Joe's throbbing shaft. As soon as Rocco's mouth enveloped his cock Joe knew he'd died and gone to heaven, but he was a lot older than Rocco and wasn't sure if he could get it up again if he came now. With a light tug to Rocco's pierced nipple, he spoke. "Wait, I want to be inside you when I come."

Rocco pulled off his cock with a pop and looked at him. "Protection?"

"In the drawer."

As Rocco retrieved the lube and condom, Joe knelt at the foot of the bed and patted the centre. With a grin on his face, Rocco crawled onto the bed and presented himself on hands and knees.

"Damn, as sexy as you are in that position, I need you to turn around so I can see your face," Joe said running his hand through the crease of Rocco's sweet ass.

Rocco hesitated for a few seconds, but eventually turned over onto his back. He spread his thighs as he plucked at his own erect nipples.

Feeling pre-come drip down the length of his cock, he stared at the vision before him. "Perfect," he whispered. "So fucking beautiful." He reached out and touched the tiny silver hoop on the underside of the base of Rocco's cock. Flicking the turquoise bead with his finger, he was surprised when Rocco's shaft jumped. He never thought he'd be into genital piercings but Rocco's was sexier than hell.

Bending over, he looped his tongue through the silver hoop and gave it a little tug. Rocco's hips came off the bed as he fisted his hands in Joe's hair. He wrapped his lips around the base of Rocco's cock and slid upward until he took the head into his mouth. The explosive taste of pre-come worked its way around his mouth like a fine wine. Rocco's essence was definitely one to be enjoyed, savoured.

Without stopping his ministrations he held out his palm for the bottle of lube and the condom. It took several moments for Rocco to find them again before handing them over. Slicking his fingers he pressed one against the puckered skin of his lover's ass.

"So, so good," Rocco hissed as he spread his legs wider.

At the introduction of another finger, he felt Rocco's body tighten under his hands.

"Gonna," Rocco said thrusting between Joe's mouth and hand.

He knew he was taking a chance, but the last thing he wanted was to pull off. Instead he sucked on the long thin cock until his cheeks hollowed and he felt the splash of seed at the back of his throat. Backing off even more, he let the remaining cum spurt onto his tongue as he indeed savoured every drop.

After getting his love cleaned, he wiped his fingers on the sheet and applied a rubber with a liberal amount of lube to his shaft. "Ready for me?" he asked.

"For months," Rocco grinned, opening one dark green eye.

If Joe ever had a doubt Rocco was enjoying himself, the colour of that one eye peeking at him would have settled matters. He hooked his forearms under Rocco's knees and spread him even further as he pushed slowly inside. Once he reached a certain depth, Rocco's body seemed to suck him in balls deep. "Damn, my cock was made to be inside you," he moaned.

"Told ya."

He looked at Rocco and started to chuckle. "Don't throw me off my pace. It's taking every bit of my concentration to make this last." He had to look away from the smug

expression on Rocco's face. Instead, he watched his cock disappear and then reappear as it pumped in and out of Rocco's hole. God his man was pretty, and his cock looked damn good right where it was. Shifting, he went at Rocco from a different angle trying to see if he could, yeah right there. Joe knew he pegged Rocco's gland when he yelped and jerked. "Like that?"

"Harder," Rocco squeaked, tossing his head back and forth on the pillow. His black hair was a mass of tangled silken strands as Joe rammed his cock into Rocco's body as hard and fast as he was able.

"Yes...yes," Rocco shouted as his body began to shake.

Thank God for young pups who could rejuvenate in such a small amount of time. With Rocco's climax came the clamping of muscles around Joe's cock. Giving a final thrust, he buried himself balls deep and came as he kissed his man. "Please give me the chance to get used to this," he whispered. He wasn't sure if he was talking to Rocco or God. All he knew was that he hoped he had more time before Rocco realised he could do better than a middle-aged, boring psychiatrist. But he had Rocco here, for now, and he vowed to cherish each moment he'd been given. After disposing of the condom, Joe pulled Rocco into his arms. The smaller man's head tucked securely on his chest, he felt himself drift off.

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After breakfast, Joe pulled Rocco onto his lap. "Thanks for cooking. I don't normally get a big meal like that at home."

Smiling, Rocco leaned in and kissed him. "I've been cooking forever, and I don't mind saying, I'm pretty good at it." He whispered his lips over Joe's swollen eye. It looked worse than it felt, but the kisses were appreciated regardless.

Joe readjusted Rocco so he was straddling his lap. "I guess that means we need to make a trip to the grocery store." He ran his hands down Rocco's back to land on his sweet little ass. "So tell me what else you'd like to do today?"

Squirming in his lap, Rocco grinned. "Um, I can think of a few things," he said as his eyes started changing from brown to more of a green hue.

Rocco's top button gave way under his fingers as he slid a hand in the back of his jeans. Joe had wondered if Rocco would be sore after their earlier romp, but instead, he found Rocco's hole still delightfully stretched and eager for attention. "Mmm," he moaned and bit his lover's neck.

"Make love to me."

"I'd love nothing mo..." his sentence was interrupted by the ringing telephone. Both he and Rocco looked at each other. "Should I answer it?"

"I don't know, but if it's Dad he won't give up."

With a deep groan, he lifted Rocco from his lap and walked to the kitchen wall phone. "Hello?"

"Hey," Justin said.

Exhaling a sigh of relief, he smiled over at Rocco to let him know it wasn't Collin. "Hey, Justin."

"I thought maybe the two of you could use some friends. How 'bout coming over to watch the Super Bowl? Luc and I decided to have an impromptu party."

"I don't know. Is Collin going to be there?" he asked, opening his arm to Rocco. When his man was wrapped around his chest he kissed the top of his head.

"Well, we invited him but he said he didn't feel like being around any of us today. To be honest, I didn't quite know how to take that. I mean, I know he's probably pissed at you for what you told him about Rocco last night, but what did the rest of us do?"

He didn't know what to tell his friend. Yeah, Collin had been beyond angry, but Justin had become a really good friend to him. "Maybe he just needs time alone to come to grips with everything that's happened."

"Maybe. Since he's not going to be here, will the two of you come?"

"Do the other guys know about me and Rocco? Because if I bring him it'll be as my date."

"No worries there. We're all happy for you. So tell me you'll come."

"Hang on a minute and I'll ask Rocco." He brought the phone down to his thigh and covered the mouthpiece. "Justin wants to know if we'd like to go over for a Super Bowl Party."

"Can I still sit by you and kiss you on commercials if I feel like it?" Rocco asked, batting his long lashes.

"You bet. I don't imagine we'll be the only ones sneaking kisses."

"Okay then. Ask him if I need to make something to bring?"

Putting the phone back to his ear, he gave Rocco a squeeze. "Should we bring anything?"

"Just yourselves. Luc's been in the kitchen all morning making stuff and I know Aaron's bringing over a couple desserts."

"What about beer?" he asked, looking down when he felt Rocco tense. He assumed it was because he couldn't drink yet and was afraid he'd feel left out so he soothed him with another kiss.

"Beer's always welcome, you know that," Justin laughed. "See you around two?"

"We'll be there." He hung up the phone and led Rocco back toward the bedroom. "We don't have to be there until two. Plenty of time for a lazy morning in bed."

"I like the way you think."

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Parked in Justin and Luc's driveway, Rocco wiped his sweaty hands on his jeans. "I'm nervous," he admitted.

With a hand to the back of his head, Joe pulled Rocco toward him and ran his tongue over Rocco's lips until he opened. The kiss was deep and passionate, but way too short as far as Rocco was concerned.

Joe withdrew back to his side of the small car. "They're our friends. We won't get any trouble from them."

"But they're friends of my Dad's, too." He began to pick at one of the holes in his faded denims, this one on his upper thigh. Looking down he could see the pocket lining showing through. *Time to get a job and buy some new clothes*, he thought to himself. Joe wouldn't want to be seen with a ragamuffin as well dressed as he always was. Rocco stole a glance over at his man. Even on a lazy Sunday with friends, he looked hot. Dressed in a pair of black Levi's and a grey turtleneck, Joe looked every inch the classy guy that he was. He sighed and picked at his pocket some more, inadvertently making the hole even bigger.

"You trying to tempt me with that?" Joe asked, leering at his bronzed skin peeking through the rip.

Rocco realised what he was doing and crossed his arms. "No. It's a nervous habit I have. That's why all my jeans look this way." He took in his appearance once more before turning to look at Joe. "I'm sorry that I'm dressed like such a kid. I'll get a part-time job and get some new clothes."

"Don't apologise for your clothes, honey. I happen to think the ripped jeans are sexy as hell on you. Besides, you've got a birthday coming up. Who knows, maybe the birthday fairy will bring you some new jeans." Joe gave him a wink as he reached out to squeeze his thigh. "Let's go, it's getting cold in here."

Getting out of the car, he was surprised when Joe took his hand for the walk to the house. "Just remember, be yourself." Joe gave him one more kiss before walking in.

"Knock, knock," Joe said, as he entered.

"Hey, come on in," Alec replied. Rocco couldn't help notice the way Max was curled around him. He was sitting in Alec's lap even though there looked to be plenty of room beside him in the wide chair. Alec did a double take when he saw Joe's eye and whistled. "Nice shiner. Collin do that?"

"Who else?" Joe mumbled.

"Well the rest of us are happy for you and if I didn't have a lap full of my baby, I'd get up and hug you both."

"Thanks, I have a feeling we're going to need all the support we can get."

After slipping off their winter gear, Joe held up the twelve-pack he'd brought and looked down at Rocco. "I'm going to go put this in the fridge. Why don't you have a seat and I'll be back in a second."

Rocco nodded as Joe walked toward the kitchen. He heard Justin and Luc in the kitchen commenting on Joe's eye as well. He wondered if Joe's friends would blame him for the fight. As he ambled toward the couch he noticed he had a hole in his sock as well. *Oh great*, he thought, *now I really look like a kid*.

Alec must've caught him looking and then noticed the embarrassing blush staining his cheeks because he did his best to put him at ease. "You and Demitri," he smiled and shook his head. "I don't think that brother of mine owns a pair of socks without holes. Don't worry, I'm used to it."

He grinned at Alec and Max and sat in the corner of the deep couch.

"So how're classes going?" Max asked.

"Good so far. I hate the required ones of course, but the art classes I'm taking are awesome. Do you know Professor Willis?"

Alec nodded his head. "I've met him," he said a little uncomfortably. "Is he a good teacher?"

"The best," Rocco felt his whole body come alive. He could talk about pottery all day and not tire of it.

"Well from what Joe and Demitri tell me, you're very talented. I'm surprised a professor could teach you much."

"How does Demitri know about my work?"

"He saw the bowl in my office," Joe said, coming into the room. "He even tried to buy it from me."

"Wow," he replied, as Joe sat down and put his arm around him.

"I've told you before. If you want to make extra money, just sell a few of your pieces. I have patients come in all the time wanting to know where they can buy them. Hell, for that matter, why don't we just set up a display in my office with your work. I'd be happy to sell some for you."

Rocco felt safe wedged between Joe's much larger frame and the end of the couch. "I'll talk to Daniel, uh, Professor Willis and see what he says."

He didn't miss the look Alec gave Joe. While he was wondering what that was about, the door opened and Koby and Julian walked in stomping snow from their boots.

"Hi," everyone chorused back and forth.

"Wow, Collin really gave you a good one," Julian said pointing to Joe's eye.

"I thought you were picking up Demitri and Aaron on the way." Luc said, coming into the living room.

Julian shook his head. "He's dealing with a few problems, but he'll be along as soon as he can."

Luc narrowed his eyes. Rocco could tell he was concerned. "What kind of problems?"

With his hands held up in a surrender gesture, Julian chuckled. "He's having trouble with the University's Board of Directors. They don't seem to think a full-time Diversity Tolerance Program Director is needed at NCIU. I believe Demitri is pleading his case."

"That's crazy," Rocco replied, clenching his fists. It was so out of character for him naturally all heads turned to look at him. Feeling his face heat, he shrugged. "I mean, I've only been on campus a couple of weeks and I can tell you that we've got a problem brewing."

Joe surrounded him with strong arms. "Has someone been bothering you?"

Oh, oh look at his man, getting all protective. "No, not really bothering me. Just looks mostly. I seem to get a lot of looks."

Everyone except him and Joe started laughing. With fire in his eyes, Joe looked around the room at his friends. "What's so damn funny about that?"

It was Julian who finally answered. "Look at him, Joe. Have you ever in your life seen a more perfect looking human being? Forgive us, Rocco, but you evidently don't have a clue as to your effect on people. They're probably all looking at you because they see what we all see."

In a split second, Joe had him lifted onto his lap. He wrapped his arms around Rocco and kissed his neck. "Stop looking," Joe said, "He's mine and I don't share."

Luc, the level headed one of the group came over and sat next to them on the couch. "I don't think any of us have designs on Rocco, but you have to admit that he's stunning. That's all Julian was trying to say."

"That'd better be all Julian was trying to say," Koby piped up, wrapping his arm around Julian.

Rocco looked around the room. These people were serious. He thought about the looks he'd been getting lately. Some of them, he conceded, might have been appreciative looks, but when a leer makes your skin crawl...

"Hey, what's wrong?" Joe asked, looking worried.

"Nothing." The last thing he wanted was to call any more attention to himself. "I'm gonna go use the restroom," he said, climbing off Joe's lap. He just needed to get away for a few minutes.

After locking the bathroom door, he slid to the floor. He knew better than to bring up the subject again. Hell, his own mom never believed him when he'd told her about her boyfriends looking at him. Well, maybe she believed him, but it only made things worse in his house.

His mind started to wander back to his years of dealing with his mom's men. With a physical shudder, he stood. Looking into the mirror, he shook his head. He turned on the cold water, and splashed his face. "Come on, Rocco, get over it. Just have a good day with Joe and his friends." With his hand on the knob he took several deep breaths. This was the first day he and Joe were a couple and the last thing he wanted was to dampen it with his worries.

Chapter Five

"You gonna stare at him all day, or come and get something to eat?" Demitri asked at half-time.

Joe looked from Rocco's sleeping face to Demitri. "Sadly enough, I think I probably could stare at him all day, but my stomach's talking to me." He looked back down and sighed to himself. *God, just look at those lashes.* Unable to control himself any longer, Joe bent down and kissed Rocco's sweet parted lips.

Rousing, Rocco began kissing him back as he slowly opened his eyes. The taste of Rocco's passion had his cock stiffening in his jeans. Joe quickly glanced around the room. Several of his friends were grinning while the rest pretended to be involved in the half-time show.

With a soft moan, he broke the kiss and pulled back. "Ready to get something to eat?"

Rocco's eyes flashed with mischief as he licked his lips. Joe heard a groan from across the room and turned just in time to see Max elbow Alec in the stomach. Caught off guard, Alec let out an "oof" before turning to kiss his man.

Joe narrowed his eyes just a bit at Alec. He knew his friend didn't even realise he'd groaned but just the thought of him getting turned on by the site of Rocco's tongue...

"You ready?" Rocco asked, interrupting his thoughts.

"Yeah," he said, deciding to let Alec live another day.

Rocco rose off Joe's lap and pulled him from the couch. "I can't believe you let me fall asleep like that," Rocco said as they walked into the kitchen.

Joe ran his hand over Rocco's butt. "I figure anyone who could sleep with all the cheering going on, must have needed it. Besides, I enjoyed watching you."

After fixing himself two sandwiches and a big bowl of nachos, Joe grabbed a beer out of the fridge. "You want a Coke?"

"Yes, please," Rocco answered.

Joe looked at Rocco's plate and shook his head. "I thought you said you were hungry. You don't have enough food there to fill a toddler." Rocco's plate consisted of a few carrots and celery sticks along side a tiny drop of dip and a half of a sandwich.

Shrugging, Rocco picked up his plate. "This is how much I usually eat. Just think of all the grocery money you'll save."

"I'm more worried about you than spending a little extra money at the damn grocery store. When's the last time you had a physical?"

"Right before I enrolled, Dad..." Rocco stopped and closed his eyes briefly. "Dad made me go."

"And the doctor didn't say anything about your weight?" Joe watched as Rocco's spine straightened. His chin lifted as his eyes met Joe's.

"My Dad had the doctor take every blood test imaginable. Evidently he too, thought there must be a reason I'm so small and weak. I think he was actually disappointed when we found out I'm perfectly healthy, just small."

Setting his plate and beer down, Joe put his arms around Rocco. "I love you no matter what size you are. I just worry." He gave Rocco a brief but passionate kiss, slipping inside to steal a taste. "You have to stay healthy so you can take care of me when I'm old and feeble." He grinned.

Rocco gave his mid-section a good squeeze. "I'll take care of you even if I'm young and sick."

"Hey, you two love birds, you're missing the start of the third quarter," Justin yelled from the living room.

Chuckling, Joe shook his head. "I guess we'd better go back in before they send a search party."

Nodding, Rocco picked up his plate and preceded him out of the kitchen. Sitting in his spot on the couch, he tried to figure out how to eat and hold Rocco at the same time. Grinning, Rocco sat on the floor at the end of the coffee table and set his plate down.

As Joe ate he looked around the room at his friends. They all seemed so settled in their relationships. All of them were curled up with their significant others as they watched and cheered. Justin and Luc had been together the longest and they still couldn't be near each

other without touching. Joe looked over to where they were sitting. Justin rested on a pallet of brightly coloured pillows with his back against the wall, and Luc was nestled securely between his legs with his head in Justin's lap.

"Joe," Rocco whispered, looking up at him. "Is everything all right?"

With a smile and nod, Joe reached down to brush his knuckles down Rocco's smooth cheek. "Everything's fantastic."

He finished his food and watched as Rocco continued to nibble his for the next twenty minutes. When Rocco stood and held out his hand for Joe's plate he smiled. "Can I get you anything else while I'm in the kitchen?"

"You can bring me back another beer," he said giving Rocco a wink.

Rocco hesitated for a second before nodding and disappearing into the kitchen. As soon as he was gone, Justin looked over at him. "How's he doing?"

"He seems okay. I still wonder though."

"I'm hoping to get a chance this week to talk to Collin. Maybe he just needs a sounding board."

"I hope it helps. Whether Collin and I continue to be friends is not nearly as important as Rocco getting his dad back." He was stopped by a loud crash coming from the kitchen. Joe was up and running toward the sound in a second, followed closely by Luc.

Walking in, he saw Rocco bent over something on the floor. "Are you okay?" Joe asked coming up behind him.

Rocco's head whipped around and his eyes went wide. "I'm sorry, Luc. I was trying to help clean up, but I dropped a glass and broke it."

"It's all right, we've got plenty," Luc said, getting into the pantry for the broom and dust pan.

"Rocco!" Joe yelled. "What've you done to yourself?" He grabbed Rocco's bleeding hand and pulled him up and toward the sink. "Why didn't you say something?" He began washing Rocco's bloody hand under the cool water.

"It's not a big deal. I've already checked it out. It's just a small one." Rocco tried to pull his hand back, but Joe held on.

"As much work as you do with these hands, it is a big deal." Luc passed him some paper towels and dried the wound. He inspected the cut and decided it looked to be pretty clean, but he wondered whether he should take Rocco to the ER just in case.

"I'm fine," Rocco stressed again. Apparently exasperated with his coddling he turned to Luc. "Do you have a bandage or something I can wrap around it so Mr. Protective here chills out?"

With a grin, Luc nodded. "In the bathroom. I'll get it."

After he left, Rocco looked up at him. "You can't treat me like a baby in front of your friends."

Was he doing that? Okay, so maybe the cut wasn't as bad as he made it out to be, but it was just the shock of seeing Rocco's blood that threw him into protective mode. He bit his lip and shrugged. "I didn't mean to make you feel bad. It's just that you mean the world to me."

Rocco cupped his cheek with his good hand. "And you mean everything to me, but stop fussing, I'm fine."

"Yeah, I hear you." He knew he sounded like a disappointed child, but dammit, he'd waited a lifetime for someone to love and take care of.

"Can I still sit with you?"

That brought a smile to his face. "Try sitting anywhere besides with me," he joked.



After the game, Rocco refused to leave until he'd helped Luc and Max clean up the kitchen. They'd finally agreed as long as Rocco promised not to get his bandage wet.

Now, sitting on the couch watching the post-game show, Joe couldn't wait to get home. As he sat there he thought over the day. Suddenly he turned toward Alec. "Hey, what was that look you gave me when Rocco was talking about Professor Willis?"

"Did I give you a look?" Alec asked, looking confused.

"Yeah, so what do you know about the guy?"

"Plenty and nothing. He's a sub. I know him from Secrets, the club I used to frequent."

Alec must have seen the next question coming because he answered right away. "Yes, I've played with him."

"Is he someone I should worry about?"

"He's a damn fine looking man, but no. Daniel's a sub through and through, so unless Rocco's a Dom, you should be perfectly safe."

"Well, not that I've considered who's dominant or submissive in our relationship, but I don't see Rocco taking charge in the bedroom."

Alec shrugged, "Just don't mention any of this around Max. He doesn't want to know about the subs I've fucked."

The blunt statement threw Joe a little, but then, that was Alec. He was a very straight forward kind of guy. "I won't mention it to anyone, not even Rocco." What he didn't say was that he didn't care to give Rocco any ideas about the Professor, not that he thought Rocco would be interested, but it didn't hurt to cover your bases.

"You ready?" Max asked Alec as he came into the room followed by Rocco.

"Are you all finished?" Alec asked.

"Well, not exactly, Justin was giving Dad that nostril thing he does so Rocco and I decided to make ourselves scarce."

"The nostril thing?" Joe looked from Rocco to Max.

"Justin's horny, he does this thing with his nostrils when he's rutting. Don't ask it's too creepy for me to talk about."

Laughing, Joe stood and held out his hand to Rocco. "Let's get out of here before we hear the call of the wild."

"Oh gross. That's my Dad you're talking about," Max said with a visible shudder.

The four of them quickly put on their boots and coats and silently left the house. Waving to his friends, Joe pulled out of the driveway. He started to reach for Rocco's hand but stopped himself, choosing his thigh instead.

"How's the hand?" he asked, finding bare skin through one of the holes in Rocco's jeans.

"Its fine," Rocco said, reaching over to unbutton Joe's Levi's. "I've been dying to touch you all afternoon."

Joe accommodated Rocco's wandering hands by spreading his thighs. He let out a hiss when Rocco's fine boned hand wrapped around his aching cock. "Feels good, honey."

Leaning over the console, Rocco grinned. "Well then this should feel even better." Rocco covered the head of his weeping erection with his mouth.

"Oh, oh, fuck," Joe said as he pulled into his drive. He quickly looked around to make sure none of the neighbours were out. The streets were not only deserted but dark.

Laying his seat back, Joe closed his eyes and enjoyed the feel of Rocco's mouth bobbing up and down on his shaft. He stretched to the side and ran his hand over his man's sweet ass.

With his free hand, Rocco unzipped his jeans to give Joe better access. Groaning, Joe ran his finger between Rocco's twin globes. He stopped when he felt the plug. "Oh shit, did you have this in all day?" he asked, giving the plug a jiggle.

"Mmm hmm," Rocco answered, not taking his mouth off Joe.

Sliding the plug out, Joe slammed it back in to the apparent delight of Rocco who howled around his cock. With as much suction as he could muster, Rocco worked Joe's prick like a pro. "Gonna," he grunted.

Rocco picked up his pace even more as Joe continued to manipulate the plug. At the first shot of his seed in Rocco's mouth, he felt Rocco's ass tighten as he himself came.

"So good," he whispered into the dark.

Rocco cleaned his cock before thrusting his tongue into Joe's willing mouth. "Love you."

"I love you, honey," he declared, smoothing Rocco's hair away from his face. "Let's go to bed."

Chapter Six

Several days later, after Julian's regular weekly counselling session, they stayed late to talk as usual. "So I guess Justin tried to talk to Collin yesterday," Joe inquired, gently prodding for information.

"Hell, that wasn't a discussion, that was a goddamn yelling match. I've never heard him like that. What made it worse was probably a quarter of the football team were in the weight room conditioning."

"So the players got to hear all mine and Rocco's business," he sighed and rubbed his eyes. "Every time I try to call him, he tells me it's no longer his concern and hangs up."

"Sorry, man. I wish I could tell you something, but I have no idea why he's reacting this way." Julian stood, "Feel like going out for dinner, just the four of us?"

"Thanks for the offer, and if you don't mind a third wheel, I'd love to join you. Rocco's staying late at the college to learn a new glazing technique or something like that. He's hoping to use it in the pots he wants to sell."

"Is he settling in to your place okay?" Julian stood and put on his coat.

Joe felt himself blush, "Yeah, I didn't realise how much I needed him with me. It's more complete now, you know what I mean?"

Julian clapped him on the back as they headed out the door. "I know exactly what you mean." Julian gestured toward his car. "I told Koby I'd meet him at McGilley's. You want to just follow me?"

"Sure, see you there." Joe drove toward the Irish pub with one thing on his mind, Rocco. He'd never known a more caring and sexually exciting lover. There was never a dull moment. Rocco loved to experiment and like any other eighteen-year-old, he never seemed to get enough. Joe chuckled. He'd felt like an eighteen-year-old himself lately. He should be ashamed at the amount of sex he'd been getting the past few days, but try as he might, he just couldn't stop himself from grinning.

Thinking of Rocco had him hard as a rock in no time. Damn, he couldn't go into the pub like this. He quickly switched gears and thought of Collin and his inability to forgive a son for being gay. Yep, that did it. Joe looked down at his deflating cock. "Works every time."

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Putting away his supplies, Rocco turned toward Professor Willis. "So you think I've got the techniques down enough to try it on my own? I really appreciate you staying and showing me how to do it, by the way."

Daniel walked over and leaned against Rocco's work table. "I've never seen a quicker study. You're talent's already surpassed mine. I'm glad there was still something I could teach you."

Cleaning his hands, Rocco felt himself go red at the compliment. "Thanks, I just really want it, ya know? I'm hoping to sell enough to bring in some spending money."

"You should get some stuff together and I can have a friend of mine look at them. He owns a gallery in Seattle."

"Really, you think I'm good enough for something like that?" Rocco asked, slipping his coat on.

Daniel smiled and cupped Rocco's cheek. The gesture wasn't meant to be sexual, but rather caring. "You have more natural talent than anyone I've ever known. I know you want to teach, but I think you should save that profession for people like me. I love art. It's my passion, but I'm not good enough to do it for a living. You are. Don't waste it."

Rocco thought about what Daniel said. "So you're using the old saying on me. Those who can, do and those who can't, teach?"

Daniel nodded, "Sounds harsh, but it's the truth."

"I'll talk it over with Joe and see what he says."

"Oh yes, I heard you were living with Dr. Pressman now."

"Where did you hear that?" Rocco's spine stiffened. He knew Joe wouldn't like the entire campus knowing his business.

"Talk, gossip, whatever you want to call it. I overheard a few students chattering on about it. From what I understand your father isn't too happy." Before Rocco could reply, Daniel held up both hands. "Sorry, I don't know why I did that. It's none of my business and I should know better than to listen to other people."

"It's okay," Rocco turned toward the door. "The gossipers are right. Joe and I are in love, and have been for a while. Dad just found out this past weekend and he's not taking it very well. I know you didn't mean anything malicious by what you said."

"Thanks," Daniel called out as Rocco opened the door.

With a final wave, Rocco headed home. He was surprised to find it so dark when he stepped out of the building. One or two of the street lamps weren't working it seemed. Pulling the collar of his coat up, he headed toward the bus stop. He knew Joe would have a fit because he didn't call for a ride, but if he knew his lover, he was probably snoring on the couch with a book in his hand.

Besides, it was a pretty nice night for the end of January. Something slammed into him from behind sending him to the pavement. A pillow case was being put over his head as several sets of arms held him down. He screamed.

"Listen, cocksucker. We're friends of your Dad's. We're here to teach you a lesson, you cocksucking fag." The voice wasn't familiar but it was definitely young. A player he wondered?

Struggling to free himself did little good as one by one the boys took turns kicking him and punching the side of his face. The smell inside the pillow case was overwhelming, making it hard to take a deep breath. Pine-Sol? The air whooshed out of his lungs as a kick slammed into his side. Trying to move to deflect the blows wasn't helping. He couldn't tell where they were coming from. First from his right and then his left. How many were there? A fist kept up a steady stream of punches to his head and face. Each one sending shards of pain through his system. There were too many. It was overwhelming. Everything hurt, as the punches and kicks kept coming. After a savage kick to his side, breathing became difficult. Dying, he was dying. He'd been beat up before, but never like this. He began to wonder whether he would even survive. The thought of never seeing Joe again, had him trying to struggle against the heavy weight on his arms.

Rocco didn't panic, he did what he'd always done in situations like this, he began to withdraw. When he felt hands on his zipper he tensed but as his jeans were pulled down, he drifted away from the scene. High above himself in the clouds he wasn't even aware when the boys ran away. All he knew was the pain continued.

"Rocco! Rocco, can you hear me?"

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Still laughing from a story Koby was telling, Joe almost didn't hear his cell phone over the noise in the pub. Sitting back in the booth, he held up a finger as he unclipped the phone from his waist. Looking at the display, he saw it was Alec. "Hello?"

"Shit, thank god I found you. Daniel called. He couldn't reach you at home and he didn't want to call Collin."

Joe's mind immediately went on alert. "Who's Daniel? What's happened?"

"It's Rocco. He was jumped by a group of guys. Fuck, man, he's on his way to the hospital."

"Max and I are headed there now, we'll meet you."

"Is he..." he paused and took a deep breath as he pulled money out of his wallet to throw on the table, "is he going to be okay?"

"I don't know. Daniel just said he was conscious but in some sort of shock when he ran the guys off."

"I'll be there in five minutes." Joe hung up and looked across the table. He told the guys what Alec had said.

"We'll drive, you're in no condition," Julian said, as he and Koby weaved through the crowd behind Joe.

"Just get me there as fast as you can," he climbed into Julian's truck.

Alec and Max were waiting for him in the Emergency Room lobby when he stepped through the door. "Where is he?"

"They're still examining him," Alec replied, holding Max to his side. Alec turned and gestured toward Daniel who was in conversation with a big guy in the corner of the waiting room. "Daniel's talking to a Detective from the police department."

Without waiting for Alec to say anything else, Joe rushed over to the detective. "Do you know who did this?"

The guy turned toward him. "Can I ask who you are?"

"Dr. Joe Pressman, Rocco's partner. Now can you tell me what's going on?"

Daniel put his hand on Joe's forearm. "I'll tell you what I know when Detective Warren leaves."

"Can't someone just tell me whether or not you have these fuckers in custody?" Joe's hands fisted at his sides. He felt so damn helpless.

Daniel gave his arm a slight squeeze. "Please, Joe, just let me finish up here and then we'll talk. They don't have anyone in custody, but we're hoping Rocco might give us a clue when he's able to talk."

"Able to talk? What the hell did they do to him?" He pulled his arm out of Daniel's grip and began to pace in small circles.

"Dr. Pressman, the quicker you let me question my witness, the quicker we can look for those responsible. Now please, go check on Rocco and leave us to talk."

Joe narrowed his eyes at the detective. He could tell by his tight jaw the guy was getting pissed, but so what. That was his love in there. Didn't this asshole understand that? He felt a hand to his shoulder and looked back.

"I think the nurse is ready to speak with you," Koby said.

"Thanks," he said and rushed over to the middle-aged woman dressed in a pink smock and pants. "How is he?"

"Resting," she said. "We were able to determine that he doesn't have a concussion so we gave him something to help him sleep. The doctor should be out shortly to fill you in on the extent of his injuries, but I thought you'd like to know that for now, he's not in any pain."

Joe sighed, "Thank you. When can I see him?"

The nurse smiled. "The doctor should be able to give you a better idea of that." She looked around at the circle of friends. "You're luckier than a lot of people, you've got friends to support you, let them."

Joe swallowed around the lump in his throat and nodded once. As he watched the nurse walk away, Koby and Max enveloped him in a hug.

"Do you think we should call Collin?" Julian asked.

"I don't know, probably."

"I'll take care of it," Julian said, turning toward the bank of pay phones on the wall.

Koby and Max led him over to a chair and sat him down. Joe's attention swung back to Daniel and the cop. He couldn't believe he'd never met Daniel before as much as Rocco talked about him. Rocco. How much could one man stand? After hearing bits and pieces of his horrible childhood, he'd wanted nothing more than to give Rocco the stability he seemed to crave, now this. He wondered how much damage this attack was going to do. Not physical damage, although he was also worried about that, but the emotional damage of knowing he wasn't safe anywhere. And he should have been safe. It was his responsibility to make sure Rocco was safe. Why hadn't he demanded to pick Rocco up after his lesson? Fuck, this was his fault. He'd let Rocco down by not being there when he'd needed him.

He watched as Daniel shook the cop's hand and walked toward him. The detective followed closely behind Daniel and if his eyes weren't deceiving him, the guy was staring at Daniel's ass. Wow, bold as brass. They stopped in front of him.

"I'm going to talk to the staff and find out when I can question Rocco, but I wanted to give you my card and to strongly advise you not to go looking for these guys yourself. I know it'll be tempting, but let me do my job."

Standing, Joe looked Detective Warren in the eyes. "I want a copy of your report sent to the University."

"Why?" he asked with narrowed eyes.

"Because the harassment at the University has gone on long enough. It's time the Board received a wake-up call."

"I'll talk to the Chief." The detective held out his hand. "Call me if Rocco wakes before morning. I wrote my home number on the back."

He nodded and looked at the business card in his hand, Detective Leo Warren. Joe watched as Leo gave Daniel a seductive grin before walking over to the nurses' station.

"You ready to talk to me?" he asked Daniel.

Smoothing his long blond hair out of his face, Daniel nodded before looking down. "I don't think you're going to like what I have to say."

"Doesn't really matter whether I like it or not, I need to know." He walked a few chairs over before sitting down with Daniel next to him. Joe noticed he refused to look him in the eye. He wondered to himself if it was his submissive nature or if he felt guilty for what happened to Rocco. "Okay, talk."

Taking a deep breath, Daniel began. "I was coming out of the building when I heard laughing. At first I thought it was just a bunch of students goofing off and started to walk toward my car, but then I heard them yelling. As soon as I understood the words I ran toward them."

"What were they saying?" Joe put a hand on Daniel's back as he started to shake a little.

Daniel glanced up at him before lowering his eyes again. "They were talking about Coach Williams and how he didn't deserve a faggot for a son. They said they were going to teach him a lesson." Daniel's head rose and he looked Joe right in the eyes for the first time. "There were four of them. I think they were football players."

Joe's hands fisted as he shut his eyes. All he could think about was Collin sending his dogs out to do his dirty work. "I'll kill him," he whispered to himself.

"No," Daniel said. "You can't interfere in the investigation. If you do the ones responsible may get off without paying for what they did."

"Tell me the rest," Joe ground out between clenched teeth.

Daniel was back to looking at his lap. "I started screaming for help and the group ran. When I reached Rocco I thought he was unconscious because he didn't move, but when I turned him over he opened his eyes. Well one eye. The other was already too swollen. His jeans were around his ankles so I pulled them up and called 9-1-1 on my phone."

"Did they...?"

"No, I don't think so. I think they were just trying to scare him. By the time the police and ambulance arrived he was having a hard time breathing but he refused to talk. I

wouldn't be surprised if some of his ribs weren't cracked. The only thing I could do was try to make him as comfortable as possible and find you. I kept asking Rocco for your phone number but it was like he didn't hear me."

Joe held up his hand, "Thanks, I've heard enough." Standing, he walked to the restroom as fast as he could. The last thing he wanted was to break down in front of a waiting room full of people.

Finding the nearest sink he turned the cold water on and splashed his face. His emotions were all over the place and he couldn't figure out what to do first. He knew Rocco would need him when he woke, but his mind screamed for revenge.

A knock on the door heralded Max peeking his head in. "Collin's here," he said.

With a growl, Joe pushed Max out of the way and stalked out to the waiting room. He spotted Alec talking to Collin by the front door and pounced. Without giving Collin a chance to even look at him, Joe reared back and landed a punch to his jaw.

The older man fell to the ground and Joe went after him, but was pulled up and away by Alec and Julian. "You fucker," he screamed at Collin. "You did this, you sent your players after your own son. What kind of father are you?"

"What?" Collin asked, trying to get back to his feet. "I didn't, I swear I wouldn't do something like that," Collin denied, shaking his head.

"Liar," Joe said. "Get out of here before I kill you."

Collin looked toward the rest of the group, as Julian and Alec continued to hold Joe back. "I didn't do this, I promise you." When none of them spoke, Collin rubbed the side of his face and walked out of the Emergency Room.

Alec gave Joe a hug before releasing him. "Let him go."

"What? You believe him?"

"Whether I do or not it's up to the police to figure out," Julian said. "I've been friends with him a long time and I've never known him to lie."

"Yeah, well there's a first time for everything."

Chapter Seven

Sitting beside Rocco's bed, Joe continued to berate himself. The doctor's words played over and over in his mind. "Lucky to be alive," he'd said. Rocco had suffered two cracked ribs, a badly bruised kidney and so many contusions he looked blue instead of his normal sunny bronze. The hospital had done x-rays, sonograms and a CAT scan to check for internal bleeding but they'd found none. His thick down coat had saved him. A coat. Not the man who was supposed to take care of him. He'd been out laughing and drinking with his friends. How pathetic.

Rocco had been asleep for almost ten hours when a hiss of pain alerted Joe he was awake. Scooting closer to the bed, he swept the black veil of hair out of Rocco's face. "Shhh, don't try to talk, just listen. You were jumped by several guys last night after you left the art room. You're in the hospital now and you've got a couple of cracked ribs, but the doctor said you should heal just fine. All we can do is to try and make you as comfortable as possible."

He gripped Rocco's hand, the only thing that wasn't bruised. "I love you," he whispered.

"Hurts," Rocco mumbled.

"I know, honey. I'll go get a nurse and see if she can give you something else for the pain." He started to stand, but Rocco gripped his hand.

"Who?"

"We don't know for sure, but we think they were some of your dad's players. The police are working on it. Daniel found you and scared them off. Do you remember that?"

"No," Rocco croaked.

Joe was glad Rocco didn't remember everything. He just hoped he remembered enough to help the police. "I need to call Detective Warren. He's the guy in charge of your case so he'll want to question you." He gave Rocco's hand a reassuring squeeze. "Do you think you are up to that?"

Rocco looked at him through swollen purple slits. "Did my Dad do this?"

"I don't know, honey. He came by while they were still examining you. I punched him. I'm not proud of it, but I was so damn angry with him. He claims he knew nothing about it, but that's for the police to decide."

"Call the detective."

"I will, right after I go find a nurse." He bent over the bed and placed a gentle kiss on Rocco's bruised forehead. "I love you."

"Love you," Rocco said around the cut on his lip.



Lying on his side, Rocco studied the big, dark, detective as he got comfortable in the chair next to his bed. Joe stood over the detective's shoulder leaning against the window sill. Rocco couldn't help but notice the worry and guilt on Joe's face. He'd tried earlier to put Joe at ease, telling him it wasn't his fault, but he didn't think he'd gotten through to him.

He'd tried for the past hour to remember details of the attack, but only one really stuck out. "Pine-Sol," he blurted. "I remember the pillow case smelled like Pine-Sol."

"Like the bathroom and floor cleaner?" Detective Warren asked.

"Yeah. I used to know a guy who put it in his laundry water. He claimed it took out the smell of sweat better than anything else. I'm sure it was Pine-Sol."

"Leo," Joe said from across the room, "is it possible to get a warrant for the football lockers the players keep? I'm sure if this person washes his sheets in Pine-Sol, he probably washes his sweaty work-out clothes in it as well."

Leo nodded his head. "It would be much easier to get a warrant for lockers than the dorm rooms or apartments of every player. I'll have to talk to my Chief when I get back to the station." He leaned forward, closer to Rocco. "I need you to tell me step by step what you remember after leaving the art studio." Leo took a small tape recorder out of his pocket and held it up. "Do you mind?"

"No." He looked over at Joe. "Should we do this alone?"

Detective Warren must have picked up on his anxiety. "Yes, that would probably be more official." He turned around in his chair to look at Joe. "Do you mind stepping out into the hall for a few minutes? Maybe you should get yourself something to eat in the cafeteria. You look pretty wiped out."

Joe never took his eyes off Rocco. He walked toward the bed and gave him another kiss on the head. Rocco could tell he wanted to say something, but he shook his head instead and left.

As soon as Joe was out of the room, Rocco began. "I remember walking out of the building and noticing it was really dark. I think the lights weren't working or something..." He continued describing the attack in as much detail as he could remember. Rocco had to stop often to give his ribs a rest, but when he was finished he could see the detective's jaws were tense and bulging.

"Can I ask you one more question? Why did you want Dr. Pressman out of the room?"

"He feels guilty. I didn't want him to hear the details of what happened. Just knowing it did, is eating him from the inside out."

Detective Warren's face softened and a small grin appeared. "The two of you are so busy protecting each other you're not talking about it. He's a doctor, don't forget. I'd suggest you either talk to him or talk to another professional. Attacks of this nature tend to leave more internal scars than external." Leo stood and slipped his tape recorder back into his pocket. "We should all be so lucky to have a relationship like the two of you have. You should rely on each other. You'll need it to get you through this."

"Thank you." Rocco watched Detective Warren. He heard him open the door.

"I'll find Joe and send him back in."

"I'd appreciate it." He heard the door close, and pushed the button on the machine beside his bed which released another dose of pain medication through his IV. He yawned and immediately winced at the pain it caused. *Get used to it*, he thought. From what the doctor said he would probably be sore for several more weeks. It would take about six weeks for his ribs to heal though. As the pain medication started to work his eyes began to drift shut. Maybe he'd just rest them until Joe came back and they could talk.



Drinking his third cup of coffee, Joe paced back and forth in the hall until Leo came out of Rocco's room. "Did you get what you needed?" By his own ears he knew he sounded gruff.

"Yes." Leo looked at him for a second. "I know it's not my place to say this, but he was just trying to protect you by not wanting you in the room."

Protect him? "What?"

Leo sighed and ran his hand through his short black hair. "He knows you're blaming yourself. He just didn't want to add more fuel to the fire."

Joe started to deny it, but stopped himself. Maybe Rocco was right because he knew if he'd listened to every detail, it would have killed him. Extending his hand, he waited for Leo to shake it. "Thanks. Call us if you find out anything."

"Certainly," Leo nodded before walking off.

He slipped quietly into Rocco's room and found him asleep. The doctor had told them he'd keep him for another day to monitor the amount of blood still passing through his catheter before releasing him into Joe's care. They'd give him pain medication for his ribs, but he'd just need to take it easy for a good long while.

As Joe took his seat, he wondered what they would do about Rocco's classes. He wasn't sure if the teachers would let him make up his work. He had come to a decision in the last twelve hours, though. The University needed to do something about their security. Rocco had said the lights weren't working around the art building. As soon as Rocco was out of the hospital he was going to talk to him about filing a lawsuit against the university. If Detective Warren could help prove the attack on Rocco was based on his sexual preference, Joe thought they'd have a damn good chance at getting a few things changed at the college.

Joe looked around the room. Why did hospitals always paint the walls a drab greenish grey? Knowing Rocco would probably sleep for an hour or so, he decided to go outside and make some calls. The first one would be to his mom and dad. He may be thirty-five but, his parents still were the best listeners around, and this time, he needed to tell them the whole truth about the love of his life.



One of his close friends, Tony Bianchi stopped by the hospital that night, bringing them both burgers and shakes from the Shake Shack. "I didn't know whether you could eat this or not, but hated to think of both of you dining on hospital food."

"I can eat the burger," Rocco said, "but the shake might be a little too thick. No sense in building up phlegm. It hurts like hell to cough."

Tony pulled a chair up next to Joe as he dug into his dinner. Moaning Joe closed his eyes as he took his first bite. "Oh, Tony. You have no idea how much I needed this."

Chuckling, Tony began drinking the chocolate shake he'd gotten for Rocco. "So when are you getting out?"

"Tomorrow," he answered for Rocco. "But he won't be able to do anything for several weeks. My mom's flying in this weekend though. I called and told the folks what happened and she insisted on helping." He grinned, remembering his mom's response when he'd told her about Rocco and how young he was. She'd told him age was nothing but a number and it was the feelings that counted. Leave it to his mom to break life down into the simplest terms.

Rocco looked at Joe as he slowly chewed his food. When he'd told him that they were going to get mummied for the next week or so, he'd seen the confusion in Rocco's eyes. Joe could tell it was just one more thing Rocco had missed out on growing up with Janie for a mother.

Tony stayed and visited for about another thirty minutes while they watched Rocco nibble at his hamburger. Joe tossed a look at Rocco for not eating and he grinned and nibbled some more. "So how's Christian?"

"Fine, he's been away on business a lot lately." Tony shrugged. "Trying to drum up more clients he says. I told him we have all the work we can handle now, but he still goes."

Joe reached over and squeezed Tony's shoulder. "But the two of you are still getting along good aren't you?"

"Yeah, hell, we've been together since college. I guess every relationship has its ups and downs. We'll be fine." Tony stood and stretched. "I'd better get going. Don't hesitate to call if you need anything."

"Thanks for dinner," Rocco said, still holding about a third of his burger. Tony smiled and waved as he went out the door.

Joe stood and held the trash can up to Rocco. He sheepishly dropped the remainder of his dinner in it and grinned. "It's hard to eat."

Sitting back down, Joe scooted his chair closer. He ran the palm of his hand down the side of Rocco's swollen face, pushing his hair out of the way. "Do you think you're going to be okay enough to go home tomorrow?"

"Yeah, as long as they send me home with something strong enough for the pain. I'd much rather lay in our bed so you could be beside me."

Leaning over, Joe kissed him, careful of Rocco's split lip. "You're okay with my mom coming, aren't you?"

"I'm okay with it. I'm just not sure why she's coming."

"Well, I told her that I loved you and that you'd been hurt, so naturally she feels like she's needed here. I could've argued but it really wouldn't have done any good. Olivia Pressman lives to be needed. She's going to have you so spoiled there'll be no living with you by the time she leaves."

He could see the worry return to Rocco's brown eyes. His tongue snaked out to wet his lips. "I'm not sure how to act." He finally admitted.

"Act like yourself and she'll fall in love with you as fast as I did." Joe could tell Rocco still wasn't convinced. With his background, who could blame him? He made a mental note to talk to his mom when he picked her up at the airport. Joe was sure she'd need a little warning about how Rocco was likely to act when she tried to do the mother thing with him.

"Why don't you go on home. I'm tired and you need a bath." He grinned and wrinkled his nose.

"Oh I do, do I? Well then maybe I'm too stinky to give you a goodbye kiss." He stood and thrust his nose in the air.

"You'll never be too stinky to kiss. Bring those lips down here."

Joe knew Rocco needed time to think and even though he knew being tired was a lame excuse, he decided to give him what he'd asked for. Without touching his hands to Rocco's sore body, he leaned over and kissed his man. "Love you."

"Yeah, me too."

Chapter Eight

On his second morning home, Rocco opened his eyes to the smiling face of Joe.

“Morning.”

Joe reached over to the nightstand and retrieved the pills and water. Handing them to a still groggy Rocco, he smiled. “Mom’s coming today. I have to leave in a couple hours to make the drive to the airport.”

Rocco managed to get the antibiotics and pain pill down and handed the glass back. He didn’t want to tell him he was still nervous about Olivia coming so he didn’t say anything.

Joe picked up on it and scooted a little closer. “Would you like me to help you take a bath this morning?” Joe peppered his skin with soft kisses. When he started working his way down his neck to his chest, Rocco tensed enough he gasped in pain. Joe’s head popped up. “Did I hurt you?”

“No, I hurt me. I guess I’m still a little self conscious about all the bruising.” He’d seen himself in the mirror for the first time the previous day. Although the swelling in his face was starting to go down, he still looked like a freak. Joe fell in love with him because of his apparent beauty, and now look at him.

Working his way back up to Rocco’s lips, Joe wrapped his hand around Rocco’s flaccid cock. It was a very possessive move, but one he very much welcomed. He needed to know Joe still loved him even if he was no longer beautiful.

“I love you, why can’t I get you to believe me?”

“I believe you,” he mumbled.

“No you don’t. If you did then you’d know cuts and bruises wouldn’t stop me from wanting you. I need to make love to you so bad its killing me, but I also know I have to wait. We’ll have plenty of time for that when your ribs have healed. Right now, it’s about me taking care of the man I love. That’s you by the way.” Joe grinned and kissed him again.

Rocco felt his cock start to stir. Without thought, he ground it against Joe's hand and hissed in pain again. Joe removed his hand immediately and shook his head. "No sex, it'll put strain on your muscles."

"I just want to feel close to you." He knew he sounded like a petulant child but he hadn't even gotten a hug since the attack. Oh, he knew the reason behind it, but it didn't make it any easier to handle. Being wrapped in Joe's embrace was like nothing he'd ever known. God, he needed that feeling.

"Let me try something, but you have to tell me if it hurts. Promise me?"

"Yes." Rocco waited while Joe worried his lip a little. A few moments later he was chest to chest with Rocco, Joe's hand resting on his hip. It wasn't the same as being hugged, but he felt closer to Joe than he had in days. He inhaled Joe's morning coffee breath and hummed. "That's better."

"Yeah?" Joe asked. "I'm not hurting you am I?"

"God no." He tipped his head forward and buried his face in Joe's neck. "Will we be able to do this with your mom here?"

"Every chance we get," Joe promised.

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Stretched out on his side, Rocco smiled as Aaron and Demitri came into the living room. "Hey, guys. Excuse me if I don't get up," he joked from his position on the couch.

Demitri sat in one of the chairs while Aaron knelt beside Rocco. "How're you feeling?" Aaron asked.

"Sore, but better all the time. At least, I'm able to get to the bathroom without doubling over in pain." He looked over at Demitri. "Joe said you wanted to talk to me about filing suit against the University. Count me in."

"Really? That's fantastic. I was afraid I was gonna have to twist your arm a bit," Demitri said with a wink.

"Nope, no twisting. I'm too sore for that anyway." He readjusted his braid that Joe had put into his hair to keep it out of his face. "We've already contacted a lawyer. I'm supposed to meet with him on Monday to draw up the papers."

"Good. Have you heard anything from Detective Warren?"

"He just called this morning. They picked up Chad Loningham last night for questioning. His were the only gym clothes that had traces of Pine-Sol, but Leo said he didn't have enough yet to hold him. I think he was trying to shake him up though." Rocco shook his head. "It sounds like there's a very real possibility that we may never know who all was involved."

"Collin's still adamant that he had nothing to do with it. I think I believe him. He's missed a lot of work this past week, and I think he's been drinking pretty heavily." Aaron said, absently smoothing Rocco's hair at his temple.

"I hate to think my dad would do something like this. I mean, I know for some reason he's washed his hands of me, but I just can't believe he'd have me attacked."

"Well, if it helps, Chad is a friend of Vic Winter's. Do you know who he is?" Demitri asked.

"Is that the quarterback that gave Koby so many problems?"

"One and the same. It's just a guess on my part, but I'd say Chad wasn't too happy about his friend losing his position to a gay man. I bet when he heard Collin discussing your sexuality with Justin, Chad used you to get back at the gay community in general. I honestly don't think it was an attack on behalf of Collin, despite what was said at the time."

Rocco fingered the rip in his T-shirt. "Do you think my dad would talk to me if I called him?"

"I don't know, but I do know he came up to the ER as soon as he was contacted. I think he's in a downward spiral right now."

He didn't know what to do. In his heart, he really couldn't believe that his dad would do something so horrible, but what about before that. Being kicked out of the house without a chance to explain, had hurt like hell. "Maybe I'll call him."

Aaron was about to say something when the door opened and Joe and his mom stepped into the living room. "It's snowing again," Joe said pulling off his coat before helping Olivia with hers.

Rocco swallowed, suddenly feeling more nervous than ever. Mrs. Pressman wasn't at all what he'd imagined. He knew Joe's dad was a surgeon so part of him expected a thin woman who'd fit right in to the Chicago social set, tennis with the girls at the club and all that. What he didn't expect was the short portly woman with the big smile and greying hair.

Before he could introduce himself, she was flying across the room to sit her ample bottom on the coffee table directly in front of him. "Oh, sweet boy, just look at you." She extended her hands, and he started to pull back. She tsked him and cupped his slightly swollen face. "What have they done to such a perfect face?"

"Wait until the bruising and swelling goes down," Joe said from over her shoulder, "then you'll see just how beautiful he really is."

Mrs. Pressman leaned forward and kissed him on the forehead. "I see the depth of your beauty in your eyes, son."

The endearment brought a rush of moisture to his eyes as he looked up at Joe. Why was she doing this? He'd lived his entire life without this kind of affection from a woman, why now? Rocco couldn't help himself as he eyed her suspiciously trying to figure out what kind of game she was playing.

Joe must have picked up on his mood because he cleared his throat, breaking the tension. "Mom, why don't I carry your luggage to the guest room and you can unpack."

Aaron and Demitri took that as their cue and stood and put their coats on. Demitri looked over at him and smiled. "We'll leave you all alone. Feel better."

"Thanks for coming by," he said, once Mrs. Pressman removed her hands from his face.

She sighed and stood to face Joe. "I can get my bags. It looks like Rocco could use something to drink. After I unpack I'll make a nice batch of hot cocoa." She looked back down at Rocco. "Do you like yours with marshmallows or without?"

"I don't know," he said honestly. "I've never had anything in my hot chocolate before."

"Well then, you're in for a treat." Mrs. Pressman walked over to the door and picked up her suitcase and carry-on and toted them down the hall.

As soon as she was out of eyesight, Joe knelt in front of him, giving him a deep kiss.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, it's just weird, I guess. I've never known anyone like her." As much as he wanted to shift away from the knowing look on Joe's face, his ribs kept him where he was.

Joe shrugged and looked toward the hall. "She's just my mom." He gave him a wink. "Her mothering instinct is kicking in double time with you. I hope it's not too hard for you to handle, but it makes her happy. Promise me though, if it gets to be too much for you, tell me."

"Okay," he mumbled, not sure of how he felt about it yet. Joe taking care of him was different, he was his lover, but he didn't know if he liked the idea of someone else trying to coddle him.

Thinking about Mrs. Pressman brought the thought of his father to the forefront. "I think I need to call my dad. Aaron said he's not been working lately and that he's been drinking. I've been around alcoholics all my life, and I know that leaving them alone isn't the answer."

Joe played with his braid a few seconds before answering. "I just don't want him to say anything more to hurt you. I know he's your dad so of course I won't try and talk you out of calling, but if he starts in, I want you to hang up."

Closing his eyes, he swallowed. "I have to try."

"I know, honey." Joe kissed him again.

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After a nice dinner of beef stew and corn bread, Joe helped Rocco back to the couch. As he watched Rocco's face wincing in pain, he shook his head. "You shouldn't have sat up at the dinner table."

"Your mom went to a lot of trouble, it would have been rude not to eat with the two of you."

Exhaling, he got Rocco settled on his injured side like the doctor had advised. "Listen, I know you're still a little uncomfortable around Mom, but she's here to make it easier. You won't offend her by not coming to the table next time." He sat on the floor and brushed the wayward strands of black hair away from Rocco's face. "I love you."

"Love you," Rocco said, biting his lip.

"What?"

"Could you bring me the phone? I thought maybe I'd try calling Dad now."

Joe warred with himself for a few seconds before nodding. He gave Rocco a kiss and unclipped the cell phone from his waist. "Remember what I said. If he starts in on you just hang up."

"I remember," Rocco said, softly looking at the keypad.

Standing, he pointed toward the kitchen. "I'm going to help Mom clean up. Yell if you need anything." Rocco nodded, and Joe walked back into the kitchen.

"How is he?" Olivia asked, filling the sink with hot soapy water.

"He's fine," he shrugged, "calling his dad."

Olivia's eyes rounded. "I'm surprised you didn't try to stop him after the way Collin kicked him out."

Pulling a dishtowel out of the drawer, he began drying the dishes. "He's a man, Mom. He may only be eighteen, but from the sounds of it, he's taken care of himself his entire life. Hell, he's probably more mature than I am." Joe clenched the dishcloth in his hands. "If only he weren't so damn soft hearted. It still amazes me that he's been through a life of hell and still has a heart the size of a mountain."

Olivia turned and wrapped her arms around him. "That's why he deserves someone with a heart just as big. You're perfect for each other."

He looked at his mom. "The age difference doesn't bother you?"

She shrugged and went back to washing dishes. "Before I met him, I'll admit it bothered me somewhat, but not anymore. I can see how much love there is between the two of you every time you look at each other. That's all I ever wanted for you."

"Thanks, Mom."

A loud cry of pain came from the living room and Joe and Olivia both headed for Rocco. He was bent over the side of the couch crying in pain as he threw-up the last of his dinner. Trying desperately to wrap his own arm around his heaving mid-section to control the pain, Rocco's face had gone white.

Knowing it would probably hurt, he apologised before scooping Rocco into his arms and carrying him to the bathroom. "I'm done," Rocco rasped out.

Joe grabbed a face cloth from the shelf and ran it under cold water after setting Rocco on the closed toilet lid. He cleaned his face and mouth before pulling his soiled T-shirt over his head. After getting Rocco wiped down and stripped to his underwear, Joe put his lips to his forehead. "Are you sick or upset?"

"I'm not sick. Could you help me to the sink so I can brush my teeth, and then I'd like to go to bed please? I think I'm done for the day." Helping Rocco stand, he led him to the bedroom and pulled the comforter and sheets back as he eased him down.

"Do you feel like talking about it?" He asked as he took Rocco's underwear off and covered him.

Rocco finally looked him in the eyes. "He told me he didn't have a son and hung up on me. He was drunk, but that's usually when people are the most truthful."

Stretching out to face Rocco, Joe kissed him. "I'm so sorry he treated you that way."

"I don't know why I expected him to want to talk to me. I shouldn't have called. It was stupid."

"No, it wasn't stupid, never that. You reached out. That's all you can do." Joe tried to keep the anger out of his voice, afraid Rocco would misconstrue its source. "You sleep for awhile. I'll come to bed later and love you."

Rocco nodded and closed his eyes. Joe waited for a few more minutes until Rocco's breathing evened and went to the living room. He started putting on his coat and boots as Olivia came into the room. He could see that she'd been cleaning up the mess and smiled. "Thanks."

She narrowed her eyes. "Where are you going?"

"To kick an old friend's ass," he said, as he opened the door and left.

Chapter Nine

By the time Joe made it to Collin's he'd worked himself up even more. How dare that bastard hang up on Rocco. Pounding on the door produced no response so he tried the knob. Not surprised to find it unlocked he walked directly into the living room.

Collin was stretched out on the couch with a half bottle of whiskey in his hand. As mad as he was, the sight of his ex-best friend shocked him. Collin looked nothing like the strong football coach he'd always known. His clothes looked like they hadn't been changed in days to say nothing of his unshaven face.

"What the hell do you want?" Collin slurred.

Crossing his arms over his chest to keep from ripping his old friend to pieces, Joe exhaled. "I came to find out why you hung up on your son."

"He's not my son."

"Dammit, just because he's not the kind of son you pictured having doesn't make him any less yours," he yelled.

"No, I mean he's really not my son. I found out when he went to the doctor before he started school. According to the blood tests, he's not mine."

"You mean you had DNA done?" He widened his stance and put his hands on his hips.

"No, but I know Janie's blood type from the medical records I made her send when Rocco came here to live. I'm O positive and Janie is A positive, but Rocco is O negative." Collin laughed and took another drink. "I paid thousands of dollars in child support for a kid that wasn't even mine."

A kid? Suddenly, Joe didn't see his ex-friend or Rocco's father, what he saw was a dirty drunk. "You don't deserve Rocco for a son. Yeah, you're right, you did pay thousands of dollars, but don't fool yourself, you were never a father. A real father sees his children more than once a year. And you? You piece of shit, never even bothered to check up on Rocco to

make sure he was being fed. Do you know he went to work when he was just a boy so he could buy himself food?"

He saw confusion in Collin's face. "Yeah, that's right. That bitch he has for a mother spent every penny you sent on everything but her own son. Did you even know Janie was an alcoholic? Or that most nights he slept outside in front of their apartment because he'd been ordered out of the house by a whoring mother? You make me sick. You're as bad as Janie ever was. Rocco should be glad to be rid of you, you sorry sack of shit." He turned and threw open the door as he left.

Joe sat in his car for several minutes trying to calm down before heading home. What would he tell Rocco? He thought back to the day Rocco's mother had basically kicked him out of the house. It was the day of Lorne's funeral. His mother wouldn't let Rocco go to the service. She'd accused him of killing her lover. Rocco had tried to explain that Lorne was trying to get attention by playing with the gun. He'd asked Lorne several times to hand the gun over so they could talk but Lorne refused. He said the only way Rocco could save him was by forgiving him for sleeping with Janie. Rocco had refused to forgive or forget and Lorne had raised the gun to his head and asked the question again. Once more, Rocco refused to be bullied into taking Lorne back. As he stood watching, Lorne blew his brains out.

Shaking his head, Joe tried to imagine the guilt Rocco must have felt and then to be accused by his own mother? No wonder he hadn't wanted to talk about it. "And now this," Joe sighed, pulling into his driveway.

Letting himself in, he smiled at his mother. She'd always done this. Olivia was sound asleep on the couch, still sitting up with the light on, waiting for him to come home. He walked over and kissed her cheek. "Wake up and go to bed, Mom."

Her eyes opened and she grinned. "I'm awake. I was just resting my eyes." Olivia cupped Joe's cheek. "How'd things go with Collin?"

"Bad, but at least I know where he stands. Now I just have to tell Rocco. Did he wake up and call for me while I was gone?"

"No, sweetheart. He's slept peacefully, but if you're going to wake him, have him take another pain pill. He had one right before dinner but he probably threw most of it up. No sense in him waking in pain later."

Joe helped his mom up and walked her to the guest room. "Thanks."

"I love you, Son."

"Love you, Mom." After his mom closed her bedroom door, he made sure the house was locked and picked up the bottle of medicine and a package of crackers from the kitchen counter.

Getting undressed, he watched Rocco's face in the moonlight. His expression was drawn and tense even in sleep. Joe wondered whether it was the pain disturbing him or thoughts of Collin.

After a quick trip to the bathroom, he slid under the covers. He studied Rocco some more while he waited for his skin to warm. When at last he knew he wouldn't chill his man with the press of his flesh, Joe scooted closer to Rocco. Looking at the perfectly shaped lips in front of him, he couldn't resist kissing them.

Rocco moaned and opened for him. Delving his tongue in to sweep the interior of Rocco's mouth produced the desired effect.

Eyes now open, Rocco smiled. "Hey, you."

"Hey, honey. You need to take a pain pill and eat a little something."

Rocco nodded and after taking his medicine and eating his crackers, he buried his face in Joe's neck. "I wish you could make love to me," he whispered, nibbling Joe's skin.

"Oh, you have no idea how much I want to, but the doctor said..."

"I don't care what the doctor said," Rocco interrupted. "I need you. I need to feel that you still want me. You can tell me all day but it's not the same as feeling it." Rocco grasped Joe's hand and lowered it to his half-hard erection. "Please."

Joe looked into Rocco's eyes and fought himself over what was right and what was needed. He tightened his grip on the shaft in his hand and flicked the tiny silver hoop.

"Uhhh, yes, more," Rocco begged.

"Promise me you'll stay as still as possible?"

“Anything, I’ll do anything you ask, just touch me.”

Taking one more deep tongue tangling kiss, Joe licked his way down Rocco’s body, stopping to pay homage to his pierced nipples while slowly stroking his cock. He felt Rocco grip the back of his head as he continued to lick and suck at the protruding buds.

Breaking away, Joe moved lower, taking the blankets with him, until he was eye level with Rocco’s dripping cock. He tongued the slit, gathering as much of his lover’s desire as he could before moving down to that shiny silver ring that had tempted him earlier. Using his teeth, Joe tugged on the hoop as Rocco moaned and gripped his hair.

“Suck me,” Rocco whispered.

After laving his sac, Joe worked his tongue up the length of Rocco’s shaft. He loved every ridge, every vein of the long thin cock. Slipping his lips over the crown, he moaned as the taste of Rocco’s essence invaded his senses. With his cheeks hollowed, he sucked like it was the first time he’d ever had Rocco’s cock in his mouth.

Rocco moaned and tried to thrust his hips toward Joe’s face. A small hiss and hitch in his breathing was the only outward sign Joe had that he’d hurt himself. Slowing his pace, he reached down between his own legs and fisted his cock, relishing the tight grip of his fingers. Stroking himself to the same steady pace he was swallowing his lover’s cock, he felt at peace for the first time in days.

Nails raked his back as Rocco fought to keep still. “Can’t hold it,” he panted.

Joe hummed his approval around Rocco’s shaft seconds before a steady stream of cum shot toward the back of his throat. The slightly bitter, earthy taste set off his own orgasm as he shot his seed into his hand. Stifling a roar, Joe shook with the intensity of his own release.

He bathed Rocco’s cock with his tongue as his breathing returned to normal. “Let me see your hand,” Rocco begged.

Joe scooted back up the bed and presented Rocco with his seed covered hand. Maintaining eye contact, Rocco slowly laved every digit before moving to his palm. “Fuck, that’s sexy,” Joe said, watching his lover.

“Can’t wait to heal. Need you deep inside me. Need you to claim me again.” Rocco kissed him, sharing their mutual taste in a deep mating of tongues and teeth.

"I know, honey. I feel the same way." Joe rested his head on Rocco's pillow and brushed the hair away from his temple. God, he didn't want to have this conversation, but he couldn't keep it from Rocco, it just wouldn't be right. "I went to see Collin."

"What? When?" Rocco asked, his head coming up to look into Joe's eyes.

"Earlier, after you fell asleep." He cupped Rocco's bruised face. "He was drunk, but I guess that's no surprise. Collin told me something I think you need to know. I'm not going to lie, honey, it's going to hurt."

"I'm used to hurt. Just tell me what he said."

Looking into Rocco's eyes, Joe saw the truth in his words. He *was* used to being hurt. Dammit. "Collin said according to the blood tests taken when you had your physical, he can't be your biological father." He held Rocco's cheek in a firmer grip so he couldn't look away and turn back inside himself like he usually did after hearing bad news.

Rocco surprised him though by giving a short nod. "Honestly? It doesn't really surprise me. There were plenty of clues given to me by my mother while I was growing up. I just never had proof."

Closing his eyes, he sighed. "I just really wanted a dad. I used to dream that one day da...Collin would come and take me away from my life with my mom. When I was a kid and she and I would argue, I'd say I was going to call my dad and have him come get me. She'd laugh and say things like, good luck finding him. Usually when I called Collin, Dad in front of her, she'd correct me by saying, you mean the man who's paying me for you. I guess I slowly worked it out, but I didn't want to tell Collin because he was the only dad I'd ever have. But I guess in the end, blood means more than anything to him."

Joe quieted Rocco with a kiss. He couldn't believe he was about to do this, but Rocco needed something to believe in. "Give him more time. I think it must be hard for him. You've evidently gotten used to the fact that he probably wasn't your biological father over the years, but Collin's just learned about it after eighteen years. I know he's never been a good father to you, and I won't defend him for that, but don't completely write him off yet."

Rocco studied him for a long time before speaking again. "Please don't ever change your mind about me. I know I'm young and not very attractive right now, but I'll get older and the bruises will fade."

Feeling the sting of tears, Joe shook his head. "Oh, honey, I'm in this for life. To be honest, you're voicing the same fears I've been struggling with. I don't want to hold you back. Your art, all your talent, you can do so much with it. I don't want to be the one to hold you back from reaching your full potential."

With a slight chuckle, Rocco shook his head. "With you by my side, I can fly."

Chapter Ten

Opening the door to Rocco's studio, Joe smiled. "Hey, thought I might find you out here. How was your first day back?" He walked in and kissed the side of Rocco's neck.

"Got a few strange looks. Gossip seems to be spreading." He shrugged. "Get Olivia to the airport okay?"

"Yeah, protesting the entire trip about leaving you too early. And you know she'd turn you over her knee if she heard you calling her anything but Mom."

"I'd rather have you turning me over your knee," Rocco looked up and blew him a kiss.

The image of Rocco's smooth bare ass bared to his hand gave Joe an unexpected shiver. "Maybe, someday," he mused. He watched Rocco continue to shape the vase on the pottery wheel. Joe was feeling horny as hell with his mom finally out of the house, but he knew better than to disturb Rocco when he was working a piece. Besides, it had only been three weeks since the attack and he wasn't sure he could hold back enough not to hurt him.

They'd petted and sucked, but hadn't had actual penetrative sex since...he shook off the depressing thoughts. Detective Warren had been over just a couple days earlier to tell them that unfortunately the case was being transferred to the back burner for now. They had no new leads and absolutely no concrete evidence on any of the guys they thought were involved.

Poor Leo had stood with his arms crossed and listened to his wrath for a good twenty minutes before offering his sincerest apologies.

"What's wrong?" Rocco asked, breaking into his thoughts.

"Nothing, honey." He ran his hand over Rocco's black braid.

Rocco turned on his stool and stood, offering his lips. "Let me get this stuff cleaned up and I'll join you on the couch."

Joe swept the interior of Rocco's mouth with his tongue. "I'll make the popcorn."

With one final kiss, Joe went into the kitchen and put a bag of popcorn into the microwave. He noticed himself humming as he fixed two glasses of Coke.

After setting the tray with their snacks on the coffee table, Joe went into the bedroom and stripped out of his clothes. A quick wash-up and he was in his sweats heading for the couch.

Just as Joe stretched out on the soft cushions, Rocco walked into the living room naked. "Oh fuck," Joe whispered, his hand going under the waist band of his sweats to wrap around his shaft. His cock hardened painfully in a split second as he watched Rocco's lithe body walking toward him. The bruises were barely noticeable on the perfectly bronzed skin. "Damn you're pretty," he said looking up as Rocco stood over him.

"It's been a long time since we could watch television naked." Rocco shrugged and pulled Joe's sweat pants off, tossing them to the floor. Rocco straddled his torso and sat with the crack of his ass resting on Joe's throbbing erection.

Wrapping his hands around Rocco's lean hips, he thrust up. "Should I even bother turning on the television?"

Rocco leaned forward and ran his tongue up Joe's chest to capture his left nipple.

"I guess that's my answer," he said, rubbing his cock against Rocco's cleft. Reaching out, he plucked and twisted the silver hoops in Rocco's hairless chest. Just looking at this man had him on the verge of coming. "Sure you're up to this? I don't want to hurt you."

"I ache already," Rocco said, looking down at him with dreamy heavy-lidded eyes.

"Where do you ache?" Joe asked, wrapping his fingers around Rocco's cock. "Here? Do I need to kiss it and make it better?"

Rocco stuck out his bottom lip and nodded. With Rocco's help they were soon in a sixty-nine position. With Rocco's shorter stature, instead of his cock in Joe's face, he had a perfect view of that sweet hole he loved so much. As his cock was enveloped in a hot wet heat, Joe separated Rocco's cheeks and ran his tongue over the tightly puckered hole.

Breaking away he thrust up deeper into Rocco's mouth. "I'd hoped you would have prepared yourself with one of your pretty plugs."

Rocco pulled off his cock and shook his head. "I needed you. Your fingers to stretch me, your tongue to lick me and your cock to fill me."

"Such pretty words." Joe stuck two fingers in his mouth and got them nice and wet. Withdrawing them, he tapped the tight pucker a few times before inserting the first digit. "Let me in, honey."

Rocco's back bowed as his body swallowed Joe's finger. "Oh, that's nice," Rocco panted as he began fucking himself against Joe's hand. "More," he pleaded.

Joe slowly inserted the second finger, watching the skin open and stretch. Rocco continued to rock back and forth but resumed his ministrations to Joe's cock.

Twisting them, he found and rubbed against the smooth gland, smiling as Rocco cried out with Joe's shaft still buried in his mouth. Removing his fingers, Joe pulled Rocco back toward him enough that he could bury his face in the crevice in front of him. His tongue slid over the skin of the stretched hole before working its way inside. Rocco's lean body writhed above him, dripping pre-come onto Joe's chest.

"So good, always good."

Joe grinned. He loved it when he made his man let go of his worries and just feel. With one last swirl of his tongue he slapped Rocco's ass. "Turn around." Joe spit in his hand and reached down to further coat his own shaft. He guided his cock head to Rocco's hole and waited.

With a devilish look on his face, Rocco impaled himself, hissing at the apparent burn as he worked his way down Joe's length. "Fuck," Joe groaned at the tight heat surrounding him.

When Rocco was fully seated he looked down. "God, I missed this."

"Me, too," Joe said, struggling to hold himself together until Rocco gave him the okay to move. With another one of those devilish grins of his, Rocco swivelled his hips. "No teasing," Joe moaned, sweat breaking out on his forehead.

"Okay," Rocco said, as he rose up before sliding back down. Getting his feet planted on either side of Joe's hips, Rocco began to ride him fast and hard.

Even through the shear bliss of it all, Joe was still concerned about Rocco's healing body, and reached out to lend support to his sore ribs. He eased Rocco up and down his length as fast as he dared without hurting him. Swivelling his hips, he was rewarded with a loud moan. Rocco threw his head back and Joe watched as the tendons in his lover's slim neck stood out in stark relief against the smooth skin.

Wrapping his long fingers around his dripping erection, Rocco began to pant as he stroked and rode. "Gonna."

"Come all over me, honey. Paint me with your seed," Joe demanded in a gruff tone as he tried to stave off his orgasm.

He watched in awe as the tip of Rocco's cock erupted in a string of pearly white essence, splashing over Joe's stomach and shoulder. "Yes," he cried, pulling Rocco down onto his shaft as he pulsed shot after shot of seed into his love.

Falling onto his chest, Rocco sighed, "Love you."

Running his hands down Rocco's back, Joe kissed the top of his head. "Love you."

"Can we stay just like this for awhile?"

"I'm too wiped out to get up anyway," Joe chuckled. "I think a little nap is a good idea." Rocco snuggled his face into Joe's neck and they were both soon asleep.

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"Hello?"

"Hey, Demitri, it's Joe, you got a minute." Joe leaned back in his office chair and put his feet on the desk.

"Sure, what's up?"

"We got a call from the lawyer this morning. The University wants to settle this suit out of court. They're afraid of the media digging too deep into the story and the last thing they want is bad press. Rocco and I were just wondering if you'd have time to meet with our lawyer to discuss what we are and are not prepared to negotiate."

"That's fantastic news. I'll do you even one better. I'll see if I can get Charlie on the phone to listen in on the meeting. He's the real brains of the BK Foundation. I'm just the wallet and the good-looking figure head."

Joe chuckled, "From what I remember, Charlie's not so bad himself. I don't think your pretty face has anything to do with it."

"Oh, I'm crushed," Demitri faked a hurt tone. "Tell me, when do you have to meet with the lawyer?"

"At ten in the morning."

"Okay, I'll give Charlie a call right now and see what we can come up with."

"Sounds good. So what do you and Aaron have planned this evening for Valentine's Day?"

"I'm taking him out to eat at the Grog. For some reason the man just can't get enough of that place."

"Hey, Rocco and I have reservations, too. Maybe we'll see you there."

"I'll look forward to buying you a drink. This lawsuit could turn out to be the best thing that's happened for the minority students in years. Not just the gay ones, but black, Asian and disabled, too. Make sure you tell Rocco thanks for going through with it."

"I will. Talk to you later."

"Bye."

Joe hung up the phone as Rocco poked his head in the office. "Got a second?"

"Of course." He smiled and took his feet off the desk.

Rocco came in carrying a wrapped box. "Ooh, what's this? A present for me?" Joe smiled.

Bouncing over to the desk, Rocco set the box down. "Yep, open it."

Instead of reaching for the gift right away, Joe pulled Rocco into his lap and kissed him. "First things first," he said kissing him deeper. The kiss took off and Rocco adjusted himself to straddle Joe's thighs, pressing his hardened cock into Joe's lower stomach. Joe broke the kiss and looked into Rocco's dark green eyes. "You drive me crazy."

"Good," Rocco said, moving back and forth in Joe's lap.

Joe growled and nipped Rocco's neck. "If I wasn't expecting Julian in ten minutes, I'd fuck you across the desk."

Rocco reached over and took a handful of tissues out of the box. Handing them to Joe, he began to unbutton and zip both their pants. "Quick and easy," he grinned. Rocco took

Joe's hand and led it to their twin erections. "Touch me," he moaned, as he continued to move.

Looking from the clock to the door, Joe wrapped his hand around both cocks and began a hard fast rhythm. Rocco's back arched as he thrust into Joe's hand. "Tissues," Rocco panted, and took them from Joe's hand.

Wrapping the tissues over the tip of their cocks, Rocco shot his seed. Joe watched as the thin paper became transparent with his lover's essence. "Fuck," he groaned as Rocco pressed his thumb against Joe's slit. His cum mixed with Rocco's leaving a soaked tissue in Rocco's hand.

Once finished, Rocco tossed the wadded tissue into the trash and cleaned them both with another. "Now, present time."

Joe chuckled and zipped them both up before shifting Rocco to one thigh so he could reach the brightly wrapped gift. Opening the box, he started laughing. "It's perfect." He ran his fingers over the beautifully glazed jar. On the side, Rocco had etched the words, "Penny for your thoughts."

"I thought it would look good on the corner of your desk. Maybe you could pick up a little extra money in tips," Rocco said with a wide grin.

"Thank you. I absolutely love it." He kissed Rocco, thrusting his tongue inside. Their moans were interrupted by a loud knock on the door. Joe broke the kiss, "Come in."

Julian walked in, eyes wide when he saw them in a heated embrace. "You need more time?" He joked, as he stood by the door.

"Nope, we're through, for awhile anyway." Joe squeezed Rocco's ass as he lifted him off his lap.

Julian made a show of sniffing the air. "Yeah, I can smell that you're finished."

Joe picked up the paper from his gift and after wadding it into a ball threw it at Julian's head. "Watch it. It's Valentine's Day. Love in the air and all that."

"Something's in the air," Julian joked again.

He noticed the dark crimson stain working its way up Rocco's neck to his cheeks. "I'll be home after I get this sorry fool out of here. Do you want to stay in the outer office or do you want me to meet you there?"

"I'll stay. Maybe I'll call Koby and tell him to put Julian's underwear in the freezer," Rocco said, raising his nose in the air as he walked out of the office.

"Ooh, you're in trouble now," Joe said removing the box from his desk.

"Not really. I very seldom wear underwear," Julian said with a wink.

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After placing their order, Joe took a look around the restaurant trying to find Julian and Koby. What he did see however, was not good. "Oh, fuck." He rubbed his palms over his face.

"What's wrong?" Rocco asked, leaning forward.

Joe uncovered his face and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Christian, Tony's lover and vice-president, is over against the wall."

Rocco looked around, "Which one is he?"

Joe gestured toward the far east wall. "The impeccably dressed blond over there kissing the red head."

"But, that's not Tony, that's a woman," Rocco exclaimed in a shocked tone.

"Yep. Shit, Tony's a good friend of mine. How am I just supposed to ignore this?"

"And on Valentine's Day. What a creep," Rocco narrowed his eyes in Christian's direction and crossed his arms.

Setting his napkin back on the table, Joe squeezed Rocco's hand. "I'll be right back. If I don't find out what the hell's going on it'll drive me crazy." He stood and walked over to stand beside Christian's table. When the pair didn't break apart he cleared his throat.

Christian broke the kiss and looked up with fire in his eyes until he saw it was Joe. In a split second, Joe saw the guilt and worry in Christian's eyes. *Yep, you've been caught motherfucker.*

"Joe, uh...what are you doing here?" Christian released his hold on the red head and turned toward him.

"Taking my Valentine out for dinner. Where's Tony?" Joe crossed his arms and tilted his head, waiting for an answer.

"Uh...Tony's in Seattle, on business. He couldn't get back for the evening so he told me we'd celebrate this weekend."

"So you just took it upon yourself to celebrate without him." Joe leaned his palms on the table, towering over Christian. "You have exactly twenty-four hours to come clean with Tony before I call him myself."

Without waiting for a reply, Joe turned and walked back toward Rocco. He sat down and exhaled. "I'm sorry, honey. Do you mind if we get our dinner to go? I don't much care for the company in here."

"I already asked the waiter to box up our food," Rocco said, petting his hand. "I'll take you home and make you forget all about Christian and his cheating ways."

"Thanks."

Rocco leaned forward and kissed him. "I even asked for a pint of their yummy caramel sauce. I thought I'd let you lick it off me for desert."

"Damn you do know how to get my mind off things," Joe winked and kissed him back.

Chapter Eleven

After a solemn dinner with Tony, Joe sat back in the booth. "I wish I could tell you it'll get better, but I know it doesn't help right now."

Tony looked at him, his dark brown eyes looking tired and sad. "It's been forty-two days since I kicked him out and it's still hard for me to understand. I've been with Christian for years. I trusted him completely. Hell, that's why I made him my vice-president. Now not only do I no longer have a partner, but I need to find a new executive." Tony ran his olive-skinned fingers through his short curly black hair. "Why didn't he tell me he was bi-sexual?"

"I don't know," Joe said, placing a hand on Tony's shoulder, "but I'm here when you need someone to talk to."

"I know, thanks, man." Tony finished off his glass of red wine, his fourth in the past hour.

"How 'bout I drive you home," Joe offered.

Tony looked at his empty glass and sighed. "Yeah that would probably be best. I think I'm going to move. The house has too many memories for me, now."

Joe could tell Tony was dreading going back to the empty house. "I've got to go by the college and pick up Rocco. Feel like taking a little side trip?"

With a nod, Tony grinned. "I'd like that."

After settling their tab, they headed toward the college. Tony offered up his car since Joe's Crossfire only had two seats. Getting behind the wheel of the expensive luxury car, he made sure Tony was buckled before pulling out onto the main street.

After parking in the visitor's lot, Joe and Tony made their way to the Art Department. Tony opened the door for Joe. "So what's Rocco doing here so late?"

"Trying to catch up, he was out for three weeks."

"Anything come of that yet?" Tony followed Joe up the stairs to the second floor.

"We had a meeting with our lawyer and the Board of Directors and their slew of lawyers. It went pretty well. Demitri and Charlie really helped us out. We decided in place of a monetary settlement to ask for across the board campus changes. Our lawyer thinks the Board will finally agree to hire Charlie as a Tolerance Director. We're also asking for all the broken street lights on campus to be repaired and maintained as well as the hiring of several more security guards. As well as strict policy changes in the way they deal with discrimination of any kind. That'll include, race, handicap, and sexual orientation. Now all that's left is to wait to see if they offer a counter proposal and if everyone's agreed they file the official paperwork. Once that's finished, hopefully we'll be able to move Charlie to town. The BK centre should be completed in another three months, so if he's hired before then, he'll be staying with Demitri and Aaron."

They reached Daniel's classroom and Joe knocked on the door frame as he stuck his head in. "Anyone here need a ride?"

"Be right there," Rocco called.

Joe ushered Tony into the studio. He smiled to himself as Tony went from one work table to the next looking at the in-progress pieces. "Amazing," he said and shook his head. "I always wished I could learn something like this but my father said art was for queers." He turned and winked at Joe. "Guess he wasn't too far off. I ended up taking every business class he told me to, but never got over my longing for art." He touched a finished piece on the centre table, an abstract sculpture of two men entwined in each others arms. "Beautiful."

"Hey you," Rocco came around the corner, taking off his apron. "I was just helping Professor Willis get pots into the kiln." Rocco looked over his shoulder before leaning closer to Joe. "Don't say anything about his face."

Before Joe could relay the message to Tony, Daniel came out of the small room that housed the kiln. Tony looked at Daniel for several seconds before approaching him. "Who hit you? Was it more trouble on campus?"

Daniel pulled his blond hair out of its leather thong and let it cover the side of his bruised face. "I'm sorry, do I know you?" he asked defensively.

"No." Tony stuck his hand out. "I'm Tony Bianchi. Sorry to just blurt that out like that. Please, forgive me. Something happens to me when I see the evidence of one person beating another."

"It's okay, and no, it didn't happen on campus."

Joe noticed the two men were still shaking hands. It appeared neither wanted to be the first to let go. Interesting.

He watched as Tony's much bigger body took another step forward. With his free hand he gently outlined the black and purple bruise around Daniel's eye and cheek. "What's your name," he asked.

"Daniel."

"Daniel, how'd you get the bruise?"

Joe had never seen anything like it. Daniel appeared to be completely mesmerised by Tony's deep commanding voice.

Daniel licked his lips without taking his eyes off Tony's mouth. "I made the guy I've been seeing angry." Daniel looked down at the floor. "It was my fault. I should have just followed orders and not questioned him."

"No. No one has the right to do this to another human being. No one. It doesn't matter what you did or didn't do."

Daniel shook his head. "You don't know me."

Tony tilted Daniel's head up with a knuckle under the chin. "I'd like to know you."

"I can't, it wouldn't be wise."

Joe looked at Rocco and shrugged. Pulling him close he whispered in his ear. "What the hell is going on?"

"I'll tell you later. Do you think we should leave the two of them alone or drag Tony out of here kicking and screaming?"

"I don't know. I'm driving his car. Does Daniel have a car?"

Rocco nodded and stepped forward. "Daniel? Joe and I are gonna take off. I don't suppose you could give Tony a ride home, could you?"

Daniel looked from Tony over to Rocco and then back to Tony. "It wouldn't be wise."

Instead of arguing with him, which is what Joe would have probably done, Tony cupped the side of Daniel's cheek and leaned in to place a kiss on his damaged cheek. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Yes, I'm sure he's regretting it even now. I'll just go back to my apartment and unplug the phone and lock the door."

Tony dug into his coat pocket and retrieved a business card. Taking out a pen, he scribbled on the back. Placing the card in Daniel's hand, he folded the much smaller man's hand over the paper. "Call me if you need me or if you just need to talk, no matter what time of day."

Daniel gave a tight nod before holding the fisted card against his chest. "Thank you."

After several seconds, Tony turned and walked toward him and Rocco. "Let's go," he said, heading out the door.

"I'll see you on Monday," Rocco called out to Daniel as they followed Tony.

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On their way home from dropping a still dazed and seemingly angry, Tony off, Joe's cell phone rang. "Hello?"

"Hey, it's Justin."

"Hi, Justin." Joe pulled Tony's car into the restaurant's parking lot. He'd told Tony that he and Rocco would pick up his car and drop his off.

"I thought I should call. Collin resigned today. I was just notified by the Athletic Director, he asked me to fill the position temporarily until they can set up interviews for a permanent replacement."

"Oh," Joe said, looking over at Rocco.

"Listen, I know you and Rocco have been at odds with him lately, but I'm worried. Despite everything, I still consider him a friend and well, he won't talk to me. Hell, he won't let anyone in his house period and he's not answering the phone. I'm afraid with this recent bout of depression and drinking, he might do something stupid."

Leaning his forehead on the steering wheel, Joe sighed. "I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks, man. I know I'm putting you in an awkward position, but I honestly don't know what else to do."

"You did the right thing by calling." Joe said his goodbyes and hung up. He didn't know how to tell Rocco. *Damn it. How did things get this out of hand?*

Rocco touched the back of his head. "What's wrong?"

"Collin. Justin's worried about him. He's resigned and won't let anyone in to the house to talk to him. Justin's afraid he might do something stupid." He pulled Rocco across the console and into his lap. "I'm sorry, honey, but I need to go talk to him."

"No you don't, I do."

Joe shook his head. "No. I don't want you near him in this state of mind."

Rocco cupped Joe's face. "I need to do this. I let one person die because I wouldn't try to see through his pain. I won't make the same mistake again." He gave Joe a chaste kiss. "Besides, I have a few choice words for him."

He looked at Rocco, seeing the determination in his eyes. "Okay, but I go with you." Before Rocco had a chance to argue he stopped him with a kiss. "I'll stay outside if you want me to, but I won't let you go alone."

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Thirty minutes later they pulled into Collin's driveway, after taking Tony's car back. Rocco took a deep breath and opened the car door. "Wish me luck."

"Be careful. After you go inside, I'm going to sit out front on the steps. Yell if you need me."

Rocco looked at Joe. He looked so worried, but if there was one thing Rocco knew how to do, it was how to deal with a drunk. With a new resolve, he got out of the car and marched toward the front door. Lifting his fist, he pounded on the door. "It's Rocco, let me in."

He pounded for several more seconds. "I'm not going away. You might as well open the door."

"It's open," his dad yelled. In that moment, Rocco realised that no matter what, he'd always think of Collin as his dad. He may have been a shitty one, but he was the only one Rocco had.

Stepping into the living room, he looked around. The empty bottles and beer cans reminded him so much of his childhood, he felt bile rise in his throat. The only thing missing was an abusive boyfriend passed out on the couch.

"Come here to gloat?" Collin said coming into the living room with a fresh can of beer in his hand. He popped the top and sat in the chair.

"No. I came to see if there was any way to get my father back." He could feel the tears filling his eyes, but he couldn't stop them.

"Didn't your boyfriend tell you?"

"Yes, he told me what the blood tests say, but I'm asking you to be my father. Not the kind of father you have been, but the kind of father you'd like to be."

"Why would you want that? Joe told me how much I screwed up your childhood by not being there for you when you needed me."

Seeing the pain on his dad's face, Rocco walked over and knelt at Collin's feet. "I love you, that's why. The question is can you accept me as your son even though you know the truth about my parentage?"

Collin seemed to crumple before his eyes. The beer can fell to the floor as he covered his eyes and wept. Rocco felt the nasty smelling beer soaking into the leg of his jeans but ignored it and wrapped his arms around his dad. "Please," he whispered. "Please love me."

"I do," Collin cried. "I always did. When you were a baby, I visited the reservation for a whole month during the summer. I watched you while Janie worked at the casino. God, I loved you. I begged Janie to come back to Idaho with me so I could be with you. She refused and it almost killed me. I came back and went on a month-long drunk. I decided to never get that close to you again. I just couldn't take it. My heart couldn't take it. So I visited a week a year for the next seventeen years. Despite that, I never stopped loving you. You were the only blood I had left in the world. When I found out you weren't mine, I guess I went a little crazy."

Collin stopped talking and held Rocco tight. A little too tight, as Rocco began to feel the pressure against his newly healed ribs. He hated to do it, but he pushed his dad back. "I'm sorry, but my ribs are still sore."

Collin's eyes went big as he reached out to touch his fingertips to Rocco's chest. "I had nothing to do with this. Please believe me. It's torn me up inside to know you were hurt because of something I said in a moment of rage. I know it seems like I took my anger out on you, but I was mad at the world, and unfortunately you paid the price."

"I'm okay now. Things are going to change at the University, good things." He laid his head on his dad's knee. "So will you still be my dad?"

"I'm not sure that I really know how to be a father to you."

"Well, the first thing you need to do is stop drinking. I've had a lifetime of that and I really don't think I can take any more. Second thing is you can teach me how to throw a football. It wasn't that I never cared to learn. I just didn't have anyone to show me how it was done." Rocco chuckled, "But don't fool yourself. I'll never be any good at sports, but it doesn't mean I wouldn't like to at least try."

Rocco's heart almost sprang out of his chest when his dad ran his fingers through his hair. "I don't have much to offer you, but you've always got a home with me," Collin said.

"Thanks, but I already have a home. Speaking of which," he looked up at his dad, "Joe's on the porch steps waiting for me. Would it be okay if I asked him in? I'd like to get you cleaned up and put into bed."

His dad's eyes filled with tears once more. "I doubt Joe wants to see me."

"You're wrong. He won't say it, but he misses you."

"I miss him, too." Collin sat back in the chair looking defeated. "I've screwed everything up, my relationship with you and Joe, my career. I resigned ya know?"

"Yeah, I know. Maybe you could get your job back?"

"Naw, it was time for me to step down anyway. I suggested Justin take over. He'll be good for the team. At least it'll ferret out the homophobes." The word seemed to shock him. "The stuff I said to you. I'm sorry. After finding out that you weren't mine, I was looking for a reason to push you away."

"Shhh," Rocco said, standing. He kissed his dad's forehead and walked toward the door. "I'll be right back."

Instead of pulling Joe into the house, he stepped outside and shut the door. "Can you help me get my dad cleaned up?"

Joe rose off the step and embraced him. "Will he let me?"

"Yeah. He's feeling pretty shitty about everything that's happened, but I understand why now."

"Then explain it to me." Joe rubbed his back.

"I will, later though. Now, he needs a shower, shave and nice clean bed."

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It was after two in the morning when they finally got home. Rocco had insisted they stay and clean up the house. They'd changed Collin's sheets while he took a shower. After he was scrubbed pink, Rocco tucked his dad into bed with a kiss on the cheek, while Joe had watched from the doorway. The obvious love Rocco had for the man tore at Joe's heart strings.

Another two and half hours spent cleaning the rest of the house had worn his poor baby out and Rocco had fallen asleep on the drive home. Joe carried him inside and straight to bed. Undressing him, Joe wanted nothing more than to give Rocco back all the love he'd given to his dad that night. Stripping he climbed between the sheets and pulled a sleeping Rocco against his chest. There was always tomorrow.

Chapter Twelve

"Are you about ready? We're going to be late," Joe said looking at his watch.

"I'm coming, I'm taking the casserole out of the oven," Rocco called back.

Joe put on his black leather jacket and pulled Rocco's coat out of the closet. Rocco practically ran out of the kitchen with an insulated carrier in his hand. "I'm sorry, but I wanted it to be hot when we arrived."

Joe took the carrier while Rocco slipped his coat on. "See that's the thing with surprise parties. It helps if you actually arrive before the guest of honour."

Rocco looked up and gave him a quick kiss. "Smart ass. Let's go."

On the drive to the still unfinished BK House, Rocco turned to him. "What time was Charlie's plane supposed to arrive?"

"An hour ago."

"Oh, well, okay then. Maybe Demitri will take the long way from the airport."

"You hope," Joe said chuckling. He noticed Rocco worrying at the small hole in his jeans and calmed him with a hand on his thigh. "Stop it, its fine."

"Everyone's worked so hard to get Charlie here. I don't want to screw up his party."

Joe pulled into the parking lot in front of BK House. It wasn't finished yet, but all that was left were aesthetic details. He turned off the car and leaned over to give Rocco a kiss. "Did anyone ever tell you you're a worry wart?"

"I don't even know what that is, but it sounds gross. You think I'm gross?"

Joe laughed and shook his head again. "Oh, the things I still need to teach you." He gave Rocco a deeper kiss. "Come on."

"You're just going to leave the car here? Should you hide it or something?"

"He's blind. It's not like he's gonna know there are other cars in the lot." Climbing out of the car, he retrieved the two folded lawn chairs out of the small trunk space. "Ready?"

"Yep." Rocco joined him in front of the car as they walked into the building. "Oh, wow," Rocco said when they got inside. "I didn't realise it was going to be so big."

"It won't look quite this big when we get the furniture in," Tony said, greeting them.

"How've you been?" Joe started unfolding their chairs as Rocco took the casserole dish to the kitchen area. Joe couldn't help but to notice the way every eye in the room turned to follow Rocco. He knew he'd have to get used to it. Rocco would always get that level of public attention.

Tony shrugged, "Okay, I guess. I've been finding a lot of inconsistencies in Christian's work. I don't think anything was intentional, I think he just got to the point where he really didn't give a shit."

Rocco came running to stand beside Joe. "They're here. I just saw the car pull up."

"They're here," Tony yelled. The room quieted immediately and when the door opened, everyone yelled surprise. Charlie grinned from ear to ear. "Next time, if you all want to surprise me, don't park in the lot."

Rocco looked at Joe, giving him a questioning look. Before he could take a guess, Charlie started laughing. "I'm blind not deaf. We pulled up to a lot full of cars still pinging with cooling engines. You'd be surprised what I can hear and smell."

The room erupted in laughter and well wishes as everyone went to shake Charlie's hand, many of them meeting him for the first time.

As Charlie made his way around the room, Tony came back to stand by him and Rocco. "So, I figured Daniel would be here?"

Rocco looked around the room. "He was supposed to be. He said he was almost ready to head out when I talked to him earlier."

"Do you have his number? Maybe we should give him a call."

Shaking his head, Rocco reached down and started fingering the hole in his jeans. "It's written down by the phone at home. I don't know it by heart."

Joe took Rocco's hand and brought it away from his jeans and up to his mouth. "Calm down. I'm sure he's fine," he said kissing his palm.

"Do you know where he lives?" Tony asked, looking a little worried.

Rocco nodded. "In the apartments on the corner of Cherry and Vale, apartment two o three."

"I'll go drive by and see if his car's still there. What's he drive?"

That got a small laugh out of Rocco. "He's an artist, a Volkswagen Bug of course."

Tony slapped them both on the back. "Stay and enjoy the party. I'll be back before you know it."

After Tony left, Rocco leaned against him. "I think he's pretty sweet on Daniel."

"Gee, whatever gave you that idea?" Joe laughed.

"Ooh, aren't we in rare humour today," Rocco said, poking him in the side. "Come on, I want to mingle and talk to people. It's about time I made some friends my own age."

"You have friends your own age. What about Max and Koby? They aren't much older than you."

"Yeah, but those are your friends, they have to like me. I want some friends that like me just for me."

Even though it didn't make sense to him, Joe nodded and let Rocco drag him toward a group of students, which included Liam and his self-appointed bodyguard, Bear. He was glad Rocco was interested in finally opening himself up enough to meet new people. The last month had really done him a lot of good. His relationship with Collin was growing more every day. It was almost a given for him to get home from work in the evening and have Rocco on the phone with his dad.

Rocco had helped Collin find a local AA chapter to join. He'd even decided to start attending Al-Anon meetings once a month. With the household he'd grown up in, Joe encouraged him whole heartedly.

After Rocco introduced him to the small group of students, Joe gave him a kiss on the cheek and gestured toward the other side of the room. "I'm gonna go check on the other old folks."

Smiling, Rocco nodded. "I'll catch up in a few minutes."

Joe walked away happy as a lark. He had it all it seemed and come hell or high water he'd do everything in his power to keep it.

About the Author

An avid reader for years, one day Carol Lynne decided to write her own brand of erotic romance. Carol juggles between being a full-time mother and a full-time writer. These days, you can usually find Carol either cleaning jelly out of the carpet or nestled in her favourite chair writing steamy love scenes.

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