



THE  
LAST

*Cannoli*

TALI SPENCER

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## THE LAST CANNOLI

**By Tali Spencer**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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M/M Romance Group Publication

# THE LAST CANNOLI

By Tali Spencer

## Photo Description

In this pretty picture, a forest green ceramic cup and saucer sits upon a table of warm amber wood. The cup is filled almost to the brim with luscious, creamy hot chocolate and it has a gingerbread man inside, sunk chest deep and smiling. The effect is one of happiness—and possibly pleasure—at having found his perfect place.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*MC is from a marketing background. His partner and he worked together on many campaigns, and MC was happy to let his partner take the fame, preferring to stay out of the spotlight. After all, they knew it was a team effort, and that's all that counted... right until being unceremoniously ditched in favour of a glamorous job offer in another city.*

*MC decides he needs a change of job and a change of attitude. What could be more different than working in a bakery? He expects it to be difficult, and his former friends and colleagues enjoy teasing him about this abrupt shift. MC doesn't mind—it's a temporary thing while he finds his feet. What he doesn't expect is to find himself enjoying like in the cafe/bakery as much as he does! Decorating and baking really appeal to his creative side... and the bakery's owner/manager is so passionate about his work that it is not hard to admire his drive. MC has to remind himself that he is falling in love with the bakery—not his boss! But lines blur, Boss is a friendly, supportive guy who views the bakery staff as an extended family and MC is starting to realise that this might be the best decision he's ever made! It's not perfect—Boss is staunchly against corporate-speak and MC is itching to use his business know-how and advertising contacts to push the bakery to the next level. But will success go against what Boss and the bakery stand for?*

*Help them find a satisfying balance, please!*

*Contemporary, any level of sex okay, but I would like to see Boss and MC clash at first and become friends before they become lovers. The growth of the*

*relationship and the mutual support and understanding is important to me!*  
*Good luck!*

*Sincerely,*

*Gillian*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** culinary, humorous, Italian-American, frotting, family drama, bakery, cannoli, in the closet

**Word Count:** 42,651

# **THE LAST CANNOLI**

**By Tali Spencer**

## Chapter One

The sign over the door spelled “Dippolito’s Italian Bakery” in big green letters while garish neon writing in the fogged plate window shouted “Cannoli”. This place looked promising. Old brick gave the storefront character, as did the striped green, red, and white awning. Customers crowded inside. And there was a hand-lettered sign taped to the door that said “Help Wanted”. As good a place as any to test his luck.

Sean entered to a blast of warm air so thick with scents of bread, cinnamon, and anise it was like breathing inside a cake. Two women were busy serving customers behind a long line of curved glass cases, so Sean went to the rear of the store and approached the beefy guy in a white apron filling something brown with a pastry bag. The man looked up.

“Help you?”

“I’m here about the opening.” Sean realized he sounded awkward, like a kid asking for his first summer job. Looking into those penetrating, chocolate-brown eyes was short-circuiting his devil-may-care attitude. He pointed to the sign in the door. “It says ‘Help Wanted’.”

“You? You’re kidding me.”

Sean blinked. “No. I mean, I don’t think so.”

“Don’t take me wrong. You look like a man with bills to pay. Car. Apartment. Maybe a girl?” With a shrug, the baker went back to filling what looked like tubes of cookie dough. “Job pays peanuts and no bennies. I’m looking for part-time help in the back. Maybe a little cake decorating. You decorate?”

“My grandma taught me how to make flowers on cakes. Sweet peas. I also can make animal faces. Bunnies and bears. I write a mean Happy Birthday.” Sean put on what he hoped was a winning smile. Jill had been the gifted partner when it came to persuading reluctant clients. He did best behind the scenes. “Really, I’m a quick learner and the hardest worker you’ll ever meet.”

One of the women had rung up her customer and walked over. Her name tag said “Donna Mae”. “Who’s this, Joe? He buying some cannols?”

“Wants a job.”

“For crying out tears, give the man an application!” Donna Mae swept around to an area at the rear with a desk cluttered with paperwork beneath an



antique wall phone. She picked up a sheet of paper and thrust it over the top of a case of refrigerated pastries. "Here, fill this out."

"Thanks."

With a long look of aggravation, Joe lifted one of the hollow cookie tubes. For some reason, that simple gesture was riveting. Commanding. The brown cannoli shell filled the man's palm perfectly and the way his fingers curled around it... Sean blushed. Was he really imagining Joe's fingers curled around a *cock*? He came back to his senses when Joe's deep voice intruded on that image.

"Hey, dreamer. I just asked if you want me to fill one special just for you."

Sean nodded dumbly, hoping his thoughts hadn't found their way to his face. He watched Joe expertly insert the pastry bag nozzle into first one open end of the cannoli, then the other until creamy chocolate-flecked filling swelled deliciously from the finished product. When Joe handed it to him, he took it and used extra care to make sure their hands didn't touch.

"There you go. Eat it while you fill out the application." Joe turned back to making more cannoli.

"You need a pen?" Donna Mae asked helpfully. "Here, use this one." She handed him a cheap pen with a bank name on it and pointed toward the windows where two tiny tables sat with a few old chairs.

Sean opened his winter jacket and made his way to the table. The wooden café chair's loosened joints creaked under his weight as he sat.

While he filled out the grainy, copied form, he nibbled on the cannoli. It was good. No, make that great! It was amazing. Rich filling, a crispy light-as-air shell. So crunchy and sweet with every bite. He stuck his tongue down the tube at one point to lick out the filling. The neon sign made sense now. The bakery probably had a reputation for its signature dessert. Dippolito's could make a killing if they did more advertising, maybe print up a few flyers. He lived within a half mile of this place and had never seen any ads or promotion.

He turned his mind back to the application. Name, address, telephone... the usual. He hesitated at what to put down for work experience. Partner at Montgomery Whelan? The small marketing firm had won awards and made a name for itself in the region, though it was unlikely anyone in a business so small it hired people by way of a sign on its door would have heard of it. "Employee" sounded less over-qualified than partner, so he put that down

instead, along with the Starbucks job from college and a summer working at Ray's Automotive while living with his parents. Education. Did an MBA from Wharton in Marketing Management qualify him to decorate Italian pastries?

He decided not to lie by omission and simply put down the facts. They could see the rest: male, average height and weight, reddish hair kind of wild from the windy day, boyish face and blue eyes, pushing thirty. Young enough to still find a career. Except he wasn't looking for a career. He'd had a career and look how that had worked out.

The store was empty of customers and Joe was nowhere to be seen when he returned to the counter, handing the application back to Donna Mae. The other lady was on the phone, taking an order.

"You a morning person?" Donna Mae was all business as she scanned his application. Purple reading glasses perched on her long pointed nose. "You'd need to be here by four a.m. and earlier for holidays. And bring your muscles. Trays get heavy, so do the racks. We clean the front, but you would do the grunt cleaning in back, including the ovens."

Hard work. That was exactly what he wanted. Something he could put his back into instead of his mind. "Sounds good! Really, I'm ready, able, and willing to do anything."

"Can you work a cash register? In case you're asked to help up front?"

"I worked my way through school ringing up coffee at Starbucks."

Donna Mae folded his application and tucked it into the deep pocket of her apron. "Boss wants to know when you can start."

"That's it? You're not looking at more applicants?" He was already headed for the door.

"He needs the help and it says here you stayed at one job for six years. That's what we like to see. Oh, and Delphine thinks you'd look good in a hair net."

The other woman had finished her phone order and shot him a grin over her shoulder. She was gray haired and cute, and looked like a middle-aged Audrey Hepburn. She seemed friendly. For the first time since Jill had dropped the bomb that they were professionally through and she was moving on without him, Sean actually wanted to work with other people. The last three months had left him craving more human contact than just going to the store and spending his nights with box sets of *Six Feet Under* and *Nip/Tuck*. He was bored—and he

couldn't imagine a greater threat to his well-being. If there was one thing a creative person needed in this world, it was an outlet.

Dippolito's Bakery, watch out.

\*\*\*\*

"A bakery?" It was amazing how Sean's mother's voice managed to convey so much disdain in two words. It was a gift.

"An Italian bakery."

"That doesn't make any sense. You're Irish. And you stopped eating pastry when you started that running thing you do. Are you still running?"

"Yes, Mom. This is a job, a way to get out of the house, make a little cash. I'll be decorating cakes."

Silence.

"Mom?"

"Are you doing this because you're gay?"

"You know, not every decision I make is based on my sexuality."

"Well, most men I know stay in careers they went to school for and like getting paychecks." No one had ever accused Mary Whelan of being anything but practical. The high point of her life had been when her daughter, the lawyer, had married a doctor. Sean, on the other hand...

"I'm happy. Happy enough." Nothing he could say would make a part-time bakery paycheck sound good.

"Are you sure? Sean, you can come home. Start over. Charles can get you a job at the hospital. You don't have to stay out there."

"You know I hate winter, Mom, and Wisconsin's are the worst. Really, I'm doing fine here. It snows just enough to be seasonal." He didn't want to hurt her feelings by telling her he preferred living in the Philadelphia area. It was easier to be gay here than in Oshkosh. Even if he was sometimes lonely, he blended in. He had theaters, shopping, restaurants, and public transportation all within blocks of his house.

He didn't tell her the even bigger reason he wanted to stay in the area was it would feel like failure to go home.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Two

Donna Mae had told him to show up for his first day at three a.m. and to use the door in the back of the shop. She'd left out the important parts like how dark it would be because there were no nearby street lights. The alley behind State Street looked like the perfect place for a mugging. Though he knew Dippolito's was sandwiched between an attorney's office and a rundown bookstore, from the back he couldn't tell which building was which. There were clues, though. Squaring his shoulders, Sean walked across a gravel loading bay and approached the one door with a light. He gave the steel surface a sharp couple of raps.

When Joe opened the door and stood there, his broad frame backlit like a character in a video game, Sean grinned. "Sean Whelan, reporting for duty."

"What kind of name is that? Get in here before some thug mistakes you for a leprechaun."

The back of the bakery was larger than he expected. Sean followed Joe past the open door of what looked like an office to a large area where a big table holding bins of flour and sugar and labeled bags of spices awaited. Two huge ovens hogged the brick wall at one end of the kitchen. To the right was a long deep counter with storage shelves and an open entry to what he assumed was the bakery. Rows of pies lined the counter. Joe reached up and pulled something white off one of the shelves.

"Here's your apron. It gets dirty, you put on another. And grab a hair net, too." Joe showed him the box.

"Fear not." Sean briskly looped the apron over his neck and did his best to tie it behind him. "I'll keep up appearances."

"Appearances?" Joe apparently didn't like that word. "Did you know this shop's so clean inspectors bring their families over so they can eat off our floors? That Chef Ramsey guy on TV stopped by here once for a couple cannoli and thought he'd gone to heaven."

"Really?" Sean had caught a few episodes of *Kitchen Nightmares* on TV.

"Yeah. Donna Mae tried to jump his bones in the break room, would you believe it? Made the top ten list that year." Joe pointed to the area that looked like a kitchen. "Ready to start?"

"You bet." Sean looked around, trying to spy cakes to be decorated. He'd bought icing yesterday and spent hours last night with a box of plastic bags, filling them as pastry bags and practicing his sweet peas and bunnies.

"We clean before going home. Right now you fire up the ovens so I can work on baking bread and rolls." Joe must have noticed his look of dismay. He heaved a sigh. "I gotta show you how, don't I? Come 'ere."

Joe hunkered down in front of one of the ovens and opened a smaller door underneath. He motioned Sean to join him. Sean crouched and froze as their thighs touched. How was he supposed to concentrate?

"See here? That's the pilot. And see this?" Joe held up his right hand. "Yeah, it's a dollar store lighter thing. You turn this valve, just a quarter turn... click this thing... light the gas. See the blue?" A blue flame burst to orange within the oven's bowels. "Turn this thing here to that mark. Do that for the other one, got it?"

Sean got it. He'd also gotten a jolt of solid masculine thigh. One thing for sure, Joe wasn't beefy, no way. He was working class hard as a rock. Up close, some of the man's intensity felt almost intimate, a seductive sense of being in his element. His voice vibrated with competence. He also smelled faintly of olive oil and garlic, like sitting down with friends to eat pizza. Sean gripped the lighter Joe had pressed into his hand and shook it to clear inappropriate thoughts from his head before he could finally manage to light the other oven's pilot.

"Do they take long to heat up?" he asked.

"No. They hold heat all night. You have a thing for fire?"

"Me? Hell no. I'm scared of it." Time to trot out another winning smile. "What now?"

"See those big buckets beside the oven over there? Bring one here."

And that's how Sean learned dough could be stored in fifty-pound plastic containers, by nearly throwing out his back. Every possible ingredient was oversized and heavy as hell. Dippolito's apparently bought flour by the ton. The walk-in refrigerator held vats of butter, milk and huge tubs of ricotta cheese. None of what he was doing so far was even remotely creative. But there were short breaks and he used them to study Joe.

He'd never seen a man so completely focused on his work. Joe was like some kind of bread-making witch doctor. He manhandled dough efficiently in

giant bowls, resorting occasionally to ancient mixers. He poked dough he'd mixed the night before with his fingers. He punched it down. In some cases, he kneaded the balls before putting them aside to rest. It was a kind of ballet. While Sean washed bowls and wiped down table space, Joe formed the dough into logs, pulled them, patted them, pinched and slapped until ready for the oven. What would it be like, Sean wondered, to be worked over by hands like that?

By four thirty, the first trays of breads and rolls were ready. Dozens of loaves had been put in to bake when there was a loud banging on the door. It swung open with a blast of frigid air.

"Jesus! Winter's biting ass this morning. Want me to tell you how cold it is?" A stocky man in jeans and wearing boots stomped into the bakery. "Hey! You finally got you some help." He eyed Sean up and down. "Where the fuck did you come from? Look like you got lost on your way to some reality show."

"I'm learning the business. I'm Sean."

"Is that so? Name's Fred. Give me a hand and leave the maestro here to babysit his buns."

Sean soon understood why Fred wanted help. He'd backed a truck up to the door and it took the two of them a minute or so to slide out a heavy duty ramp so Fred could roll out two dozen rattling cupboards, each filled top to bottom with tray upon tray of doughnuts, cookies, pastries and cakes.

"There you go. See you again in two." Fred walked over to where Joe was engrossed in shaping smaller balls of dough into rolls. "He know how to put 'em out?"

"Donna Mae will be here in an hour. I thought she could show him."

"Fuck that. Come here, kid, let me show you where things go."

Fred flipped on a couple overhead lights in the front of the store. By the way he worked without error, sliding open refrigerated cases, telling Sean which trays to pull and carry up front and on which racks to put them, he clearly knew his way around the bakery. Before long, trays of delicate cookies, hearty donuts, jewel-like tarts, and lavish cupcakes filled the glass cases. Soon, they were setting pies and cakes along the display shelves.

"So most of this stuff isn't even made here?" Sean moved a lemon pie from one end of the display shelf and put it beside a strawberry torte that presented a more delectable contrast.

"You mean here in the back? In those two bread ovens? Nah. We have a bigger kitchen over on Brooke Street. It's a family business, but hey, you ever try to bake ten dozen *sfogliatelle*, or *pignoli* and maybe twenty rum cakes at the same time in Mama's kitchen? Don't work too well, let me tell you. But the ovens here are great for bread, you know? So we got Joey doing the rolls and the cannoli and keeping shop, and Angie cracking the whip over on Brooke making sweets. Which leaves me to be the guy driving all around Philly making sure the restaurants get their just desserts." Fred rolled a glance his way and must have seen the dawning look on his face. "Didn't know, did ya? Joey and me, we're brothers."

Now that he took a closer look, Sean could see it. Fred had the same dark hair and same warm brown eyes. He also had a few more pounds and laugh lines, and a slightly larger nose, but there was no denying Joe and Fred sprang from the same Mediterranean roots. Fred popped him with an elbow.

"The Dippolito brothers. The Terrors of Cardinal O'Hara. Angie's the baby. And Mama still lives in the apartment upstairs from here." He jabbed a finger toward the ceiling. "I'm popping up for some coffee and biscotti now that I've showed you how to set up the cases and make Donna Mae a happy woman. Because believe me, you don't never want to make a woman unhappy."

"And Freddie should know, because he's a married man." Joe laughed as he shoved the big plastic bin he was carrying beneath the counter where he'd been making cannoli the day before.

Sean fought a grin and thought Joe should definitely laugh more. He'd been right about a family bakery being a good place for him to be with people. Whether or not he'd be able to keep his appetite under control was another question. The delicious aroma of bread baking in the ovens now wafted from the back, mingling with rich anise notes from the biscuit things filling the tray nearest him. Biscotti. Jill used to bring them to the office sometimes, back in the days before she'd decided croissants denoted class.

"You know, married life isn't bad." Fred grabbed a white paper bag from a compartment under the bread shelves and picked out three of the biscotti. "I keep her happy, she keeps me happy. It's a very civilized arrangement. You should try it sometime. Oh wait—" he slapped his brother on the arm—"I forgot, you don't qualify. Besides, women prefer men who actually have a life." He paused, then said, "I'm headed up. Anything you want me to tell Mom?"

"Nope."

Fred shrugged and left. Sean, meanwhile, mulled the news that Joe was unmarried. There were only a thousand reasons a man who looked to be about thirty wasn't married. Being gay wasn't even a reason anymore, though Sean wondered now after Fred's remark about Joe not qualifying. Pennsylvania law didn't allow gay marriage. He soon heard boots clomping up the stairs.

"Your mother lives upstairs?" Living above the family bakery sounded incredibly quaint. Sean couldn't imagine his mother living anywhere but in a suburban rancher. The one he'd grown up in, in fact.

Joe chuckled and wiped his hands on the clean white towel he kept perpetually in the ties of his apron. "Yeah. Dad brought her there as a young bride and they never moved out. My grandparents moved out instead after I was born, said Mom and Dad could stay because the rent was free. Young family and that. It was a good deal."

"I'll say." The mortgage on the house he'd bought just two years ago was his greatest expense.

"It's a nice place, bigger than it looks from the street. Four bedrooms, great big kitchen. The grandparents expanded over the back of the store in the '50s."

"Do you go up and have breakfast with her, too?"

"Nah, that's Freddie's thing. I see her plenty. She'll come down later and park herself in the office. Got a bad knee but still likes to see to it the orders get filled."

Joe clicked down the lights again as they returned to the back. The ovens radiated heat, but the place was cavernous, and Sean felt comfortable in long sleeves. Joe had rolled his up to reveal forearms corded with muscle and biceps a body builder might envy, all covered by olive skin and visible dark hair. When he opened the oven doors, he looked gilded.

"Heads up. They're done."

Using long-handled bread paddles, Sean helped Joe transfer the hot loaves to cooling racks. The damn things weren't heavy, but the work was hot. In the time it took Sean to unlade his paddle, Joe somehow shoveled two dozen new loaves into the hot brick oven. Between the two ovens, they were filling up the three-tiered rack pretty good.

Heaving a sigh, Sean wanted nothing more than to slump into a nice cozy chair. Since college he'd never done any work more manually taxing than reloading the copy machine. He'd even hired a lawn service to mow his grass.



“You do this every day?”

“For twenty years.” Joe took a deep drink from his water bottle. “I started in middle school. As far as Dad was concerned, labor laws were for wimps. Haven’t taken a day off in years.”

“I guess I should be happy I’m getting minimum wage.”

“You’re getting what I can afford. If you don’t like it, you know where to find the door and, if I were you, that’s what I’d do.” He cocked his head with a look so completely mystified Sean knew he’d hear more. “I looked over your app. You got a freaking degree from Wharton!” The way Joe’s Philly accent drew out the first vowel was so adorable Sean bit back a smile. “Wharton! You know where my sister went? She went to Penn State down the road. And you worked for some fancy-ass marketing outfit—”

“Montgomery Whelan.”

“Yeah, well you’re the fucking Whelan. So tell me again: why the hell you here?”

Sean tightened his jaw. He wasn’t going to tell his tired sob story to his overworked boss. “I was kind of looking forward to decorating.”

“Decorating?”

“You told me that was part of the job. Putting flowers on cakes and cupcakes and things.”

“You’re freaking unbelievable.” Joe snapped a glance at the big clock hanging on one wall and reached for a paddle. It was time to take some more loaves out of the oven. Sean stepped up and grabbed a second one. He was being paid to help, wasn’t he?

“So, tell me—” Sean took the initiative once they’d filled the top tier of the racks—“why did you hire me?”

Joe’s deep brown eyes locked onto his and a little smile lifted his lips. “I liked the way your mouth worked that cannoli.”

\*\*\*\*\*

When the bakery opened its doors, the place came to life. Customers who’d been waiting outside filed in and voices rose in greeting. Commuters catching the trolley that stopped on the corner, attorneys and office workers from the courthouse two blocks away, utility workers, people from the neighborhood—everyone seemed to know each other and the movement never stopped. Bread

flew off the shelves. Before Sean knew it, he was putting boxes of pastry together like a pro and sheathing loaves of bread in long wax bags.

Joe rocked the front of the store, though. After the bread was baked and shelved he took over the cannoli station, where customers gravitated to him. He struck up short conversations with judges and contractors, winked at flirty Main Line matrons, and endured the determined assaults of mothers and grandmothers armed with pictures of eligible sisters or daughters. Sean noticed he always reacted the same, a pleasant laugh and shake of the head. For such a serious guy, Joe had a nice smile. He had full, expressive lips and one of his front teeth ever so slightly overlapped the other. As imperfections went, it was pretty damn cute.

At one point, Joe sent Sean to the refrigerator to fetch a tub of cannoli cream they'd mixed fresh that morning. The stainless steel bowl weighed a ton, and Sean plunked it gratefully onto the counter. He pulled off the plastic, sure he would have python arms just like Joe's after a few more weeks of this. He noticed Joe reach into a pants pocket and pull out a flask of black glass, from which he added a splash of something dark and spicy to the bowl.

"What's that?"

"Secret ingredient."

"That's cool." A suggestion of alchemy was always fun. "What is it?"

"Can't tell you." Joe stirred the cream with smooth strokes until the darkish streaks vanished. "If I did, it wouldn't be secret."

Whatever it was and whatever mysterious quality it bestowed, Dippolito customers loved their cannoli. Whenever Joe had to go to the back, Donna Mae or Delphine took over cannoli-making duties. Sean served a few customers once he'd demonstrated his cash register skills, though he struggled when it came to ringing up some of the more ethnic pastries. He'd grown up eating apple pie and hot cross buns, not *sfogliatelle* and *pignoli*.

"That's a *zeppole*." The new voice critiqued Sean's latest attempt. He looked over his shoulder at a short older woman with dark brown hair, a full figure and tag that read "Mama Jo". She beamed at the laughing customer. "He's new, but I'll have him speaking like a *paesan* in two weeks." To Sean she said, "When you're done come in the back. I need your picture."

There were still plenty of customers, but Josephine Dippolito took Sean by the elbow and hauled him into the back office, where she stood him against a

wall and snapped his picture with her phone. Last time Sean had visited his Mom, he'd had to take his own picture with her phone and assign it to his phone number to remind her what he looked like. Mama Jo was practically a pro. Barely a minute later, she plucked a copy of his image out of a little photo printer, labeled it "Sean", and pinned it to a board on the facing wall that said "Dippolito Bakery Family". A snapshot of Josephine and a handsome man named Nick, probably her late husband, was at the top, younger and smiling. A robust mustachioed man named Dom shared top billing. Immediately under them were pictures of Joe, Fred, and a dark haired young woman Sean figured must be Angie. A lot more pictures were arrayed under them. Dippolito's Bakery employed about twenty people, most named Dippolito or Franzone. Sean was in Joe's group. His face smiled out just below Delphine's and beside those of the two high school girls who came by to help in the afternoons and on weekends.

"That's a really big family," Sean teased.

Josephine laughed and returned to her desk. "And now you're part of it. You get a paycheck end of the week. You can pick it up in the office any time after I get here on Friday morning. My son showed you the timecard system?"

"He sure did, Mrs. Dippolito."

"Call me Mama Jo. You're doing a good job out there. Do me a favor? Go back and tell my son I need two dozen small hoagie rolls tomorrow morning for Father Phil."

Sean lucked out when he found Joe relaxing and talking to Donna Mae between customers. The rush hour of morning traffic had eased up a bit. Both tables near the window were occupied by people sipping bottled water as they ate their pastries.

"Um, Joe?" He gained the man's attention. "Your mother says she needs two dozen small hoagie rolls. For Father Phil."

Joe's jaw clenched. "Here's what you do. You take whatever you can from the day olds. You know which are the small hoagie rolls, right? Well, you take the day olds first. Count 'em. And then before you go home, you make up the difference from the ones we made this morning. Got it?"

Sean nodded. Donna Mae had wandered off to take care of an influx of customers, but he didn't need her insight to interpret that Joe's mood had turned sour. His best move was to do exactly as he'd been told. Grabbing a bag, he went to the day old case and took all the small hoagie rolls. Seventeen. He used

a marker and a post-it to slap “Father Phil” on the bag and took it to the back where he put it on a shelf used for orders. He returned to the front and dove back into serving customers.

It took Sean a few more days to notice that Mama Jo never called Joe by name or talked directly to him, or he to her. Mama Jo would find whoever was free and say to them, “Tell my son he needs to make four extra Italian breads for tomorrow.” And Joe in turn would tell someone, “Tell my mother I won’t be home tonight for dinner.” And that was the way they passed messages to each other. Sean had never seen anything like it.

One day in the break room when neither Dippolito was around, Donna Mae explained it. “Get used to it. Something happened between them, don’t ask me what, and neither will apologize. They haven’t talked to each other for more than a year.”

“A year? That’s ridiculous!” No matter how furious Sean got at his parents, which was often, they still talked. Awkwardly maybe, or snippy, or hurt. But silence was unthinkable.

“You’re not Italian. I am. I know how this works. They might go this way to the grave.”

Delphine breezed in to pick up a new pack of hand wipes, which were stored in that room and not the main store room. “Did you tell him they live together?” She rushed right back out.

Sean blinked at Donna Mae. “They do?”

“Oh yeah. The boss never moved out, happens all the time with Italian sons. He lives upstairs. She does his laundry and cooks him dinner. Mother and son, they never stop being that. They love each other.”

But they didn’t talk to each other. The more Sean knew about Joe, the less he understood.

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## Chapter Three

The next Saturday, Sean picked up his paycheck when he left at noon. Two hundred bucks and change. The plus side of his part-time hours was he had spent most of the last week of afternoons prepping for his rotisserie baseball draft that night. He got to Waverly's pub in Drexel Hill early enough to find a parking spot around the corner and staked out a booth. By the time Dan trudged in hauling a ten-ton briefcase worth of research, he'd spread his own materials across half the tabletop and was nursing a root beer.

"I hate that fucking hospital." Dan shoved the briefcase along the bench and wedged his large body into the booth. "I signed off on a shit ton of flyers about our valet parking and you know what operations did today? Raised the parking rates! Now I'll be getting calls from irate oldsters who think they should only have to pay what's on the snappy piece of paper. Because what I put on the paper was right on Monday, but it was dead wrong on Thursday when we mailed the damn things."

"It's nice to see you, too, Dan." Sean handed his friend a menu.

"Don't fuck with me. I've had it up to here with wise guys." He cut his hand across the top of his head, the hairline of which had retreated a bit more since they'd seen each other last.

Sean had met Dan Wisniewski when they were classmates at Wharton. They'd realized within minutes that they were both from Wisconsin, both lapsed Catholics, and could talk in Dairy State code. Recognizing fate, they'd joined forces, found two female students—Jill and Jenn—who wanted to move out of their tiny apartment, and set up house in a rundown row home two blocks from the university. At some point Dan found out Sean was gay and said, "Well, fuck me," quickly followed by "Don't you dare." After graduation he'd married Jenn and gotten a job making big bucks doing marketing for the region's largest cancer hospital.

Dan ordered a draft beer before reaching into his bag and pulling out a stack of player ranking lists. "So how *are* you doing? I couldn't believe it when I heard Jill took that job in New York and didn't take you with her. I always knew she was a bitch. Jenn agrees. You were the brains of that outfit."

"I was the creative partner. She was the face, the one who could work clients and sell ideas. Personality plus. I'm all ideas but no flash." Sean began

laying his player rankings out with Dan's. "I guess when she was wooed by a firm as talented as Anvil, she decided she didn't need me." Actually, she'd told him that to his face.

"For God's sake, tell me you made her buy you out before she dissolved the firm."

He nodded. Dan did, too.

"Good. Good riddance and now you can move on. A guy with your talent should be able to land on his feet. Sent out resumes?"

"No." Sean studied his lists. Pitchers. Where was his list of value relievers?

"Why the hell not? The job market's not that tight. Want me to put a word in for you at the hospital?"

"Don't. You're this close to sounding like my mother. She's threatening to get Charles to give me a job at the hospital where he's Chief of Staff back in Wisconsin." Dan snickered. Sean sighed. "I don't think I'm cut out for corporate politics. I'm thinking of doing something else. I took a job at Dippolito's Bakery."

"A *bakery*?"

"Now you do sound like my mother."

"Hey, we're both from Oshkosh." He scrutinized a list and then threw it on a pile. "What are you doing at this bakery? Marketing cupcakes? Easter's coming on."

"Actually, day after tomorrow's St. Patrick's Day. Keeping busy mostly. I've only been working for a few days, but... I like it. The boss is a nice enough guy and he's fair. Donna Mae and Del, the ladies up front, have adopted me. And I've found I like decorating cakes."

"Seriously? It's a stage, right? Something you gay guys go through?"

Sean shot him a glare. "No. That would be a penchant for musical theater, like breaking out in song while bidding on sizzling prospect Rosario Puente's hot knuckleball pitching ass. Which I plan to do."

"Hell no," Dan groaned. "You know I hate those damn floaters."

To Sean's relief, a few more of the guys came through the door. After hollering greetings, they set up at another booth. About an hour remained before they would move to the big meeting room to begin the draft. Everyone

would be well-prepared and the competition for players would be fierce. He and Dan co-owned the always dangerous but never successful Drexel Hill Bingles, and they'd both vowed that this would be their year.

Go Bingles.

For the next fifty minutes, he and Dan talked about which players they would bid high on and which they thought could be gotten for lesser bids. At the end of their brainstorming session, the plan had come together, they'd put their research in order, and they both felt pretty good. The fantasy baseball league was the one thing they still did together, year after year.

Dan studied him, serious hazel eyes sharp in his round face. "This bakery thing... you'll be underutilized. You know that, right? You put all that time and money into getting an MBA from Wharton and—I'm just going to say it—you're not a pastry chef. You're a hell of a creative marketing guy who helped Jill Montgomery build an award-winning firm. Someone will want you."

"But that's what I'm afraid of. I'm afraid someone will hire me and I'll be trapped on the same hamster wheel I was before, just running with different hamsters—ones with sharper teeth. I'll be paid to come up with ideas so other people can look good and take all the credit. I thought it would be different with Jill, because we were friends and she told me how brilliant we would be as a team. And we were. We were top of the game until the day I didn't quite make the cut—"

"Hell, Sean."

"What she did *happened* because I let it. I was happy to let her take all the credit. I hate touting myself. I want my work to do the talking for me."

"What work? Bunny cakes? Cannoli?"

"I don't make the cannoli. Joe makes the cannoli. It's a secret family recipe." Sean grinned when Dan rolled his eyes. "Hey, bakeries are serious business!"

"I guess it's as good a place as any to park your ass for a while until you get your head screwed on straight. If there's anything I can do, you let me know."

"There's one thing."

"Yeah?"

Sean started picking up their many lists. At other tables around the pub other fantasy owners were doing the same. He wanted him and Dan to get good

seats near the draft board. "Let's try to get through this draft quickly, because I don't want to be here all night. I have to show up at work at four in the morning."

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Sean showed up for work the next morning with his ass dragging a half block behind him. That any part of him made the trip bordered on miraculous. The draft had run late—it always did, because half the owners got too drunk to give a crap about time—and he hadn't gotten to bed until after midnight. Operating on three hours sleep wasn't something he did well. He crossed his fingers and hoped Joe was coming off one of his own long nights. It didn't happen often, but there were mornings Joe had clearly not gotten much sleep and showed up with heavy, sleep-deprived eyes. He was quiet those days.

This looked like one of them. Joe was muttering as he punched down a bowl of dough. He already had the ovens fired up and heating.

"Hi," Sean said. He hung up his coat and went for an apron.

"Hey you." Joe didn't bother to look up, though he did stop the muttering.

"I had my rotisserie baseball draft last night." Sean figured that was as good a conversation starter as anything else he might try.

"Hope you didn't load up on Phillies. The Phils are going to suck this year."

Sean thought he saw Joe punch the dough extra hard. "No," he said, "just Ben Revere in the outfield. But we got some good pitching. I held out. We picked up Rosario Puente for a buck."

"A knuckleballer? Never pegged you for a guy who lives dangerously." Joe looked up, a question in his shadowed eyes. "Who's the 'we' in your baseball?"

"Dan Wisniewski. He's a friend from college. We were the only two cheeseheads in our class, so we banded together to survive football season."

Joe cracked a smile. "Cheeseheads? You're from Packer land? Tell me the truth: is the frozen tundra for real?"

He was kidding, right? "There's no tundra in Wisconsin. Some sportscaster made that up one day and it stuck."

"But it does get pretty frozen?"

"Know what we Wisconsinites call our lakes in winter? Parking lots."



This time Joe let out a laugh. “Don’t need to help me today. As you can see, I got a head start. Why don’t you see what you can do with the day old?”

Sean glanced at the rolling cupboard holding six trays of bakery that hadn’t sold the day before. It would be put out in a case off to one side, against the wall, marked down as half price. Some customers came in especially for it, but mostly the stuff went unnoticed. He could do something about that. Joe had just handed him an opportunity.

“Thanks!” He rolled the case out and flipped on the one bank of lights he’d need. A quick hunt turned up the supplies to do what he wanted. Scissors, a bakery box he could cut for a nice big sign. He found some red and green markers languishing in a drawer and was thrilled they still worked. He arranged the bagged breads and rolls on one side and the pastries and cakes on the other, cutting one cake into slices and putting two slices out on paper plates with little plastic forks from the break room. His final act was to tape his sign low on the outside glass: “Just as Good—Half the Price!” The lettering was sharp, professional. He’d always been artistic.

Donna Mae walked in just as he finished. “Why’d you cut up the cake like that?” She looked in the mirror behind the bread rack as she repinned her little white cap atop her helmet of impeccably sprayed hair.

“Boss told me to do something with the day olds. I thought maybe someone would want to buy just a slice.”

“They might want to buy a whole cake and then what do we do? How much we supposed to charge for slices?” She frowned, but made no further protest. Day old bakery was hardly her top priority. “Can you fill in up front until Del gets here?”

“I think so. Let me ask.” He liked being in front and serving customers far more than he did working in the back. For one thing, people sometimes wanted writing on their cakes. Just the other day, a woman had asked Donna Mae to let him do the honors because, as she put it, her mother had said his ‘Happy Birthday’ was exuberant.

That was him. Exuberant.

“Hey Joe—”

“I heard Donna Mae. Answer’s no. You want to decorate? See those cupcakes over there—I want you to put some shamrocks on them.”

Shamrocks? St. Patrick's Day, of course. Green icing, little clover leaves. He could do this. Joe must be warming up to him. By now he knew where to find everything. He used his cell phone to look up how to do it on the internet, whipped up a bag of green icing and practiced making shamrocks on a piece of wax paper before he went to town on the two trays of cupcakes. Joe came over to look when he had just six left.

"Those are good." They were. Sean had always been a quick study. His shamrock leaves looked like little hearts and had cute little stems. "Donna Mae said you were doing good with writing the cakes."

"I like this sort of thing. I think I have a gift."

"You have something all right."

Sean shot a surprised look at his boss. Joe didn't hand praise out often, but he wasn't quite sure what to make of the last part. Joe laughed and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Hey, I'm agreeing with you. Put those up front and help Donna Mae."

Sean did, but for the rest of the morning it seemed he could feel the warm imprint of Joe's hand on his shoulder.

When he got off that afternoon, he stopped off at Trader Joe's and bought a few items, including something special. The next morning, he poured his surprise into a side bowl at the cannoli station and waited for Joe's response. As the only genuine Irish person working that day, he'd even put a stick-on embroidered shamrock on his name tag. He had just finished giving a regular, Mrs. Rossi, her order when Joe grabbed him by the arm and steered him to the back. Joe pointed at the offending bowl.

"What the hell is this?"

"Green chocolate chips. For the St. Patrick's Day cannolis."

"First thing, cannoli is plural, like deer. And second, St. Patrick never put his mouth on a cannoli. He was eating potatoes in Ireland."

"He had way more chance of eating cannoli than potatoes." Sean was feeling his Irish and sticking to his guns this time. "Potatoes come from Peru."

Joe restrained a sigh and glanced at the shop. It wasn't so busy they risked being overheard. "Listen, I may never have gone to Wharton, but I know when potatoes reached the Old World. I'm making a point, and my point is cannoli

aren't Irish. They're Italian. I'll be more specific: they're Sicilian, and so am I on my mother's side. So I think I know more about cannoli than you do. And I say we don't put anything in the cannoli that doesn't *belong* in a cannoli. That means nothing Irish."

"But it's just chocolate. You put chocolate chips in all the time."

"Yeah. Chocolate chips that look like chocolate chips. You know, like the stuff Columbus discovered."

Had Columbus discovered chocolate? Whether that was true or not, Sean wasn't winning this argument, but he wasn't ready to go down without another salvo. "I think they'd look fun and still be true to the product. And I think customers would buy them."

"And you know what? This is my bakery, and I don't care what you think." Joe put the green chips underneath and brought up a bowl of brown chips to mix into the cannoli cream.

Stung, Sean headed to the back. He could take two breaks and he was taking one now. As he passed the back office, Mama Jo looked over from behind her desk. Catching his eye, she gestured him in and that he should close the door.

"I have the hearing of a bat," she said. She laid aside her reading glasses. "Sit down. I can always tell when a man needs to cool off."

Sean slumped into the chair. He'd enjoyed the job so much until now. What had he expected? He wasn't an executive anymore, certainly not here. He'd been crazy to think he could act like one. When he heard Mama Jo say his name, he looked up and hoped she couldn't see the film of tears lining his eyes.

"Sean, Joey's a proud man. This bakery, it's more than his living. It's his art. He has high standards, he's very picky. He's picky about ingredients: only the best, no preservatives or anything that might compromise the integrity of our products. Homemade breads and pastries and cookies, nothing like what you can get at the local Giant. Quality—that's what we sell."

He nodded. "I understand."

"Do you? Because I want you to understand. I think you could be good here." When he looked up again, she smiled. "I watch things. You work well with Joey. He likes you. He told Freddie he was glad he hired you, and that you're always cheerful in the morning and he needs that. He likes what you did with the day olds—the sign, cutting slices of the cakes—because now we sell

almost all of it. And your shamrocks were so pretty a judge at the courthouse bought a dozen cupcakes because he said they brought out the Irish in him.”

“Mrs. D—”

“Mama Jo.”

Sean smiled in spite of the sting he was still feeling. “Mama Jo, I like working here. I’m not going to quit. It would take more than a few cutting words. And I like Joe, too.” Maybe he even liked him too much. He could think of no other reason for hurting like this.

“I’m glad to hear that.” She wore a big smile too. “Now go out there and tell my son I’m heading out tonight with Mr. Renard to some jazz thing at the Desert Rose—but I’ll leave him some lasagna in the oven and a green bean salad in the fridge.”

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Things were rough the rest of that day, with Joe being silent for all that his glances weren’t angry, just filled with frustration and confusion. For his part, Sean walked on eggshells. He didn’t know how to take Joe Dippolito. The man was all smiles and easy to get along with one moment and closed off and touchy as hell the next. His employees loved him. His mother didn’t talk to him. He laughed readily with people he knew, remembered the names of everyone’s partners and children, where they worked... everything. But he himself was impossible to read. Sean didn’t doubt for a moment Joe was smart. He also knew Joe was sensitive about not having a college education. So why the hell had Joe hired him?

Sean left at three that day and walked the seven icy blocks from the bakery to his house on Jackson Street. Just blocks off the main thoroughfares, the residential street was narrow and quiet, lined with trees. The compact brick house sat back on a deep lot with mature trees, and it had been renovated recently. He’d thought it a great investment, located in a community of hip professionals within walking distance of work, shopping, and the commuter train into Philadelphia.

He’d barely gotten in the door when his phone signaled a text. He looked. Jill. She was in Philly for the night and wanted to meet for dinner. The Arbor.

Was she nuts? Probably. He texted back.

*U drunk?*

*Meet me.*

He didn't need this. Not Jill and not a night of feigned fun in the city. She'd insisted breaking up their partnership wasn't personal, but for him it had been. Sheer fucking pain. But he'd agreed they could keep in touch.

*No.*

No way was he driving into Philadelphia at rush hour. A place to park near Rittenhouse Square would cost him at least fifteen dollars and probably valet tips. Coming home late at night on the train didn't appeal to him either. Another text.

*You won't regret it!*

He wasn't that easy! But Jill clearly wanted something. He'd do it for the chance to see her grovel. The least she could do was make the dinner worth his while. Sean texted back:

*Send a car, you pay. Door to door. Dinner, too. Otherwise no thanks.*

To his great surprise, Jill said a car would pick him up at six. Great. She'd charge it to her expense account. What the hell. He'd wear a suit for the first time in months and get a really good meal out of it, and it would be something to think about other than the bakery and its confounding boss.

The car arrived promptly, and he was at least able to enjoy the ride into the city. Lights streaked outside the tinted windows to the tune of light jazz. When he entered the restaurant, there was Jill, as corporate sleek and perfect as an ice sculpture. A champagne silk dress hugged her body and diamond bracelets ringed her wrists. She looked beautiful, as always.

"Sean!" She hugged him lightly and he hoped to hell her lips hadn't left any lipstick on his cheek.

"I don't know why I agreed to see you again."

"Because you have the curiosity of a cat and never could turn down a great meal. And you can't wait to hear the latest industry gossip." Jill laughed and flashed something at the maître d' that caused him to usher them to a table without further delay.

"I really don't care about industry gossip." She was right, though, about his curiosity and how much he enjoyed a good meal. He liked the artsy décor and sophisticated ambience of this restaurant, something Jill would have remembered.

“What have you been up to?”

“This and that. I’m still evaluating my options.” He mentioned Dan and Jenn, and they exchanged news of other classmates for a while, catching up, stopping only when the waiter appeared for their order. After that, Jill told him about her hunt for an apartment in Manhattan. He wasn’t sure if she was insensitive or just oblivious.

When their food arrived, he paid more attention to the lobster bisque than Jill’s complaints about an unreasonable client. She’d moved past oblivious and was zeroing in on “heartless”. There had to be more to this than her needing a warm body to talk at.

“I have a new client—” she poked lightly at her beet salad—“with the most amazing product. It’s an app that gives an owner access to all of his fantasy teams, no matter the provider, through a single interface.”

Sean choked down the bisque threatening to come out his nose. At least now he knew why she was meeting him. Jill Montgomery knew nothing about fantasy sports. She *despised* sports of any ilk. If she knew the names of the home teams in whatever city she was visiting, she was doing well. “Hell, Jill,” he said once he’d cleared his throat.

“Don’t give me that look.”

“You mean the look that says you’re *crazy* if you think I’m going to brainstorm with you all night for a client in whom I have absolutely no interest?”

“We’re just talking.” Jill smiled at the waiter as he whisked away the appetizer plate.

“Keep talking. But I’m not playing ball.”

She narrowed her lovely violet eyes. “At least stop with the sports metaphors.”

“Sure. When you stop playing stall ball. Admit it. You don’t have ideas for this client.”

“I have ideas,” she sniped. “I just thought you would be interested, seeing as the product is one you might find useful.”

It did sound useful. Very useful. He only managed one fantasy team, the baseball one he shared with Dan, but a great many fantasy owners managed

several teams at a time and sometimes sports seasons overlapped. He might have been tempted to find out more about it if he didn't know Jill would take that as a declaration of consent to help her for the night. He sat back as the waiter placed their entrees before them.

"Shall I tell you what I've been doing?" Sean grinned as he sliced into his medium-rare filet. Being the cause of Jill's sour little expression was giving him more pleasure than any decent human being should feel. "I work at a bakery."

She looked down her elegant nose. "A client?"

"No, as an employee. I help bake bread. And I decorate cakes and pastries. My shamrocks got really high marks."

"Now you're just mocking me."

"Not at all. That's what I do now. And you know something, I like it. I like the people I work with. Do you?"

She laughed. "You just can't get over it, can you? You can't get over knowing Anvil wanted me and not you."

"You never told them about me." He shrugged. He'd learned from Aimee, Jill's assistant, the whole story of how Jill had gone behind his back and planned how to jump ship without him. She'd dumped Aimee, too. "And I've realized you did me a favor. Yeah, a favor. Because I liked it when we were small and our clients were small and local. As we got larger, I stopped liking our clients, Jill. But you would never turn them away, even when they were assholes. You just kept wanting bigger clients and more money, more exposure. Maybe you planned to use the company as a jumping board all along."

"Don't be ridiculous. You want the truth? Winning the Brandie marketing award opened my eyes. I saw what was possible. I guess you never noticed. Maybe you just didn't care. But I saw where I wanted to be." She looked like a college girl again, flushed with excitement. "I love the big time. I do. I love my Park Avenue apartment, no matter how much it's put me in debt. I love the parties and the kudos and the backstabbing. All of it. This is where I belong."

"So why are you eating dinner with me?"

"I met the client this morning at his office in King of Prussia. He listened to my spiel and wants better ideas. So naturally I thought of you."

"Naturally."

“We were good.” She stabbed a fork into her branzino. “And you still are. You’re good at what you do. I should have brought you with me.”

“I’m glad you didn’t.”

“Come on, Sean. Give me an hour of your time. Talk fantasy baseball with me.”

“I’m out of the business, Jill.”

“Bullshit. You just think you are.” Her smile deepened. “You have my word, Sean. If I hook the client with one of your ideas, I’ll give you ten percent. Finder’s fee.”

She looked a little desperate, but just a little. Jill Montgomery would always land on her feet. He couldn’t do anything more to make her squirm, and he still needed her to pick up the tab and pay the car to take him home. Besides, she had done him a favor, all things considered. He now knew for a fact where he *didn’t* want to be.

“Two hours,” he said. He’d never see a dime from this, but he didn’t even care. It just felt good to be doing something someone—even Jill—wanted.

Sean pulled out his cell phone for demonstration purposes and began to talk about draft kits, scouting reports, rotosports, and key words.

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## Chapter Four

He went in the next morning bleary-eyed but content. In a way, he'd finally gotten Jill and what had happened between them out of his system. Their dinner had been like a rebirth, burying Montgomery Whelan for good so he could finally move on. Oddly enough, he felt better about himself. Jill was still a selfish, hateful bitch and he pitied any man she lured into a partnership, of any kind, but she had a peculiar kind of predatory honesty and he respected that. He also realized that he never, ever wanted to be in business with someone like her again.

Walking into Dippolito's again felt like coming home. Joe had given him a key to the place the week before. He closed the door, hung up his coat, and grinned happily at inhaling the yeasty aroma of rising bread dough. The kitchen was empty but the marble table top held a paper plate with little green shamrocks around the edge. Sitting on the plate was a cannoli. Winking in the filling were little green chocolate chips.

A post-it rested beside the plate. *For Sean.*

"It's for you." Joe came out from the break room. He walked over to the table and pulled on a pair of nearly transparent poly gloves just as he did whenever he handled food.

"I see that."

"I lost my temper. It's a bad trait and one I'm not happy about. I say things and... anyway, I made up a batch of filling with your chips and handed some cannoli around to the family. You have to understand, I don't know what's in those chips, so I can't serve 'em to customers. But you know, family—" the look he gave Sean was hopeful of understanding—"they said the cannoli were fine, just a little funny taste to the green chips, but they looked real good. I made this one up for you this morning. If a cannolo's not fresh, it gets soggy."

He was trying so damn hard. Sean decided to accept the apology. "It's okay." He picked up the cannoli and licked up a nice portion of icing. After taking it into his mouth, he passed his tongue across his upper lip with satisfaction, deliberately coating it with white cream. A look at Joe's face told him he was getting the reaction he'd hoped for.

He'd wondered for weeks if Joe might be gay—and now he was damn near sure of it. The next act would either get him fired or nail the answer for certain.

Tipping back his head and opening his mouth wide, Sean put the cannoli, cookie tube and creamy filling both, in a good two inches. Oh yeah. Joe's mouth slackened slightly and he never looked away. At least, not until Sean bit down, cracking the cannoli and filling his mouth with sweet crunchy goodness.

"Whoever said fags don't show off?" Joe wasn't backing off.

"You calling me gay?" Sean asked as soon as he'd swallowed enough to speak. He'd taken a big risk just now.

"Yeah. And I'm gay too. Looks like you figured it out." Joe began punching down the dough.

"I wanted to know for sure."

"Why?"

"Because—" why had he wanted to know?—"I like knowing I'm not the only gay guy in the room. I'm not used to being the only one." That much was true. There'd been a gay illustrator at Montgomery Whelan, gay clients, and quite a few gay classmates in college.

Joe appeared to accept that. Sean exhaled in relief. It wasn't like he was interested in Joe, other than that the other man—the other *gay* man—was his boss. He wondered if Joe being gay was the reason he and his mother weren't talking.

The door opened and Fred brought in the daily delivery. "Hey Sean! Those cannoli with the green spots weren't bad. A little on the commercial side, but hey—we could call 'em seasonal. Gotta get better tasting chocolate, though. That stuff wasn't even real."

"It was just an idea." That really was all it had been. He'd only bought the one little bag of novelty chips.

"What you got, Freddie?" Joe shouted over the clatter of cupboards.

"Couple of cakes for display. Easter orders coming in!" Fred hauled out a tray with three egg shaped cakes. They were already decorated with flowers and bunnies and little eggs. Sean's disappointment must have showed, because Fred clapped him on the shoulder. "You'll get your shot at the cupcakes, shamrock boy." He slid a tray of two dozen dark chocolate iced egg-shaped cupcakes on the counter. "Go to town on 'em."

Fred rolled out the empty cupboards, and they heard him heading up the outside stairs for his daily breakfast with Mama Jo. Joe laughed when Sean looked his way. He waved a gloved hand.

"I got the bread. Have fun with the cupcakes."

Icing! Coloring! Pastry bags and tips! Sean had been hoping for this chance for weeks. He could do bunnies, flowers... anything he wanted. But what would a Dippolito's customer want? That was the question. He'd gotten lucky with the Irish judge and the shamrocks—or had he? A lot of Irish lived in this region and the holiday was almost universal. Easter would have a slightly different appeal, secular but also more religious. He would make some of the cupcakes light hearted and fun, with bunnies and carrots, and the others would be a little more formal, maybe a pretty lattice design with Easter flowers. He'd been practicing bunnies and flowers at home for two weeks.

When he was done, he wiped at an itch on his cheek and looked over his handiwork. They looked...

"Beautiful." Joe was standing behind his left shoulder.

"Thanks." Sean beamed.

"You've got a good hand with the bag. The crisscross thing is nice."

"I wanted to do something a little bit elegant, you know, delicate and pretty."

"Let's see what the customers think, right? Leave them here for my mother to see. She'll know how to price them. Then Donna Mae can put them out."

Sean went home tired and happy that night. Mama Jo had loved his decorating and, even better, the cupcakes had flown out of the store. Several customers had placed orders. Mama Jo had sent photos of the cupcakes to Angie at the Brooke Street kitchen so her decorators could replicate the designs for the orders. Sean was glad about that last part. Two dozen cupcakes had been fun. Several times two dozen would have been impossible. After getting home, he reheated some pizza from two nights ago and plopped onto the couch to relax. There was a Grapefruit League baseball game that afternoon he wanted to watch.

Dan called during the game. "You watching Puentes?"

"Hell yes. Watching knuckleball is better than comedy. Batters don't know what the hell to do. The ump is being a dick, though."

"Yeah. Well, umps." Dan paused. "Do you still read *Market Insight*?"

"My subscription ended with the firm."

"Jill's landed a client with some new app for fantasy sports."

“Good for Jill. Did I tell you I had dinner with her the other night at The Arbor and we talked about that very client?”

“Do I want to hear this?”

On the screen, Puentes walked one too many batters and got pulled in the eighth. Sean clicked off the TV. “It’s all good. I was in a funky frame of mind and seeing her again actually helped snap me out of it.”

“The woman’s a vampire. How much blood did you lose?”

“None. She paid for the dinner. And the car that took me to and from. And the expensive dessert I ordered. Let me tell you, that place should dump whoever makes their cannolis. Dippolito cannolis are ten times better than the overpriced atrocities I ate last night.”

“You keep praising this place. I might have to drive over someday and pick up a box of those things.” Dan had always been the guy to count on to bring donuts to a meeting. “Ever consider working up a marketing plan for them? You know, social media, ads, publicity—maybe some T-shirts?”

“It’s a Mom and Pop outfit, minus Pop. I don’t think Joe—the son who runs the place—would go for it.” He’d looked into Dippolito’s Bakery as a business and learned its particulars. The business had been founded in 1913 by Grandpa Dippolito, named Geno. Son Nick, Mama Jo’s husband and Joe’s father, had inherited the business. Nick had died four years ago and left the business, which employed his uncle and most of the Dippolito family, to Joe and Fred. A year after that, Fred apparently got into some kind of legal or financial trouble and Joe had bought him out. Joe really did run things. He owned the business.

“Just saying you could help them. You seem to like the place.”

“I really do. And I’m working quietly on the inside.” He chuckled. “I singlehandedly increased the sale of day old bakery. I’ve spruced up how the cakes are displayed. I’m not sure Donna Mae has caught on to what I’m doing yet. Tomorrow I’m going to start working on Joe to put better tables and chairs up front, but there’s really not very much room.”

“Ever consider going to a meet up? I just read about one for food entrepreneurs. And yes, I’m looking out for your ass. It’s right up your alley.”

“A meet up?” Sean loved meet ups. Meet ups were the party line of marketing.

“I’m sending you the link. Philadelphia Food Biz Connections. Marketing gold.”

"You're evil. I think you're more evil than Jill."

Dan did his best demonic cackle. "By the way, the reason I called... Jenn and I, we're expecting."

"You dog! I'm happy for you." Sean was reasonably sure Dan would be a good father. Hell, he was very sure. For all Dan said he didn't like children and called them noisy and messy, kids loved him.

"I want to ask you to be the godfather."

"Gosh, Dan. I mean, yes. Of course I will." The tears that rose to Sean's eyes surprised him. He'd never been asked before, not even for his niece and nephew. His sister and Charles had asked married couples they knew to do the honors. "The baby, do you know what it is?"

"It's hard to be sure, but my money's on it being human."

"You know what I mean. Boy or girl?"

"We're old fashioned. We want to be surprised, you know, the way nature intended."

"You're going to be a great dad." They talked a few minutes more about parenting, a new house the couple had just bought, and baseball—because Dan was going to make sure the kid played. Sean hung up on a happy, contented man. Strangely, talking to his immensely straight best friend made him think about sex... and thinking about sex drove home that he hadn't been having much of it.

*It helps to get out of the house*, he ragged on himself. He wasn't going to get down and hot with anyone unless he met them first. Trouble was he didn't like the club scene. He didn't like crowds—or strangers. And though anonymous sex could be thrilling, it involved taking risks. Sean Michael Whelan was all about not taking risks, at least when it came to his body and life. The riskiest thing he'd ever done was turn his back on a career in marketing and take a job at Dippolito's Italian Bakery. His bank account was still quaking in terror from that move. But he had savings enough to live for a while. More than enough. It was just...

He liked the bakery. He liked everything about it. He liked the location, the customers, stolid Donna Mae and elfin Del, the smell of baking bread, and the way hunky Joe Dippolito punched down bowls of dough and laughed at the jokes of crusty Judge Riddle and gently fielded the attempts of matchmaking women who didn't know he'd be more interested in their grandsons than their

granddaughters. Salt of the fucking earth. And Sean was going crazy trying to figure him out.

But it was true the bakery deserved more attention. It wasn't doing badly, not by a long shot. It was busy and prosperous. But it could be so much more. There were so many things Dippolito's could do in terms of promotion. Dan's comment about T-shirts, for example. Sean spent the next hour on the computer, then the phone, talking with a graphic artist he knew in Chicago. Then he looked at the link Dan had sent him and signed up for a Food Biz Connection meet-up in Center City that weekend.

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## Chapter Five

“That’s a damn shame, Mr. Renard. I like having you as a neighbor.” Joe continued filling cannoli while he talked with the old man. Jean Renard owned the dilapidated bookstore next door to the bakery. “And it’s nice of you to offer to sell me the building. But I took a hit a couple years ago and I’m pretty sure I can’t swing it.”

Sean was getting good at writing on cakes while listening in on Joe’s conversations. The little desk by the phone was the perfect place to work. The customer ordering the cake watched from the other side of the day-old case as Sean made an exuberant flourish to the tail end of ‘Birthday’ and began on the name. “Carol with an ‘e’ or without, Mrs. Boyle?”

“Without. Can you put a star on there too? Because it’s her day!”

“You got it.” Sean picked up a bag of yellow icing for the star.

“I’m not leaving soon.” Renard’s voice was pleasant and light, like someone ruffling the pages of one of the old books he sold. “I’m making plans. Your mother told me she bought that unit in the Winchester senior community in Chester County. A lovely place. I checked it out yesterday.”

“Yeah, it’s real nice.”

Sean handed the birthday cake to Mrs. Boyle, who looked at it and smiled back in delight. Sean had done a big star with a swirl of several little ones. “Oh, this is perfect! Thank you!” He boxed it for her and she bustled out the door, leaving behind a trail of happy. Sean could now indulge a few moments watching Joe filling and laying out cannoli in a big flat box. Renard was taking them to his daughter’s for dessert that night.

“What are you going to do, Joe, when she moves out? Live upstairs in that big place by yourself?”

“Well, I’m sure not moving into any senior home to keep her company. You know her cousin Carmela is buying a unit in there too? A regular flock of old South Philly birds.” Joe gave him a sly grin. “You should get yourself a place there. You’d be in demand. Most of those ladies buried their husbands and might be looking.”

Renard chuckled. “Ah, one of women’s many kindnesses, to properly put us in the ground.”

The door to the back room opened and Sean, hearing that signal, headed back. It would be Fred with the last delivery. As expected, burly Fred bounded up to throw open the back door of the truck. But there was also a woman dressed in khakis and a purple coat, with short black hair and big dark eyes of chocolate brown. She was like a flashier, prettier version of Joe.

"This him?" she asked Fred.

"Yeah, Sean. Sean meet Angie. Angie, meet Sean. Help me unload these cupboards. She gave me extra this morning."

Angie removed a gold-studded glove and put out her hand. "Happy to meet you. You're the talk of family Sundays but I'm always too busy it seems to come over. Help Freddie out and then I'll tell you what I need."

Sean had his shoulder bracing the last of seven carts—three more than usual—when Joe walked into the back.

"Angie!" Hugs ensued. "Why you on this run?"

"LaPorta's."

"Something wrong with their order?" LaPorta's was a hot Italian bistro and one of Dippolito's biggest contracts. They provided the restaurant's breads, rolls, and desserts.

"Only if you think Fat Jimmy ordering three dozen super-sized cannoli cupcakes with hard icing is a problem. Which it's not, because you know I can make as many of those as he needs. But then Fat Jimmy says he wants them decorated by the guy over in the shop on State." Angie flicked a glance at Sean. "He told me his mother bought some cupcakes last week. It's the color, she says. I don't know. I think Roxanne does great and Jimmy says yeah, she does, but her squiggles aren't as perfect. Squiggles! Who would have thought, right? Anyway, Jimmy wants holiday cakes decorated by *this* guy. So here they are, all three dozen." Angie sighed. "You know how he gets. A damn perfectionist."

"So are we." Joe cocked a look at Sean. "So here's what we do. Sean will decorate Fat Jimmy's cakes. But you find a day to send Roxanne over to watch and learn. Sean here will teach her. 'Cuz I don't want you bringing stuff over for him to decorate on a regular basis."

"You could always send him over to work by me." She gave Sean a wink. "He's cute and the girls like eye candy. He'd fit right in."

"Yeah, he is cute. And he stays right here."



Basking in the praise, Sean almost missed Fred's smirk. Just as he noticed it, the conversation ended and both Dippolito siblings left. Fred gave a wave on the way out.

"So now you met Angie. Get to work making squiggles," Joe said to Sean. "Freddie will be back to pick the load up in an hour and haul them over to the restaurant."

He was on it. He had three dozen special desserts, mouthfuls of sweet cake and ricotta cream destined for the eager palates of discerning customers, and he was going to make each and every one of them a visual masterpiece. Which was fun for the first dozen, after which his back started to ache. By the time he'd finished the last of the small oval cakes—a latticed delight with blue forget-me-nots and lacy sprays of white and pink hearts—he could barely stand up straight. He made a mental note to teach Roxanne how to make squiggles and dainty flowers in exchange for her secret of how to do this all day.

He helped Fred load the finished cakes into the cupboards and locked up after he'd left.

"You all right?" Joe asked. He'd brought back the stainless steel bowls in which he made his cannoli cream and put them in the big double sinks for washing. Great, more work to do. But Joe was good about cleaning up on his own.

"That's a little more decorating than I was counting on."

"Yeah, I'll have to have a talk with Angie about this commercial stuff. It's profitable, but I don't want it to become the elephant that runs away with the business."

"You mean you want to keep business focused on the shop? On this being a *family* bakery?"

Joe tilted his head and paused. "That's right." He said it with a little lift on the end, as if answering a trick question.

"Just asking." Sean tossed out his used up pastry bags, now empty of icing, and washed his hands. "For what it's worth, I think you're on the right track."

"Do you?"

"You bet. This business is great! It's authentic and you can't teach authentic. It's organic. Your customers are loyal. You have a rock solid brand."

"Is that a bona fide assessment from a Wharton scholar?"

"It is. You know, you should show me some respect. It was only last year my partner and I won a Brandie." It had been a good day and Sean was getting the hang of the family brand of communication. He was all prepared to explain the significance of his Brandie.

"Your partner?"

Oh fuck. Joe had zeroed in on the wrong word. Though, come to think of it, what did he care? Sean sighed. He might as well get it out there. "Jill Montgomery. The Montgomery in Montgomery Whelan."

"You mean the one who kicked you out of the business?"

"I mean the bitch who dissolved the business right out from under me so she could be free to become a superstar on Madison Avenue. She's lighting up New York."

"That sucks. I'm sorry." He sounded like he meant it. The expression on Joe's face was one Sean hadn't seen before. Like they had something in common. Rejection was pretty much universal.

Delphine popped her little bespectacled head around the corner. "Hey, Joe. Got a moment? Customer wants to know if we have more of those bunny rabbit cannoli."

Joe's mouth fell open. "What bunny cannoli?"

"I had some extra icing—" Sean began to explain. But Del made explanation unnecessary by bringing in one of the offenders. There on the plate was a regular cannoli but with a cute bunny face on one end and even cuter fluffy pink tail on the other.

"It's the last one," said Del.

"You bet your ass it is. If she wants it, sell it to her—" apparently Joe was certain no self-respecting man would want to buy a bunny cannoli—"but we don't have more. Go on, Del. She'll live." If Vesuvius ever needed a light, it would have found that and more in the furious brown glare Joe turned on Sean. He dropped his voice so no one else could hear. "What the fuck are you doing? That thing looks like a bunny in bondage!"

"It does not! Anyway, I only made eight—and customers bought them all!"

"You see, that's *the problem!* There's just one lesson here and it's that you don't make a joke outta the cannoli! You know what a good cannoli is supposed to be? A life-altering experience. Life altering! You eat a great

cannoli and, sweet baby Jesus, it's like the saints come down and deliver you to heaven. Kings don't die so good. And it doesn't happen if the guy's laughing while he eats a bunny."

"People die laughing."

"Not while eating a Dippolito's cannoli, they don't!"

Sean was on the brink of laughing himself, except he could see he was in real danger of Joe going completely over the edge. That wasn't something he wanted to see. Or cause. The man's passion for his cannoli was, well... kind of amazing.

"I won't do it again. Really. I promise."

"You're damn right you won't. I won't have you mess with perfection. Look, I might try the colored chocolate chips, because they don't change the essential product, but there's no way in hell or California this bakery starts selling bunny cannoli. Got it?"

Oh yeah, he got it. This wasn't about him, or creativity, or even Joe. This was about something so much bigger it occurred to Sean, at last, to treat it as a religion. Joe's religion, which honored traditional methods for the production of perfect baked goods. Joe wasn't trying to kill his creativity, he wanted Sean to respect his beliefs. It was only fair. Sean knew what he had to do. He assured Joe not once, not twice, but ten times over that he would observe the sacrament of the perfect cannoli.

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The Networking for Food Entrepreneurs meet up was an eye opener. Sean almost felt at home surrounded by people as incompletely versed in the food industry as he was. The group fit comfortably in a meeting room at a busy pub in Northern Liberties, and the information flew at the speed of cozy chatter. At least three of the men were gay, which should have interested him more than it did. One of the men, tall and blond, undressed him with seductively playful blue eyes, but Sean was put off when the first suggestion out of the man's mouth was to hope Sean had some coke on him. Whether the asshole was a cop or a player didn't matter because Sean wasn't what he was looking for. Within a minute of his refusal, the man moved on to a cute twink wearing a chef's toque.

Sean introduced himself as marketing manager for Dippolito's, an outright lie but it helped him fit in. He connected with a pair of women who ran two

start-up bakeries—one for gourmet croissants and the other for potato chips—and a man who was trying to drum up vendors for a street festival in Manayunk that June.

“Dippolito’s?” Dave the event organizer actually did a double take. “Any chance I could get them to set up a stall? I mean, seriously, I’d waive the fee.”

The croissant lady shot Dave an evil look. He hadn’t offered to do that for her.

Sean shook his head. “I’ll ask, but I don’t think so.”

“No offense, but you don’t need this group. Dippolito’s is an institution out there in Delco. They make damn good cannolis, and my aunt raves about their lobster tails.”

“*Sfogliatelle*.” If nothing else, Sean now knew his Italian pastries.

“Yeah, those. You know what would be perfect—I’m giving you the best advice you will ever get—enter Dippolito’s into the Philly Cannoli Festival. You’d be in against the South Philly boys, all the big names, but the publicity is top rate. Radio, TV, newspapers. It’s major league.”

Joe would never go for it. Never in a million years. The verbal fireworks would be epic and then, to top it all off, Joe would personally decapitate Sean with his big bare hands. But it was *perfect*. The ultimate celebration of the perfect cannoli.

Even Joe couldn’t stay mad for long about that.

When Sean got home that night, he found the event website, printed up the forms, filled them out, and mailed them in.

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## Chapter Six

The Saturday before Easter was mayhem. The shop opened early, which meant Sean was asked to start early, promptly at two a.m., right around the time the tail end of Saturday drunks were staggering out of the bar down the street. He let himself in and found Joe, already looking tired, baking bread. Little wonder. He was staring at a stack of orders three inches high. At least the bakery's anise-scented Easter breads—rings and loaves—were being made by the bakery elves over at Brooke Street. A dozen flat plastic bins of hollow cannoli shells stood stacked near the table.

“What do you need me to do?”

“Just help.”

They'd worked together long enough they knew how to move around each other. The huge ovens practically glowed from the heat as dozens upon dozens of baked loaves and rolls were pulled from them to cool on twice the usual number of racks. Before long they were full and the last breads stood cooling on a little used counter.

Joe heaved one of the plastic bins onto the table. “Put on fresh gloves. You're about to experience one of your wet dreams.”

Really? Sean quirked a smile. He'd had a particularly interesting one a couple nights ago. His smile dimmed only a little when Joe led him over to the big mixer where he made batches of cannoli cream. Dipping in the big scoop, he filled a large pastry bag fitted with a tip and shoved it into Sean's hands. He then filled another for himself.

“We're making cannoli. You've seen me do it. Hell, every time I turn around, I can tell you're getting a hard on from watching. So now put that knowledge to work. Just think of it as putting icing in a hole.” Lifting a shell from the bin, he demonstrated the technique. “Make sure you fill the center. Don't chintz, because customers hate that. No cream in the center is the mark of a crappy cannoli. I'll hear about it. And put a little flair in the finish. Make the ends pretty.”

By his fourth or fifth cannoli, Sean had the hang of it. By his second dozen, his right hand was ready to fall off. Squeezing dainty bags of decorating icing was ten times easier than squeezing hefty bags of thick creamy cannoli filling.

But Joe was unflagging—not to mention twice as fast—so Sean kept pushing the cream, bag upon different flavored bag, into both sizes of shells. There were large cannoli and small cannoli and by the end of the hour he was sick of filling them both. At last there was only the last bin of shells and Joe told him to stop while there were still a dozen or so left.

“We made enough for the orders. I think you deserve a break.” Joe snapped off his gloves.

Sean lifted one of the remaining large shells, and, while Joe looked on, filled it. He extended it to his boss. “I want you to be my first.” It wasn’t completely a tease. No one had yet test-tasted one of his creations. “I filled it special just for you.”

Joe shook his head and chuckled. He understood what Sean was doing, of course. With just the hint of a swagger and a look that said “fuck you, I got this”, he reached over and picked up the cannoli. Sean held his breath as Joe lifted the cannoli to his open mouth and his tongue emerged, strong and pink, to lick suggestively at the creamy tip before he leaned back and enveloped the end with his smiling lips. He looked like a porn star showing off a parlor trick—bold nose and head of wavy hair, dark eyes half closed, with his beautiful lips wrapped around the thick golden cannoli tube. Watching Joe’s jaw and lips move, cheeks hollowing while he thoroughly licked and sucked out the creamy filling, brought a groan to Sean’s throat and a boner to his pants. Damn! What he wouldn’t give for his cock to be that cannoli. Joe’s demonstration was so unbelievably hot it was even worth the little smirk of satisfaction when he finally finished and showed off the hollowed tube.

“You did good, Sean. You filled the creamy center. Made me work for it.”

“That was... how did you do that?”

“It’s a skill Italian men are born with. Women, too. You get a bunch of us around a table with a plate of cannoli and anything can happen.” He turned his head. “I think I hear Freddie with the truck.”

Sean never caught his breath again. Mama Jo and both of the high school girls, Jordana and Penny, arrived at four a.m. and set to putting together orders. Sean quickly learned the sorting system and before long the shelves and counters overflowed with boxes, bags, and names written in black marker on order sheets stapled or taped to bundles. Donna Mae and Delphine arrived and turned on the lights, opening the doors to a flood of customers all in a hurry to procure their Easter orders.

The chaos had the rhythm of choreography. Freddie came with deliveries so often Sean lost count. Over five hundred customers went away happy. All but two of the orders were picked up by the time the shop closed at six p.m. and Mama Jo turned off the lights, then sent everyone home. Sean stayed behind with Jordana to clean up.

“You have a place to go? Isn’t your family far away?” Mama Jo wrapped a cashmere scarf around her neck. She was heading out to Fred’s house in Springfield, so she could spend the night with her grandchildren and go to Church with them on Easter morning. Joe waited outside with the car. Sean had been surprised to see him back a late model SUV out of the garage tucked under the apartment. He’d never seen Joe anywhere or doing anything except in the bakery.

“Wisconsin. But I’ve been invited to spend Easter with friends.” Dan and Jenn had invited him over. It was a chance to see the new house. They’d bought a place in Montgomery County in a community with good schools.

“Drive careful, then. It’s supposed to storm tomorrow night. I’ve been following this all week.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Monday will be dead. Not many customers except for the commuters. You can stay home if you want.”

“Joe has me on the schedule.”

“He has you on the schedule every day. We may not talk, but I’m not blind. Have a happy Easter!” She headed down to the car and climbed into the passenger seat. Sean watched as Joe steered out of the alley and tried to imagine what that car ride would be like. Knowing both of them as he did, silence didn’t even seem possible.

By the time Sean left Dan and Jenn’s house the following night, it was snowing. Pretty swirls of white flakes flew past his windshield, reminding him acutely of winters in Oshkosh when he’d dance with anticipation of running out onto the pond behind his house just to skid across the fresh snow atop the ice. He would spin and play on a world split between the vast blue bowl of the sky and the brilliant white covering everything below, except him, dressed in defiant colors. A girl had fallen through the ice one year, though not while he was around, and drowned. His mother had forbidden him to go on the pond after that. But he did it anyway.

Beautiful things were always the most dangerous.

The snow was three inches deep when Sean trudged to work on Monday morning. The sturdy warm snow boots he'd brought from home and worn all through college left deep tread tracks in the snow. It rather pleased him that his were the only tracks to be seen, marching up the hill from his house to Baltimore Pike, where they got lost in the slush created by traffic. Even at this early, post-holiday hour, there was some of that. The traffic lights on timers switched from red to green. He walked the two blocks further to the bakery, the crisp air tickling his nose. Though he wore a scarf over his shoulders in anticipation of a more arduous walk home, he didn't bother to wrap it around his lower face. A little snow never hurt anyone.

There were no footsteps in the snow on the loading bay outside the bakery door, and he unlocked it to find the interior dark. He switched on the light and looked around, seeing things exactly as he and Jordana had left them. Clean. The ovens off but the bricks still radiating heat. Bowls stacked and waiting to be put to use. He closed the door behind him and wondered where Joe was. It felt strange to be here without him.

Maybe it was a test. He didn't put it past Joe to want to see what he would do without direct supervision. If so, he was up to it. The most likely explanation, though, was that Joe had spent a late night having fun with his big Italian-American family, playing the board games Fred often teased him about later, gorging on lamb and Easter bread, and perfecting obscene cannoli tricks. Sean got out of his coat and boots, put on the work shoes he kept in the break room, and set to mixing the batches of dough he and Jordana had set up according to a game plan laid out two days before. He could fire the ovens after that.

He had things well under control when Joe clomped in a half hour later, his chef whites crisp but the jacket unbuttoned at the top. One hand gripped a brown paper bag.

"Looks like I could have stayed in bed a little longer." He grabbed an apron. "Things are going to be real quiet today. I should have told you not to come in."

"But you didn't."

"Yeah, I can be a real ass that way. What can I say? I like the company." He put the bag on the table. "Breakfast. Aunt Rose made *Torta di Pasqua*, ricotta cheesecake. Doesn't make sense, right? We got us a damn bakery and what do we do come holidays? We bake more crap. It's really good, though."



“My mom always serves hot cross buns at Easter time. Then we move right on to potatoes.” It was good to hear Joe chuckle at that. But the memory made him nostalgic, too. His mom’s skillet potatoes for breakfast were to die for.

The morning went quickly though it was, as predicted, the slowest Sean had ever seen the place. Donna Mae came in but Del called to ask if she was needed. She wasn’t. Penny called in to say schools were canceled and she wouldn’t be in for the afternoon. Freddie made just one delivery. Sean helped handle the commuter rush without any problem. By ten a.m. the snow was six inches and still falling, now much more heavily. Donna Mae started fretting a half hour before she asked to leave, saying she was afraid the trollies would stop running. She wanted to go home.

“I can stay,” Sean volunteered, though he could see Joe was going to let her go anyway. “I walk home.”

“Thank you, doll. I owe you one. I’ll make it in tomorrow if the trollies are running, or maybe I can get Bob to give me a lift—if he can get the car out of the driveway.” Donna Mae threw on her coat and boots and hurried out the front door to catch the next trolley along with two customers who had been waiting below the awning. Sean had already cleared snow from the awning twice that morning and could see he’d have to do it again soon.

Surprisingly there were still customers. A logjam of people stopped by when the courthouse closed two hours later. They ran out of cannoli shells and, because Freddie wasn’t making another delivery, Joe made a batch of shell pastry and rolled it out in the kitchen for Sean to cut into rounds and fry some more shells in the shop’s ancient deep fryer. He’d done it a few times before but this time he got creative with the last several shells, shaping them into tapered, spiraled unicorn horns and figuring out how to spoon cream into the openings. He liked the idea but the execution needed more work.

By late afternoon, most of the bread and rolls had flown off the shelves, along with cookies and the heartier pastries like turnovers. The lawyer whose office abutted the bakery on Olive Street decided to spend the night in her building and bought two rum cakes to tide her over. The guys at the firehouse nearby stopped over and carried out enough to feed an army. Snow had the wonderful side effect of making everyone they met feel like comrades in a kind of adventure in which nature was the adversary. Clearly it also made them hungry. But there was still enough product left over when the bakery closed that night for the day old case to look like it would be a challenge the next day.

“Don’t worry about it.” Joe wasn’t the least bit concerned. “When this happens we just pack up the overrun and send it to Father Phil. He gives it to the nuns who teach at the school, or sometimes hands it out to shut-ins. Nothing goes to waste.”

“What about these?” Stifling a grin, Sean flourished two of his unicorn horn cannoli.

“What the hell are those?”

“I call them Unicorn Horns—” he knew better than to call them cannoli—  
“I think they might sell. A little powdered sugar to make them white, or a glittery glaze—”

“You don’t give up, do you?” Despite looking put upon, Joe accepted one of the horns and gave it a looking over.

“No. But I’ve learned not to put anything in front of customers if you haven’t okayed it.”

“We’re making progress. And this idea isn’t bad, but it might work better with a puff pastry dough, softer and prettier. So you can get a better spiral.”

They ate the cream filled horns and then washed down any equipment that needed it. Finally Joe said, “Let’s take a look.” He opened the back door and together they looked out into the alley. Snow curtain down so thickly Sean couldn’t see anything past the loading dock. Either the power was out on Baltimore Pike or snow obliterated the street lights. Joe gaped at the desolation. “Fuck, that shit’s two feet deep! No way I’m letting you go out in that.”

Sean grinned because the snow was deep, a foot at least, but not *that* bad. “Are you offering to drive me?”

“No. Because there’s no way *I’m* going out in that.” Joe closed the door. At least that stopped more snow from blowing in. “Look Sean, I know you’re from Wisconsin and can probably make snowshoes out of bakery boxes and paperclips like some kind of cheesehead MacGyver, but I think you should stay here for the night. I’d ask Mom to let you sleep in Freddie’s room but, well, you know we’re not talking, so I can’t do that. But you can sleep over in the break room. That’s what I do sometimes when things get tense and I can tell you right now: the sofa’s top rate. I’ll get you a pillow and some blankets.”

“Look, I—”

“Do it for me. If you don’t, I’ll stay awake all night listening for sirens because I’ll be sure you got hit by a snowplow. I’ll drive you home first thing tomorrow once they get the roads clear.”

Sean battled his desire to push Joe’s buttons and couldn’t resist. “Where I grew up this is nothing. It’s just seven blocks.”

“Yeah, and maybe in Bumblehump where you grew up there’s nothing but cornfields and cows. What we got here is a city full of people who can’t drive worth shit—and that’s on a good day. I saw a news guy on TV get plowed under last year. A lot of bad can happen in seven blocks.”

Yeah, maybe. Sean didn’t doubt for a moment Joe was genuinely worried about him going out into a raging storm. There was no mistaking the pleading in his expressive brown eyes as anything other than a desire to see Sean safe and warm... and right here. The break room was cozy enough and had everything he might need, including a bathroom. Sean had no pressing reason to be at his house, which was locked up tight with lights on timers. He had no pets. No plants to water. No family waiting.

“My staying here will really make you feel better?”

“Absolutely.”

“Fine, then. Bring me a pillow and blanket and I’m good.” He undid the zipper on his coat. Joe’s smile sent an unexpected warm, melty feeling straight through him.

“I knew your intelligence would eventually kick in. I’ll be right back.”

While Joe went upstairs, Sean finished getting out of his coat. What the hell was going on here? He was behaving completely out of character. He would have been perfectly fine out in the snow. Back in college he’d braved snow storms to fetch pizza and beer for dorm parties, or just so he could hook up with some guy for a blow job. He’d driven in a blizzard to see Springsteen in concert. Maybe he didn’t like risk, but *snow* on foot and city streets was a risk he could manage. The only reason he’d capitulated was to make Joe Dippolito happy and because being near Joe didn’t just feel good—it felt wonderful.

Which meant this was a risk... a really big risk.

He stared around at the bakery he’d just spent the last few months of his life falling in love with. The meet up... the cannoli contest... and now this...

He was screwing it all up.

Joe appeared again, his arms filled with pillows and blankets. Plural. Joe wasn't making up a bed, he was feathering a nest. Sean followed him into the break room. The sofa was nicely out of sight from the door, against an inside wall. A big bright carpet covered the floor. The bathroom was at the other end of the room near the lockers. An old lamp plastered with china flowers and what looked like kissing geese, probably handed down from some Dippolito relation who'd spent too much time in South Philly, gave the room good light. Joe dumped the bedding on the sofa.

Sean's heart hammered against his breastbone. He couldn't let Joe see what he was feeling, especially when he couldn't even put a finger on it himself.

Joe apparently noted his nervousness because he cracked a smile. "Mom's curious as hell, but the beauty of our arrangement is she couldn't bring herself to ask."

"I don't want this to be awkward."

"You mean you staying here?" Joe made a sound between a snort and a chuckle, then turned it into a sigh. "That's not awkward. Me and Mom, that's another story. Maybe it would help if I explain it."

That would work. Sean managed a nod.

"A couple years ago I told her I was gay, mostly to stop her from setting me up with girls she thought I might like. It was getting harder to find new excuses for why I didn't want to go out with them. But that's not what the problem was, even though she told me flat out I broke her heart. That was pretty bad, but I could understand her disappointment. I mean, you know... it wasn't easy for her." Joe looked unhappier about his mother's distress than hurt about her reaction. "Freddie and Angie handled it better. But Mom, she couldn't let go. She kept trying to find a way to fix it. About a year ago she got to talking to Father Phil, which is where it all went in the toilet. She brought him home one night and they ganged up on me. He started telling me how being gay is a willful sin—you know, 'so whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it', that kind?—which means I'm giving God the finger any time I feel attracted to a man. And when I screw a guy it's two fingers. It was the worst night of my life. He was relentless and she was crying. I waited 'til after Father Phil left and then I lost it. I told her she betrayed me and I said, 'Fuck the Church and fuck you, too!'"

"Shit—" A Catholic saying something like that was a sin in itself. And an Italian son to his mother was worse.

“Well, I told you once I don’t always mean what I say in a temper. I told her I was sorry about the last part, what I said about her. But not the other. The Church is wrong and I’m not a worse kind of sinner just because when I lust it’s for a man and not a woman. But that’s why she stopped talking to me, because I keep on being a willful sinner. I won’t say I’m wrong about the Church or go to Mass. And so I said fine, if she won’t talk to me then I won’t talk to her. We’re just waiting to see who breaks down first.”

“Doesn’t that strike you as just a little much? My mom would just tell me what a disappointment I am and be done with it.”

A fragile smile tugged Joe’s lips. “She did it, too, didn’t she? Tell you what a disappointment you are?”

“More than once,” Sean admitted.

“Well, mine tells me every day. Every *hour*. It’s my punishment. Being Sicilian isn’t for wusses. Neither is being gay. And the truth of the matter is I don’t like any of this any more than she does. I don’t think she hates me for being gay. She just doesn’t know how to fit it into her life, how to fit me in.”

Sean cocked his head at something Joe had said. “You don’t like being gay?”

“Not especially. I mean, it’s the way I am—but it’s not like I said I want to be this way. It’s got its ups and downs. Like how hard it is for me to find, you know, men I can be with. For you it’s probably easy. I mean, look at you.” He shook his head and stared at some point over Sean’s shoulder. “There’s a bar I go to sometimes over in Center City—far from here, you see, so I don’t run into anyone I know. The place is loud, people smoke... I don’t really like going there, but most of the time I can pick up someone for the night, some other guy who just needs to get off the same way I do, but then I wake up in the morning feeling like shit about myself.”

Which probably explained the mornings Joe dragged in looking like he hadn’t slept. Sort of like now, except his face was stark with repressed emotion and his eyes were so intense they looked almost black. Sean wanted to look away, but couldn’t.

“I thought you might be gay when I hired you. I don’t know why, I... I don’t usually think about that kind of thing in the shop. It’s personal. But something told me to hire you and now I think I know why. Seeing you every day, being normal with you... it makes me feel good.” Joe’s voice was barely above a whisper.

Time slowed down. The space between them sharpened. Sean noticed how the day old scruff on Joe's face enhanced his strong features, his big dark eyes, his vulnerability. There was no reason in the world a man like Joe shouldn't have willing partners line up for a chance to be with him. Hell, Sean would have jumped the line for such a chance.

"Joe, I—" Sean never got the rest of the words out. Before he realized what was happening, Joe grabbed him by the shoulders and shoved him against the break room wall.

Sean gasped as Joe's mouth slashed hot and hungry over his. His response was an immediate *Oh, God, yes!* He opened to a kiss he hadn't even known he wanted. Joe's lips worked over his as their teeth met and their tongues twined. All he tasted—all he smelled—was a call to sex so forceful he wanted to hand over the keys to his body on the spot. He ground against Joe's larger, harder frame, rolling his pelvis so his stiffening cock answered the other man's.

That was when Joe stopped and stepped away. "Fuck this, I can't... I can't do it."

"Do what? Fuck like rabbits? Because right now I'm on board with that."

"Oh yeah? I'm your employer! I can't just push you up against a wall and have my way with you!" Joe had far too good a grip on himself for Sean to be happy about it. "You know what I'm talking about, Sean. Employees are hands-off. We can't do this, it's illegal."

"Have your way with me? Are we living in the same century? For God's sake, Joe, it's not illegal for two men to find each other hot as hell. It's only illegal if *you* refuse to give *me* a raise unless I let you screw me."

Joe looked like a man who really wanted to believe that. But he shook his head. "It's family policy. We don't screw employees."

"Seriously? Never?"

"Never." Joe looked as frustrated as Sean had ever seen him, but not like he was about to make an exception.

"You're telling me you won't touch me because I work for you?"

"Yes!"

"Fine, then!" Sean threw up his hands as though Joe held a gun on him, which in a sense was true. "I quit!" He walked to the locker, picked up his boots, and sat down on the sofa to begin putting them on again.

“Hey, Sean, calm down already. You’re taking this wrong. And you can’t go out there. It’s a state of emergency!”

“You can’t tell me what to do any more. I don’t work for you.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” Leaving his boots untied, Sean stood and walked up to him. “Yeah,” he said and laid his hand on Joe’s cheek. The prickle of stubble teased his fingers, but it was the firm yet yielding shape of Joe’s gorgeous lips as he passed his thumb across them that thrilled him. When those lips moved ever so subtly to kiss his thumb, he knew he had permission to go on.

Joe’s breaths were measured, deep but not exactly even, as Sean undid the buttons of his white chef jacket. Joe always dressed professionally. Sean had never seen him wearing anything else. Under the jacket was a white T-shirt with curls of black hair poking over the collar. Oh yeah. Chest hair was nice. Locking eyes with his surprised but now willing former boss, Sean let his hands drop to Joe’s waist. He smiled. Joe lifted an eyebrow. How far was he willing to go?

What he was doing was all kinds of insane. Genies never went back into bottles. All they ever did was blow up the worlds of the guys that rubbed them. Sean hooked his fingers into Joe’s waistband and undid the clasp. The thick push of Joe’s cock against his fingers as he tugged down the zipper granted him a new set of permissions. He couldn’t wait to uncover the man—everything about the man. The little bits he’d seen so far only left him wanting more. He eased Joe’s pants down to free a thick, just slightly up-curved cock with a beautiful rosy crown. Joe Dippolito really was the perfect man.

Sean’s happy smile certainly must have conveyed his appreciation, because all at once Joe’s big hand was around the back of his head and pulling him in for another kiss. It might have been less heated, but Sean melted into it even more, happy just to have this again... the feel of a man’s mouth sealing his, sharing his breath, exchanging tiny caresses that pulled at his soul. When Joe’s right hand found his shirt and lifted it, when he felt Joe’s warm palm slide along his skin, curve over and up the cage of his ribs, fingers finding and seizing a nipple, Sean moaned. Joe’s mouth released his, and he gasped for air, only to yelp softly with pleasure when Joe began to suck and nibble down the column of his neck. He tipped his head back to give the man more to work with.

He groped for Joe's cock and wrapped his fingers around it. Hot and thick and... God! What would it take to get this inside him? He worked his hand up and down that mesmerizing length, pre-come wetting his palm. Though he battled to regain any kind of control, his attempts were futile. He wanted this too much. And Joe... Joe had his shirt completely ridden up under his arms, his pants undone. Sean nearly lost it when Joe's fingers curled into his pants and lifted out his cock, circling it in his fist and returning Sean's ministrations stroke for stroke. For the second time, Joe crowded Sean against the wall, this time so he could push into Sean's grip, their slick, excited cockheads bumping each other with every thrust of his hips.

Sean wrapped his other arm under Joe's, bracing himself against the other man by clamping down on his big, broad shoulder. Every part of Joe was hard and driving him into the wall.

"Fuck! I'm going to come!" Sean gasped a warning, but it was already too late. Semen spurted over his belly, his hand, as Joe continued to thrust, breathing hard. Only now did Sean feel Joe's cock swelling in his hand—once, twice—two spurts adding to the sticky wet heat. It took another minute before it slowly began to soften.

Joe's head was bowed beside his now, sweat beading his forehead and finding its way into Sean's hair. They were face to face. Hot breath kept pace with heartbeats. Sean turned so his lips brushed Joe's cheek. He half expected Joe to taste sweet, like the baked goods he made, like cannoli cream and anise, but he only tasted salty and faintly, pleasantly musky. One hundred percent male.

And they were both a mess. Clothes half-off, pants down around their knees, and their hands glued to each other's cocks by the come of two men who'd both been sporting sets of blue balls until a few minutes ago.

"Hey you." Joe's soft voice broke into Sean's stunned afterglow.

"Totally worth it," Sean murmured blissfully. And it was. Totally worth screwing up the best job he'd ever had.

"You mean this?"

"You."

"Yeah, you too." Joe pushed back from the wall. There was room enough between them now to breathe. "I guess we better clean up."



They took turns using the sink in the bathroom. Sean was glad he'd just restocked the paper towel dispenser, because it took a few to mop up. While Joe was running the water and probably doing the same, Sean sat on the sofa. He was still feeling slightly stunned. Deliciously dazed was more like it. Hearing a knock on the break room door was a rude awakening. He jumped to his feet and checked to make sure his clothing wasn't looking like he'd just been fucked silly.

He opened the door and stared down into the cool condemning eyes of Mama Jo. Oh. Fuck.

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## Chapter Seven

"If you're staying here for the night, you should sleep in Freddie's room upstairs. It's much nicer and you'll be warmer." Mama Jo didn't bother to try to peer around Sean. She knew where Joe would be found. She rolled her eyes slightly. "And tell my son I made a big pot of peas and pasta and expect you both to join me for dinner. I already got the table set."

Sean watched her walk away and waited until the door leading to the stairs to the upper flat had closed before he turned to look behind him. Joe stood just outside the bathroom looking scrubbed and damp and... sorry.

"You want me to go? I'm still okay with that." Sean felt for the man. Caught in the act by his mother. God only knew what she'd heard.

"No. It's still more dangerous out there than she is. Actually she handled that better than I would have thought. She likes you, you know."

Maybe not any more. But if Joe didn't want to go up there alone, the least Sean could do was face the music with him.

Dinner with the feuding Dippolitos was among the more surreal experiences in Sean's life. Mama Jo bustled contentedly between her state-of-the-art kitchen—surprising in a walk-up apartment above a store—and her tidy dinette. Joe conversed with Sean about sports, which was safe, because neither of them wanted to start thinking about how they'd just been dry humping each other like randy teenagers in the break room. Though Mama Jo didn't say a word to Joe, she was graciousness itself to Sean and lit up when he admired her apartment. She had a certain flair in decorating, though it leaned toward lots of flourishes and the display of garish glassware, and Sean pleased her to no end by saying he liked the family photos lining the walls. He had only to express curiosity about Joe as a boy for her to dig out albums of family pictures. Though Joe groaned and hid his eyes with his hand, he was helpless.

"There's me and Nick on our wedding day." She pointed out various family members. Strains of easy listening music filtered in from the radio. "See this man? That's my father Angelo. Angelo Gennaro. Everyone called him Jerry. And there's Nick's brother Dom, and my cousin Carmela. And see there, that's little Donna Mae."

Sure enough. Donna Mae had been the flower girl. "This is great!" Sean exclaimed. He grinned at an unsmiling Joe, who had surely seen the pictures a

thousand times before and, by the heat in his brown eyes when they met Sean's, was thinking of things far less sacred than his mother's wedding photos.

"And here—" Mama Jo picked up another album and laid it on the table in front of Sean—"there's little Joey." An infant with huge brown eyes and a startling shock of black hair atop his round head gazed wide-eyed from the photos, page after page.

"He's named after you, isn't he?"

"You'd think so, but no. Nick named him after his other brother, who died in the war. Giuseppe. And then he went and named our second son Fortunato."

Clenched jaw and all, Joe looked ready to snap—but Sean was all over that piece of news. "Giuseppe? And Freddie is Fortunato?"

Mama Jo winked and gave him a sharp little smile. "Don't tell him I told you."

"Never." But Sean recognized a fine display of Sicilian revenge when he saw one. Mama Jo was on top of her game. It was time to change the subject before Giuseppe kicked him out into the blizzard. "What's for dessert?" he quipped. And then he began talking about growing up in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, and building snowmen on the shores of Lake Butte des Mortes.

She sent them off when it came time to clean up the dishes, even though he offered to help. While Mama Jo futzed in the kitchen, Sean joined Joe for a look at the heart of Dippolito's Italian Bakery. Muttering something about not making up his bed, Joe didn't turn on the light in his room, leaving its details shadowy. What looked like a comfortable full bed, appropriately rumpled and unmade, occupied the far end of the room and an oversized armoire hugged one of the walls. Joe was more intent on showing him the adjoining office and flicked on the overhead light, revealing a space packed to the rafters with bookcases, filing cabinets, a huge desk covered with catalogs and inboxes, and a sweet computer setup. Though cluttered, everything looked organized.

"This room is between mine and Mom's. When I took over I built this new door and that door over there leads to her room. She doesn't come in here much anymore. She used to do the accounting but now all the main accounting is done over at the Brooke Street location because we have more room there. I hire an accountant to audit the books. I keep on top of things here. Computers are great."

"When do you have the time?"

"It's hard sometimes, but I make time. After I get off my shift, I come here and look over the spreadsheets. I stay on top of things. It's all in my head—" he tapped his forehead and met Sean's inquiring look with a self-conscious smile—"I'm not kidding, it is. I just need to update the information."

"You need to get out and play a bit more. Show me Freddie's room." Getting Joe away from the business was now a priority.

Freddie's room was across the hall. No sooner did he have Joe inside, than Sean closed the door, plunging them into darkness. It was the perfect trap. He wound his arms around Joe's neck and angled up for a kiss. To his surprise, Joe grabbed him by both his arms and broke the embrace.

"Not here," Joe whispered urgently. "Not in my mother's house. It's disrespectful."

"Why? Because we're gay?"

"No. Because my mother deserves a little respect. She doesn't approve of people who aren't married locking lips in her place. She caught Angie kissing one time and that kid was never allowed back in the house."

Okay then. Sean didn't want to be banned from the premises. When in Rome... Sean stepped back and allowed Joe to fumble for and find the light switch.

Low, thoroughly respectful light bathed a neat room that clearly hadn't seen an occupant since Freddie had moved out. The twin bed had a Darth Vader bedspread and Linkin Park posters papered the walls. Boxes of different sizes filled most of the room, neatly stacked into rows and labeled.

"Sorry about the boxes. Mom's moving in a few days. I was hoping she wouldn't be able to find the albums."

"Not a problem." Sean propped himself on the bed and beckoned Joe with an impish grin.

"You're becoming way too comfortable." Joe sat down at the foot of the bed. Sometime before dinner, while Sean was busy helping Mama Jo serve up the peas and pasta, he'd exchanged his chef whites for jeans and a polo shirt. Informality suited him. It also changed his looks drastically, replacing the hard-ass baker with a more vulnerable, rather adorable looking man. "Listen, Whelan. We're good together. I like having you in the shop, and Angie will kill me if I do anything to make you quit."

What was Joe saying? Sean popped up higher on his elbow. “I didn’t really *want* to quit. I *said* I quit so I could get in your pants.”

“Yeah. And I didn’t resist that as hard as I should have, so I guess we’re on the same page. What that means is I’m not accepting your resignation. I can’t decide if I’d rather have you in the bakery or in the bedroom—but I guess that’s something we’re going to have to figure out.”

“And we can have sex, too?”

“Keep your voice down.” Joe practically dislocated a vertebra looking to see if Mama Jo had heard and was about to come through the door. When he turned back, he gave Sean a sexy smile and a look that went straight to his cock. “What do you think? You think I’m only keeping you on so next time you quit I can nail your ass? We’re adults and... I know you’re right about the legal part. But I’m not going to conduct a relationship in front of my staff. We can have our fun, but only if it’s outside of work. Maybe I can do that. One thing for sure, I’m not going to make you find another job. I like having you around.”

“That’s good.” Because there was nowhere in the world Sean wanted to work more than at the bakery. And no one he wanted to work with more than this man. He could always quit again if needed. The thought made him smile. But then he remembered something he had to do—sooner now rather than later. He had to tell Joe about the meet up, and how he’d gotten a little ahead of himself.

*A little?* He’d gotten *way* ahead of himself, even if he and Joe were lovers. Which they weren’t, not even now. They’d just agreed they could have sex under the right conditions.

“Joe, I—” the first words were always the hardest—“I think you know I love the bakery, right? Really. You run an amazing business. I just think, well... I think more people would love to know about it.”

“What? You don’t think enough people know about my bakery? I’m not going to tell you how much we make, but it’s enough to employ twenty people gainfully. As far as I’m concerned, that’s enough business to go around.” Joe looked so relaxed, so open. They were finally being real with each other, and Sean wanted to slit his own wrists with a knife. “Hey, Sean, I appreciate your ideas. You think I don’t notice things? I notice everything... your little fixes, the way you make sure the products and shop look perfect. Donna Mae told me you took over the chalkboard and people now buy more of the specials. The day old has never sold better thanks to you. Those trolley schedules you taped

on the wall near the tables—I said leave them because customers came up to thank me.”

“Well, I might have gotten carried away... with other things.”

“Really?” Joe lifted his brows.

“I might have ordered some T-shirts.”

Sean might as well have said he'd put bunny faces on all the cannoli. Joe rose from the bed and gaped down at him.

“Oh, don't tell me you did something to mess us up before we even get started! Fucking T-shirts? Who's going to wear them?”

“You. Me. Staff. Your family. Any customers who want to buy one. But I didn't order that many, just a few. As samples. They have the bakery's name on the front.”

“Do I look like the kind of guy who wears a shirt with *my own name* on it?”

“I think you'd look great in one of the shirts. I think you'd be proud of that name, too.” Sean drew a deeper breath because Joe wasn't anywhere close to the top of his rage range—and soon he would be. “I might also have signed the bakery up for a cannoli bake-off.”

“*What?*”

No one could load one word up with as much disdain and incredulity as Joe. Sean's mother, the queen of the two-word put-down, would be crushed in a syllable. Sean pulled out his cell phone and brought up the website he'd bookmarked. There in neon green, red, and white was the home page for the Philly Cannoli Festival. He handed the phone to Joe.

“I thought Dippolito's should be there. Our cannoli are great—no, they're life altering. Everyone says so—someone even said so at the meet up.”

“There was a meet up? What the fuck's a meet up?”

Sean looked up sheepishly. “The Philadelphia Food Entrepreneurs Connection. I went to a meeting.”

“For what—award-winning marketers? Who do you think you are, some kind of bakery executive? And you didn't tell me none of this? 'Til *now*?” Joe was staring in stark disbelief as he flipped through page after page about the Cannoli Festival.

“Well, the shirts were supposed to be a surprise. I designed them and paid for them myself. They’re not official. I just thought—”

“*Thinking?* Do you even know what that means? If you for one moment think I would even consider something like... This is a big deal! They’re closing Passyunk Avenue! And look at this lineup!” Joe showed him the glowing face of the phone, though the lettering was far too small for Sean to read from the bed. “Termini Brothers! Isgro’s! You’re throwing me to the lions!—Peretti’s Pasticceria, The King of Cannoli!?”

“He’s not *that good!*” Sean bounded to Joe’s side, pointing to Peretti’s on the screen. “He says he makes the best cannoli in Philly, but I went to South Philly one day and I tried them and... Dippolito’s cannoli are ten times better! Sal Peretti’s a fraud!”

“Sal Peretti can afford to be a fraud!”

The bedroom door flew open so hard it crashed against the wall. Mama Jo walked in, dark eyes huge and her face a masterpiece of fury. They were screwed. Two gay men behind a closed door in the house of an Italian matriarch? Things weren’t looking good. Joe looked ready to jump out the window. Sean stepped away.

“Did I hear you say Sal Peretti? Is that *chooch* still braying about making Philly’s best cannoli? He’s nothing but a crook! That piece of garbage ran my father outta the business!” She marched up to Joe and practically put her finger on his nose as he stared at her in amazement. “Don’t let him get away with it. You hear me, Joey? We’re taking him down.”

“Mom—”

“I need to sit. I’m so angry I can’t stop shaking.” With Joe on one arm and Sean on the other, she made her way to the bed and sat on the edge. “This is giving me *agita*, but let me tell you the unvarnished truth about Sal Peretti. When I was a girl in South Philly, I worked in my father’s bakery and, let me tell you, we made the best cannoli in the neighborhood. In the city! Peretti was just a two-bit hood who started up a bakery around the corner from us, and that’s when the trouble began. He told my father to pay him or he’d drive him out of business. My father wouldn’t do it. Next thing you know, the health department comes in and finds enough violations to shut us down! We were clean! But Peretti, he had connections. He said he’d kill my father if he tried to reopen and shot him in the knee. I was behind the bread slicing machine. I saw

the whole thing go down.” She patted Joe’s hand. “That’s why your Pop Pop Gennaro moved back to Sicily and opened a bakery in Castelveto.”

Joe picked up her hand and clasped it between his much bigger ones. “Hell, Mom, you never told us that.”

“We weren’t supposed to say nothing. He was very ashamed—but such a gentle man, he never hurt anything bigger than a fly. I was old enough to stay with Aunt Giovanna, Carmela’s mother, which is how I ended up meeting your father.” She smiled and gave Joe’s face a wistful pat. “Such a handsome man. But the thing is, he was a baker, like *his* father, so we had lots in common—and I had your Pop Pop’s recipes. He wrote them all down for me before he ever left.”

“The cannoli!” Sean was sure of it.

She nodded. “The best cannoli in South Philly. In the city. But now made here at Dippolito’s in Delaware County.”

“We have the best recipe!” Sean couldn’t believe their luck. Maybe all bakers believed their recipes were superior to those of their competitors, but in this case he was too in love with the romance of the origin story to question it. Of *course* Dippolito’s had the best recipe!

“Mom—” there was no denying the warm tone of Joe’s voice as he spoke to his mother—“even if we do this crazy event, I’m not going to be doing it to Salvatore Peretti. He retired a few years ago. His son runs the business.”

She lifted her chin. “I know. That *stunad*, Sal, lives at the Winchester. During my last visit there, I heard him boasting about his pasticceria. Once I moved in there I was planning to put something in his soup. But now I got a better idea.” She looked them both in the eye. “We’re going to make off with Sal Peretti’s ‘King of Cannoli’ crown!”

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## Chapter Eight

The next day was heaven and hell. It started well, with Joe waking up early and Sean being able to lay warmly snuggled in Fortunato Dippolito's childhood bed, listening to Joe sing in the shower. Joe didn't sing so loudly as to wake his mother, but Sean smiled down to the tips of his toes when Joe belted out the lyrics to "Centerfield". Fogerty... baseball... perfect. Just as perfect as seeing Joe stepping out of the bathroom with wet, tousled hair, bare feet, and a pink towel wrapped around his best parts, a vision of virile Italian male. Sean licked the corner of his lips, hoping to maybe... but Joe gave him a shake of the head and a look that told him to cut it out, so he showered alone like the respectful guest he was. He emerged to the smell of coffee and eggs. He sighed with happiness.

"You really can do everything."

Joe's shoulders squared and he shot him a look. That was not good. "I'm still pissed off at you about the meet up thing."

"But you're still talking to me. That's a good thing, right?"

"I'm only talking to you because you're not Italian. You don't know the rules. You might think it was about the other thing. But it's not. It's about you stepping over the line into my business."

"I really thought—"

"Look, you're going to have to give me some time to get over it. And for all I know, Mom's listening in. She's got big ears. So not now, okay?"

"Yeah. Okay."

Things went downhill after that. He and Joe were all business at the bakery... something both of them found difficult. First there was a close call in the break room when Joe actually looked like he was relenting and about to say something conciliatory, but then Freddie chose that moment to make his delivery. After that, whenever Sean was around Joe always had someone else with him. He also never spoke to Sean about anything other than work. What surprised Sean most was how much it hurt to feel Joe pulling away from him... and to know he was doing it because of him. He'd predicted there would be repercussions and had gone ahead anyway. He just hadn't known making Joe unhappy would cut him like razor blades. He was fucking bleeding. That could only mean one thing and it terrified him.

Was he in love with the business—or with Joe?

By the time his shift ended, all Sean wanted in the world was to be on the receiving end of one of Joe's devastatingly soulful looks, or one of those secret smiles that made him melt. He was in the break room putting on his boots in preparation for the hike home when he heard Joe's voice boom from the other room.

"I'm driving Whelan home." Joe popped his head around the door of the break room. "That was our deal, right?"

"Yeah. But we're half staffed."

"Angie is sending Freddie over. So many clients closed for business today he got his deliveries done early. Let me get my coat."

Though the streets were treacherous, the drive to Sean's house was tense for other reasons. For once in his life, Sean couldn't think of a single thing to say. Joe wasn't giving him the silent treatment. Sean simply didn't know how to respond to Joe's stiff civility. He didn't know how to push past it. And he wanted to push. He wanted it so much it was almost a relief to reach his house and find out his driveway was plowed in. Joe would have to drop him off.

At least someone had done a good job clearing most of Sean's actual driveway and walks, probably his neighbor Brian, who never turned down a chance to play Good Samaritan with a snow blower. In return, Sean took care of Brian's dog when the older man and his wife took their twice yearly cruises.

"Got a shovel?" Joe eyed up the two-foot barricade of snow, slush and ice.

"I can do it. You go back."

"Look, Whelan, I'm mad at you. I don't hate you and want you to die of a heart attack on me. So do you have a shovel?"

"Please. I'm from Wisconsin. I've got two."

Joe left the SUV in the street and together they cleared the end of the driveway in fifteen minutes. When they were done, Sean took the shovels and headed to the porch at the back of his house and expected Joe would leave. Instead, he heard a vehicle crunching its way up the driveway. He looked around in surprise when Joe climbed out of the car.

"Nice house, Whelan."

Sean wanted to smile but fought it. He used one of the shovels on the two steps leading up to the back door and kept speaking as he shoveled. "My

grandfather told me to buy real estate. Over the years he collected a bunch of rental houses in Milwaukee and now he sells one off every couple years to fund his retirement.” He finished and shot Joe a hopeful look. “If you’d like to see inside, I can treat you to some frozen pizza and a beer.”

Joe nodded. “Works for me.”

Sean fumbled with his keys for a moment before he could open the door. He mentally ticked off his checklist for visitors. Floor recently mopped... check. Carpets vacuumed... two days ago. Bathroom... he always kept that clean. The clutter was another story. His pack rat tendencies would be on full display the moment they walked through the door.

He ushered Joe into the combination mud room and pantry, where they sat on the bench to take off their heavy snow boots and hung up their coats. From there, he gave the grand tour of the first floor starting with the kitchen and ending in the living room. Books and magazines overflowed the end and coffee tables into stacks on the floor.

“I guess you’re a reader,” Joe observed.

“I tried to break the habit but ended up buying cereal just to read the boxes. Sit down. I’ll get the pizza started and come back with the beers.”

Usually he just microwaved his pizza, but for Joe he opted to preheat the oven. At least he could give his guest a better crust. When he walked back into the living room, he saw Joe looking at something on the mantel above the fireplace.

“This it?”

“The Brandie. Yes.” As awards went, it was impressive. Blue agate globe and gold-plated wings, with his name prominently engraved on the plaque in front.

“That’s really nice. You should be proud of it.” Joe’s brows drew together, and Sean could see the thoughts lining up behind his boss’s serious eyes. “We need to talk about some things.” Sean sat on the luxe leather couch and Joe followed his example. Despite still wearing his chef jacket, he looked at home amidst Sean’s books. “What were you thinking? You know my feelings about the bakery and how I hate all that corporate crap. It’s all I can do now to keep the commercial side from becoming a problem. You got the fancy degree, so you know already what happens when a company grows too fast. If I outgrow my facilities, I need to acquire new ones, right? Hire more people. Maybe I

have to borrow money. I did that already two years ago. My father baked everything right at the shop and upstairs. When I took over, I got us some restaurant contracts and bought the Brooke Street kitchen, and we're finally making enough to pay off the loan."

"You're right." And he was. Sean understood what Joe was saying. Many small companies failed to make the transition to larger operations, and Dippolito's was doing *well*, not badly. "Look, Joe, I don't want Dippolito's to change. I'm not suggesting you do change. I love everything about your operation, I love the people, the place—and your emphasis on quality most of all. It's brilliant and successful and... I just think you can do something really special and, well, I guess I want to be part of it."

Joe put his forehead in his hand. "I wish you would just talk to me about these things before you run out and do them."

"Every time I try, you shut me down."

"And you're not used to being shut down, are you? But maybe that's what I gotta do. I have a lot of responsibility. More than half my family depend on this bakery. They have mortgages, kids, cars, some have college loans. Take Freddie. He has a wife in a wheelchair and two kids. She works in the office over on Brooke. The oldest kid needs braces. This is the real world and not some marketing exercise. People depend on me and I can't take crazy chances with the business."

"Not all chances are crazy. Some are opportunities."

"Like you. And me. I get that, you know." At least Joe no longer looked angry. He was trying, and he was sorting things out in ways Sean found revealing.

Sean grinned. "Will you let me tell you about an opportunity that's even better than me?" The look Joe bestowed said he didn't think he would escape *without* hearing it. "Buy Renard's bookstore. Connect it to Dippolito's and make it into a coffeeshop."

"A coffeeshop? There's a coffee shop down the street next to Trader Joe's."

"Yes. And it sells crappy donuts. It's a competitor. It steals business. What's the most common question—aside from 'What do you call that?'—we get every day? It's 'Do you serve coffee?'"

"I get that. Believe me, I hear it more than you do. People want a cuppa to go with their cannoli as they ride the trolley to work. We tried coffee a couple

years ago. A coffee pot, some cups. But people want sugar, and cream, and flavors—and places to sit. It took up space, there was paper everywhere and spills and... it became too much of a problem.”

Sean leaned forward. Couldn't Joe see that this was not just an opportunity, but a golden, once-in-a-lifetime shot at redefining his bakery? “But that's what Renard's bookstore is. Space. Imagine what you could do with it. The possibilities are endless!”

Joe laughed and shook his head. “You're hard to argue with, but if I bought that building, I'd have to renovate it. Buildings and renovations cost money, and the only thing I have to offer a bank as collateral for a loan is the bakery. Or the Brooke Street kitchen. And I'm not leveraging the business.”

Then that was that. Joe wasn't going to budge. He sat here on Sean's couch looking as solid and unmovable as an offensive lineman. Nothing that looked even remotely risky was getting anywhere near his baby. Dippolito's might not grow, and it might not shine as brightly as it could, but it was as safe and well-managed a business as Sean had ever encountered. He smiled and acknowledged defeat.

“I'm still going to throw ideas at you.”

“And I still want to hear them. I want you to believe that, because it's true.”

“Maybe we should pull out of the Cannoli Festival.”

Joe stared at him in disbelief. “Did you hear my mother? There's no way we're not going to be there! No one crosses a Sicilian when she's got her heart set on revenge. She's been on the phone all morning. She'll have the whole clan up in arms by the time I get home.”

“Are you serious?”

“You got to understand, it's a matter of family pride. It's personal now. We're going to have to show up and we're going to have to win. Nothing short of that will put this vendetta to rest.”

What had he set in motion? There was no way in the world anyone could guarantee a win in a contest involving judges and food. Especially if one's nemesis was a shady baker with underworld connections. Maybe those connections had frayed over the years, or died. Sean hoped so. He also hoped the Mafia was far more interested in drugs and gambling than bakery.

It was time to take a gamble of his own. He leaned toward Joe and locked eyes with those questioning brown ones.

“So maybe we can put this behind us, or forget it ever happened?” To emphasize the peace offer, he extended his hand.

“Behind us is good, as far as we can.” With a shy grin, Joe took Sean’s hand and lowered it to the couch between them, where he held it warm within his own. “But you’re going to have to deal with the fact I don’t forget things. It’s not just the family tradition of revenge. I told you—I’ve got one of those minds that remembers stuff. Recipes, addresses, names and faces of people. I can tell you every grade I got in every subject and also who I sat next to. It’s pretty useful. But I also don’t forget some things I wish I could forget.”

“Like what?”

“The time I woke up in a hotel room and found out the guy I’d picked up at the club had made off with my wallet and watch. If I ever see that fuck again, I’m going to wring his neck. I had to call Freddie to come pick me up.”

Sean laughed. He had his own trove of tales of misadventure. “I had a guy walk out on me at Olive Garden. He said he had to use the restroom and never came back. I even went into the bathroom to be sure, but he was nowhere to be found. For two days I called him and got no answer, but then Jill called him and... he told her he thought he might be gay but decided he wasn’t.”

“Kind of impolite not to let you know.”

“At least he got a free meal out of it. He finished his entrée, just didn’t stay for dessert.”

“And then there’s me—the guy who never got his entrée. As I recall, you said there’d be pizza.”

The oven had beeped. He’d ignored it. “Oh gosh, I am so sorry—”

“I didn’t come in for the pizza.”

Was that a glint in Joe’s eyes? Sean decided to pounce on the opening and leaned forward. “What did you come in for then? The beer—or me?”

“I’m not sure. Something I needed to find out.” Joe’s teasing smirk faded as his gaze searched Sean’s face. “I’m not sure I can do this, whatever it is we’re doing. I just know that I want to.”

He wasn’t talking about the Cannoli Festival. He was talking about *them*. Sean was so relieved he threw himself at Joe, straddling him and pressing a kiss on the surprised man’s lips. Just as he was thinking he’d made a mistake that would send Joe running from his house, he felt Joe’s arms reach around him

and pull him in. The warm soft lips he remembered welcomed his and then answered hungrily. Sean's hands went to work, tugging open Joe's white jacket while the other man's hands worked loose Sean's shirt and lifted it up. Sean mouthed Joe's lips, his face, tracing the strong line of his jaw, then dipping to explore the corded and wonderful hollows of his neck. Joe smelled so good, clean and male, and his big hands were laying claim to large expanses of Sean's body. Sean insisted on taking off Joe's chef jacket and then the T-shirt underneath. As he'd suspected, Joe's chest boasted a generous pattern of black hair over well-developed muscles, narrowing beneath his pecs like a silky funnel into his pants. Sean grinned and ran his hands over the dusky curls.

"Guess you don't mind all the hair." Joe's breath warmed Sean's neck.

"No. I like it." Lots of men preferred their partners to be smooth, but Sean liked chest hair—all the more because, well, he didn't have any. Or rather, he had seven. Seven chest hairs. He slipped out of Joe's embrace and sat up. "Look at me. I have so few chest hairs I've named them."

"You look perfect, Sean." If Joe's voice were any huskier, it would be a growl. "I can't believe I'm with a guy like you. You're the whole package. Education. Good looks—"

"Average looks. I'm average."

"Not on this planet. But then you are from Bumblehump—"

"Wisconsin."

"That's what I said."

With a grin, Sean moved his hands to Joe's pants. He licked his lips and watched the expression on Joe's face change as he understood. "You know what? I think both of us have been a little... cock deprived."

Joe was breathing heavily now. "Cock deprived?"

"You know."

"Yeah, it's a very serious condition."

Sean eased Joe's pants over his hips and down his thighs. He then stood to divest himself of his pants also. That done, he sank to his knees and took hold of Joe's cock, already stiff and standing up for attention. One of the wonderful things about cocks was that they knew what they wanted. Joe's wanted to be stroked and admired. Just the heavy feel of the veined shaft in his hand, and the scent rising from Joe's dense bush, redolent of musk and male, was enough to

drive Sean wild. He ran his tongue around the cock head, teasing its beautiful, flared ridge, wetting it before he wrapped his lips around the tip and gave a long lick to help take it deep. He hummed with pleasure when Joe wrapped a hand around his head, fingers threading through his hair, signaling him to continue.

Yeah, Joe wanted this too. The wet, hot, sucking pleasure Sean could give him. He slurped and hollowed his cheeks with suction and used every trick he knew until he had Joe clenching white-knuckled handfuls of the cushions.

“You got a frigging degree in cocksucking too? Fuck. Slow down...”

Sean did. Joe had given up on holding his head, so he drew back and stopped sucking, though he continued to lick, working his way all around Joe's cock and down to his balls. Big and round and warm in a cozy nest of fur. “I can't help it,” he explained. “It's what happens when I'm cock deprived. Besides, you really need this.” He began to lick Joe's full balls, rolling the left one with his tongue while fisting Joe's cock.

“Oh yeah, I kinda do—”

The way Joe's hips bucked up, shoving his cock in his face, was so needful Sean saw no point in teasing him too long. He didn't want to frustrate Joe, only drive him wild and then enjoy the results. Like having Joe's big body moving under his hands and feeling the taut swell of his buttocks, the powerful surge of his thighs as he dug in his heels to lift for more contact or less, and hearing his pleas for mercy or more—because Joe didn't know what the hell he needed anymore.

But Sean knew exactly what he wanted. Leaving Joe's balls wet and high, he sheathed his teeth with his lips and plunged down again on Joe's cock, sucking and licking and giving the other man what he needed. He knew he was right when Joe grabbed his head again and held him to it, demanding completion. A single guttural cry announced Joe's ejaculation, a jerk of the hips accompanied by the hot thick pulse of bitter semen across Sean's tongue. He swallowed in gulps and stopped his sucking, though he continued to ever so softly lave Joe's cock. He damn well loved that cock, at least at that moment. He loved that cock and the hot, gasping body it belonged to.

Joe's hand moved across his hair, petting him like a spaniel. There was something tender in that gesture, something utterly personal.

When Sean looked up, Joe lay sunk into the sofa cushions like a man well fucked and wore an expression so seriously adoring it struck him in the heart. A



man like Joe who took things seriously was going to be the same way about sex. Such a look should scare him. Instead, it made him feel happy.

“Come here.” Joe’s delicious growl summoned more than Sean’s body to rise and straddle his thighs. Joe tossed away pillows and wriggled around until he found the position he wanted. “Closer. You’re too far away.” He reached around and grabbed Sean by the ass, hauling him up onto his chest and shoving Sean forward. Sean braced against the couch and realized his dick was pointing straight at Joe’s face. “Yeah, like that.”

“Feeling a little cock deprived yourself, are you?”

“Well, you took care of some of that—but there’s no way I’m going anywhere without getting a taste of you.”

Sean gasped as Joe’s strong tongue set to work. He’d wondered how Joe might be at sex, if he would be rough or gentle, awkward or experienced. Joe was all of those things, a heady explosion of raw enthusiasm coupled with a generous mouth and what had to be the world’s most limber tongue. Sean’s cock was being wrapped in muscle and pulled straight into heaven.

“God, Joe!” The words tumbled from Sean’s gasping lips.

Afraid of coming too fast, he tried to pull back but Joe had planted his hands on Sean’s ass and was kneading his buttocks, holding him fast. Whatever blood wasn’t already in his dick rushed straight to it. Sean sagged into Joe’s rhythm, focused only on pleasure. He hadn’t been with another man sexually in months and, better yet, he loved it when the other man seized control. When Sean felt Joe running a finger between his butt cheeks and down across his hole, he nearly lost it then and there. Maybe Joe knew that, because he stopped sucking on Sean’s cock and smiled up at him.

“Look at you. I think you like that.” Instead of sucking Sean’s cock, Joe now grasped it with his other hand. Firm. In control. He simultaneously flicked a thumb across the wet cock head while rubbing at Sean’s anus. Sean quivered with anticipation.

“You’re a tease. You could have just asked.”

“Yeah, well—” Joe pushed with his finger until the tip entered and Sean pushed back with a happy groan—“I guess I’m asking.”

“Yes.” Sean loved the way Joe’s finger stretched him, the intimate burn of penetration. Being fucked was his favorite thing of all, and even if they didn’t quite get to that this time, he liked knowing it was on the table.

He clamped his knees hard against Joe's ribs and pushed back eagerly, greedy for more. Between Joe's finger working in his ass, finding and then massaging his prostate, and the glorious friction of Joe's fist encasing his plunging cock, Sean reached the edge and pushed off. An orgasm that seemed to start in his toes rocketed to his cock and balls and exploded. He jetted come into Joe's cupping hand and his ass bucked and clamped on the finger within it. He might have cried "Fuck yes!" out loud. He wasn't sure about that. He rode that wave while it lasted, and then he scooted back and sank gratefully down upon Joe's broad body. "God, that was good. You're amazing."

Joe kissed his head and nuzzled his hair with a few more. Their heartbeats tapped at each other through their ribs as their bodies settled back to normal. A few minutes passed before Sean turned so his face tilted toward Joe's. The smile in the other man's eyes convinced him to lean in for a kiss. Their lips met for a deep, slow communion.

"I think you're pretty amazing too. I guess it's been a while for both of us." Joe's gaze lay warmly on his.

"Yeah. I mean, for me, I haven't been in a relationship since... there was a guy I was seeing for a while a year ago, but he took a job in Atlanta and I still had Montgomery Whelan so... anyway, it turned out once we weren't seeing each other or having sex, we didn't miss each other. I was perfectly happy without him."

"At least you had someone for a while. I've never had someone who was like a date or anything. It's not like I could bring them home to meet the parents or anything like that. I only told Mom two years ago and Dad never knew at all, or if he did he never talked about it. All my life's been in a closet." Joe tugged him closer and Sean burrowed deeper against him. "So I go to these clubs, the ones I know and the ones I find out about, and I pick up guys and it never leads to anything but sex. I guess they don't look at me like the kind of guy they want to take home either."

"So you've only had one night stands?" Sean found that incredibly sad. Joe was exactly the kind of man anyone would want to take home.

"Sounds awful when you say it like that, but yeah." For a long moment, they listened to the sound of a snow blower somewhere outside. "It's strange because I can remember all their faces, but I never knew anything about them and they never knew anything about me. We'd talk about things, but never anything that mattered. When I look back, they're all like ghosts."

“Joe—” Sean sighed against his chest—“I don’t want to become one of those ghosts.”

“No way. You live and walk around inside my head. You fuck with my business and you met my mother. You’re all real.”

“That’s good. Because I’m not one of those people who goes from man to man. I’m always looking for something more—” *permanent*—“stable.” That worked. As relationship words went, stable sounded pretty open ended.

“Are you telling me you want a second date?”

“Yeah. But first let’s wash up and I’ll put that pizza in the oven.”

Joe’s laugh vibrated through his chest wall. Sean thought it the most wonderful sound in the world.

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## Chapter Nine

The week after Easter was traditionally a quiet time for the bakery, which meant it was perfect for Mama Jo to make her move to her spiffy new apartment in the luxurious Winchester senior community, which the Dippolito clan called “Winchester Cathedral”. It fit the appellation. Sean, who’d been recruited as family through some kind of invisible network, looked out the window of Freddie’s truck at the complex of buildings outfitted with towers, battlements, dormers, and pennants flying atop turrets. The entrance was built like a gatehouse complete with portcullis. The only thing missing was a moat.

“It’s a freaking castle!” Sean’s exclamation earned him a hearty laugh from Freddie, with whom he had paired for that trip. Joe had stayed behind to deal with cleaning up and figuring out how to move his mother’s television.

Freddie chuckled. “If there’s ever a zombie apocalypse, this will be our last hope. I’m not kidding. I can just see the oldsters kicking zombie ass.”

Freddie took the service road and pulled up to a loading dock. A brace of Dippolito cousins—nineteen year old Katelyn, and her brother, twenty something Tony—jumped to their feet and helped unload. They vied back and forth about how high and heavy to load the Winchester’s platform hand truck.

“If you make it too heavy, then you can’t push it alone. Uncle Freddie, tell him if he hits a wall he’ll have to pay for the damage.” Katelyn tried to lighten the load by removing boxes but her brother would have none of it. For every one she removed he seemed intent on adding two.

“Well, it won’t be me or Sean here paying for any damage, I can tell you that.” Freddie heaved the last of the boxes onto the dock. “And if you ask my mother to pay it, me and your Uncle Joe will have both your asses. *Capiche?*”

“There won’t be any damage!” Tony pushed the fully loaded hand truck forward, blocking his sister from running in front of it at the elevator doors. He shot her triumphant grin.

“We got a couple more things back at the house.” Freddie shouted as he waved a goodbye. “Tell your Aunt Angie, Joe’s working on that television but he’s about to have a stroke.”

“I’ll tell her!” Katelyn shot her brother an evil look and raced for the stairwell.

“Hey!” Tony held out his hands. “Uncle Freddie! This thing’s fucking heavy! She’s supposed to help!”

“Not my problem, big shot. She warned you, so now you get to hear about it the rest of your life. Sean and me got to save Joe from being crushed by a TV. We’re out of here.” Freddie jumped down and Sean was right on his heels. Last thing he wanted was to be pressed into service by the younger Dippolito.

After they’d climbed back into the truck and were on their way, Freddie flashed him a grin. “Bet you never thought you were signing on for this.”

“Not in a million years,” Sean admitted readily. He’d wanted a change of pace from his high-pressure job and disapproving mother, but he hadn’t counted on being pulled into the coils of a big Italian family.

“It’s going to be different for Joey, having the place to himself.”

Sean bit back a smile. This was Freddie’s latest attempt to fish. Might as well do a little of that himself. “Has he ever lived on his own?”

“Nah, never. Not that that’s unusual. Italian mothers make it easy. They want their boys home until another woman can take over the responsibilities. I lived at home ’til I married and Joey never had a reason to leave. Angie, though, soon as she got out of school and started drawing a paycheck, she got herself an apartment. Not that Mom would’ve kicked her out. She didn’t like Angie moving out like that but I’ll be honest, it was a good thing for both of them.”

Sean looked out the side window at the yards of the subdivision lining the road. Though snow covered the lawns from the late-season storm, the sun had returned. Pretty soon forsythia bushes as large as garden sheds would overflow with yellow flowers. His mind was on other things. Would Joe take well to living on his own? His own move into solitude had been more gradual, involving college dorms followed by off-campus housing. He’d moved into his own apartment when Dan and Jenn married, and from there into his own house. Society’s safe, step-by-step road map to an independent and productive adulthood. He’d lived most of his life by the book, except for being gay. And even that...

It was painful to realize how, until now, he’d been so completely conventional. He’d dedicated himself to the pursuit of high grades, hot boys, an Ivy League education, an artsy career in a field that accepted his sexual orientation, a house in a gentrified neighborhood. He’d even kept his parents’

disapproval at bay by moving out of state, ensuring no one in his family had to confront his homosexuality head on. And he'd made Jill Montgomery a lot of money. He'd made a lot of money for himself. But what did he have to show for it? His house, he supposed. His grandfather had been right about real estate being a sound place to park money. But what else did he have? He had a Brandie sitting on his shelf, but the marketing campaign for which he had won it was already obsolete and the company's stock was plunging because, however glitzy, their product had been shit.

Nothing in his life bore any resemblance to what Joe had in Dippolito's, or the way the man was trying to fit being gay into a life that included so many other people. Sean couldn't say at all if any of the other workers at the bakery knew about their boss's sexual preference. If they did, they were silent and if they didn't, Joe liked it that way. And while Freddie and Angie knew about Joe, they most likely didn't know for certain about Sean. Joe was way too private to ever share something that personal. Sean decided it was time to take another one of his creative chances and looked back at Joe's pudgy brother.

"I'm gay, you know."

Freddie didn't swerve in traffic. He never even blinked. His hands on the wheel remained steady as rocks. "Yeah, Angie and I figured that when you were all into decorating cakes. No straight guy we know gives a crap about making flowers out of icing. But then a few nights ago Mom came downstairs and she heard you and Joey going at it in the break room. The next morning she told me about it and said, 'I think Sean's gay.' And I said to her, 'Well, yeah. And he slept in my old bed last night, but how is that a problem?'"

"That makes no sense."

"Hang on there. It makes perfect sense. I don't need that old bed so what does it matter who sleeps in it, and Mom needs to realize Joey doesn't need her—" Freddie glanced over for just a moment—"I don't mean that in a bad way. I mean maybe hearing the two of you together made her realize Joey's fully cooked and kissing guys, and she can't do nothing to change that. I'm not sure it was one hundred percent real to her before." Freddie stopped talking as he drove around a pickup truck making an eventual right. "It's not been easy for any of us to wrap our heads around this gay thing. The way we grew up... it's a big change, huge, like changing religions, only we didn't—except where Joey's concerned. He didn't tell us for a long time, probably because our old man would have killed him, so we've had to adjust. And Mom's been beating herself up, trying to find a way to put Joey back in the oven."

After another pause during which Sean thought it best to say nothing, Freddie continued. "A mother's love is the most powerful force on Earth, Sean, its right up there with the angels. A mother doesn't ever give up as long as she thinks her boy is going to suffer. It took her a while to realize Joey'd be okay. He's got a good heart and a good head, and he's not stupid about the sex stuff. I think maybe it woke her up a little to find out the guy he fancies isn't degenerate or crazy. He's a guy who went to Wharton and for some dumbass reason comes to our shop every day to decorate cakes, work his ass off, and make Joey happy."

It was a lot to digest. Nothing about Joe's family resembled the one Sean had grown up in. His mother and father's disapproval was less open, an icy dismissal of their relationship. "I'm just glad they're talking again."

"Oh yeah. It was pretty bad. But they'll be okay now."

"She showed me family pictures."

"Holy fuck! You're all but adopted." Freddie cast him another sidelong, concerned glance. "She tell you anything else?"

Sean relaxed into the seat and propped his arm on the window. "My lips are sealed."

"Fuck. Okay, brace yourself. It might take both of us to keep Joey from killing his mother if he's having trouble with that TV. I don't know why the hell she won't just let us dump it and buy herself a nice flat screen!"

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Joe was waiting for them wearing gray sweatpants, an Eagles sweatshirt, and a layer of sweat and dust. His hair stuck out all around his head. The TV sat on the upstairs landing, looking well hated. Mama Jo was adamant about wanting the television to make the move with her. As she'd explained it, where else was she going to put all the framed photos of her family?

It took an hour for the three of them to wrestle the ancient console down to the loading dock where the truck waited. Sean found himself wishing he had gotten a degree in geometry and physics. Better yet would have been the body of a professional weightlifter. The television weighed a ton and its size necessitated the invention of winches and levers on the spot. It took borrowed rope, knots learned to earn Boy Scout badges, and the strength of guys who'd hauled stone blocks up the sides of the Pyramids to get the damn thing down the stairs. By the time they'd managed to heave it up into the truck, they were sweaty, frayed, and exhausted.

Sean looked at Joe, who looked at Freddie, who said, "Screw Mom. Angie's got her unpacking china. Let's grab a pizza at Calzone's and cool off. It's fucking rush hour."

They closed up the truck and walked to the small pizzeria two blocks over. The place had plenty of customers but most gathered at the takeout window. As they wound their way to the tables at the back, the rotund man making pizzas looked up and gave a shout.

"Hey, Joey Dipp! Freddie Sneakers!"

Joe raised his hand. "Flipper!"

"Flipper?" Sean asked.

"He flips pizzas. He's really good. Should watch him sometime." Joe pointed to an open table along the wall.

They'd no sooner taken a seat than Flipper strolled over. He was as wide as two of his tables. "How about all that snow? Bets on how long it takes to melt?"

"Four days," said Sean. When all three men stared at him, he added, "That's how long it takes. Here."

"He's from Wisconsin," Joe explained.

Something clattered in the kitchen, and Flipper looked around to see what it was. Apparently it was nothing important because he resumed the conversation. "So Renard tells me your mother's moving out. You staying in the upper, Joe?"

"That's the plan."

Flipper gesticulated to his staff and told them to bring the table a pizza. "That's good, 'cuz if you moved I'd miss seeing you guys around. Renard's moving too, I hear, soon as he finds someone to buy his store. Probably no one will want a bookstore, but the property's in a good location. Did he tell you he plans to follow your mom out to Chester County?"

Freddie chipped in. "He's been sweet on her for years. After his wife died at that nursing home, he started coming over for dinner two nights a week. He probably wants to keep up the regular meals."

"Well, he certainly won't be making up the difference here for much longer. Told me something else, though. Is it true Dippolito's is going to be in the Philly Cannoli Festival this year?" Flipper's round face peered down like a greasy moon.



Sean watched the brief passage of resignation across Joe's tired face. Freddie, on the other hand, looked amused.

"Yeah," Joe admitted. "We're in this year. It's a great opportunity." He was being gracious. Sean wished he really believed it. To his surprise, Joe pointed his way. "Hey, this here is my personal marketing assistant, Sean. You should get to know him. Before long he'll be buying you T-shirts and signing you up for festivals."

A great laugh rolled out of Flipper. "Dippolito's T-shirts? I would buy one and wear it with pride! I support all the locals. Hell, I give Calzone's shirts to my staff. Advertise!"

"You interested in a street festival in Manayunk?" Sean asked. It was worth a shot and he liked Flipper.

"Manayunk? No. But if you hear of one in this area, I'm all ears. And if there's any way I can help out for your festival, Joe, let me know. Here's your pie, guys. Enjoy." Flipper cheerfully went back to his kitchen.

Sean grabbed a triangle of pie and lifted it to his mouth. Pizza was a savory tradition he understood. Cheese, pepperoni, and mushrooms—chewy, spicy and hot from the oven, pizza was the perfect food. He grinned across the table. "Joey Dipp, eh?"

"You don't get to call me that." Joe cast a sour glance in the direction of Freddie's chuckle. "Come on. It sounds dumb. I can't stop people like Flipper from saying it, but I can stop the both of you."

"I think it's great. And Fred here is Sneakers."

"Because I'm sneaky. I stole Flipper's younger brother's girl, but he got over it after she dumped me for some loser in Jersey." Freddie looked unrepentant. "Just water," he said to the kid who had just gotten around to asking for their drinks.

They all said water. A day of moving had left them thirstier than camels. After a few minutes of silence, but for the happy sounds of chewing and grunts of pleasure at the food, Sean had an idea.

"I think we should come up with a flyer."

Joe stiffened and his gaze shot to Sean's with a warning, but he had his mouth filled with pizza. Freddie seized the opening.

"What kind of flyer?"

“For the festival—” Sean darted into the explanation—“to let people in the area know we’re taking part. Maybe some will show up. It helps to have fans in attendance and it would be nice to see some friendly faces besides our own, right?”

Fred grabbed another slice of the pie. “He’s got a point, Joe. A flyer might be a good idea.”

Sean wanted Joe to think so. He watched for his reaction. Joe sighed. “When I said I wanted you to tell me things first, I didn’t mean in front of other people. You don’t need allies. And it is a good idea. Can you design one? Something simple that won’t cost too much? If possible I’d like to fit it into our advertising budget.”

“Yes.” Finally! Joe was giving him the green light on something he could sink his teeth into. He had updated graphics software on his computer at home. And there was an online printer who could do the job cheaply—

“And, Whelan?”

Sean crashed back to earth. Joe was still talking.

“Check with Gina—that’s Freddie here’s wife—to see who we use for printing. I think it’s Babcock, right?” Freddie nodded to Joe’s question. “I like to keep work local.”

“I can get it cheaper on the internet.”

“Yeah. I know.” Joe appeared to be watching Flipper, who was at that moment tossing a huge disk of pizza dough in the air to the applause of admiring customers. “And my customers can buy bread cheaper at the Giant. I think it’s important to support smaller businesses and local guys. Price is important but it’s not the only consideration. I like the personal touch. Knowing the guy I’m doing business with makes the community richer and stronger, and me only a little poorer.”

“You got it.” Though Sean had known all along Joe was his boss, at that moment he felt it. It had been easy for him to dabble at working in a bakery. Menial work was a good way to avoid really allowing someone else to be in charge of him. He could always leave the job.

Except now he knew he couldn’t. He wanted to ace this job more than he’d ever wanted anything, and he wanted to do it for his boss.

After finishing the pizza, they walked back to the bakery. Dusk had settled over the town, changing its complexion. Restaurant signs blossomed along the

street, and the passage of a trolley, its interior lit to show a few passengers occupying the mostly empty seats, was surreal. The bakery lights were off and Jordana had just locked up. Joe intercepted her and had a short conversation at a waiting minivan with her mother, probably thanking them both, before sending them on. He came back to join Sean and Freddie, but stopped Sean from walking to the front of the truck.

"Dropping this stuff off will take half the night. There'll be plenty of help at Winchester Cathedral and, well, I think at least one of us should get a good night's sleep."

They didn't want him to tag along. "Sure," Sean said.

"Hey, Sean." The wide back end of the truck shielded them from Freddie's view. Joe braced one arm on the truck and raised the other to touch Sean's face. The gentle pressure of Joe's fingers made Sean hold his breath and not move. "I would rather spend another night with you."

"Really?"

"You have no idea." Joe leaned in and their lips met. Hot and stolen, the kiss warmed Sean to his bones. When they broke, they smiled into each other's eyes. "Climb in," Joe said. "We'll give you a lift."

They dropped him off on the street in front of his house. "Nice house," said Freddie, sounding surprised. And then the truck drove on to the bottom of the street and turned, leaving Sean to walk to his driveway and a house with two windows lit by timers. Another night alone, which felt more wrong than it used to. But at least now, for the first time in months, he had work to do. He would spend some time laying out the new flyer and try not to think about how he would rather be with the crazy Dippolitos, unpacking boxes, trading jibes and laughing their heads off. It was ridiculous for him to feel excluded when he wasn't part of the family.

It was the *business* he loved, the potential to bring something truly special and meaningful into his life. He just had to be careful about it. This wasn't about a man with whom he had a professional relationship that, just a few days ago, had become complicated—in all the best ways—by sex.

On his way into the door, Sean picked up his mail and tossed it onto the kitchen counter. He looked at it after he'd divested himself of his coat and boots. The usual. A few bills and ads... and a hand addressed envelope from Jill Montgomery. He tore it open to find a check inside.

\$100,000.00

The number required looking at twice. Sean grabbed a root beer from the refrigerator and plopped down on his sofa to make the call. Jill answered on the second ring.

“You told me not to call you, so I’ve been waiting.”

“I just opened my mail. I think you sent me someone else’s check.”

Even through the cell phone, Jill’s laugh sounded bright, though cold as icicles falling on glass. “Oh, Sean, you really don’t know the first thing about the money end, do you?”

“No. I hired someone to make sure I didn’t get cheated on the buyout.”

“I was hurt when you did that. I may be all about me, but I’m not about hurting friends. I never thought of you as anything else. That check is your ten percent of a marketing deal you’re going to be hearing about in a few days. The little company I told you about? Well, because of a few ideas I cooked up with your help, their app caught the eye of a bigger fish. Bigger Fish bought them and loved the ideas so much they wanted to continue the marketing relationship. Just call me Jaws.”

Sharks didn’t come any more opportunistic than Jill Montgomery. “So Jaws, how’s that penthouse office coming?”

“Any day now.”

Sean sank back into the cushions and laughed. “You’re a bitch, but I’m happy you made it.”

The silence on the line made him stop smiling. The gloating was missing when Jill spoke again. “You earned that money. Don’t undervalue yourself, Sean. You always undervalue yourself.”

“Is that why you partnered with me?”

“I knew you’d let me shine. It’s what you do best. Gotta go. Stay in touch.”

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## Chapter Ten

Joe dragged in the next day looking exhausted. He blamed it on his family and the move. As Joe explained, it had been nearly midnight before they'd managed to find just the right arrangement for Mama Jo's furniture, including the God-awful television which they'd hooked up to cable only with great difficulty and two trips to Radio Shack.

"So you know what she said?" Though Joe had pounded the dough into submission, he looked like he wanted to go another round. "She said 'The picture's off. Maybe I should get one of those flat TVs.'" Joe noticed when Sean couldn't keep down a chuckle. "You knew that was coming."

"Yeah, I kind of did."

"See, that's why it was best you weren't there. Freddie and I were saying some very unkind things about our mother on the way home last night. We needed to vent." Joe shot him a hopeful look. "Would you like to come by my place later? Maybe after six? We can order hoagies and watch the Phils. You like baseball, right?"

Was Joe asking him to hang out? He'd never done it before. Of course not, with his mother living in the same flat. But now... Joe had the flat to himself. And he wanted to spend time with Sean. Kind of like a date, or at least as close to one as Joe was likely to do until he got used to being with another man in public.

"Sure! I can bring something. Root beer? I have a stash of Sprecher's. It's the best."

"Just bring yourself. I'll have Flipper deliver."

After that, for the rest of the work day, Sean didn't need anything more. He wore a big smile on his face and charmed the customers into smiling too with his happy cake decorations. It was Del's birthday and he went to extra effort on a surprise cake just for her, embellishing Roxanne's blue delphiniums with airy little butterflies that delighted Del so completely she planted a big kiss on his cheek. When he left the bakery at two, Sean headed up the alley instead of to the street. After skirting snow piles half the size they'd been that morning, he turned the corner and made his way to State Street, then walked down the block of buildings toward Dippolito's again until he came to The Book Stop. After

pausing at the cracked wooden door with grimy glass and quaint lettering half-worn off, he went in.

The store smelled like wood oil, as if someone had been cleaning something other than the worn hardwood floors or the ancient bookshelves peeling paint and holding a disorder of books. The scent of stories locked away and perhaps never to be read hung in the air. The light would have been better if the big window at the front was not obscured by a half-pulled security fence and at least a decade's worth of dirt. A few beat up tables near the front looked more forlorn than inviting. Not a single customer graced the place, giving it an air of resigned neglect.

Renard looked up from his place behind the front counter. He wore a pinstriped blue shirt and dapper dark gray vest. His thin face split with a smile. "Might I hope you represent a new bakery delivery service?"

"No, Mr. Renard." Sean returned the smile. He looked around. "You'll have to come next door like everyone else."

"I'm sure I will. It's not the same without Josephine, but I can't go long without *pignoli* for my coffee."

"Are you selling all these books along with the shop?"

"If the buyer wants them. But there are no valuable books in this lot. I sold any that were worth anything to a collector. And another guy came through and bought boxes for resale on the internet. These books you see—" he regarded his store and its half-empty shelves sadly—"are just old and unwanted. But old books are still worth reading, if only people would give them a chance."

Sean thought so, too. People might balk at handing over money for battered books... but there might be other ways to make them useful. The shop had good bones, he thought, though his first step would be to get a building inspector in to make sure the structure was sound. He knew Dippolito's was rock solid, and the little boutique next door looked to be in good shape.

"What are you asking for this place?" He watched Renard's face register surprise.

"You mean what I'm selling it for?"

"Yes. I... well, I think I might know someone."

Renard fished in his vest pocket and pulled out a dog eared card. "Here's my realtor. You should know I'm in the position to wait for a buyer. I cannot, however, finance one."

Of course not. It would be foolish to tie up his money in a loan when he needed it to move out to Chester County to be near Mama Jo and enjoy what was left of his golden years. If he hoped to end up in the Winchester, Renard would need a solvent buyer. Sean had worked out last night what he could afford, and a little research into recent sales on this street left him optimistic. He just needed some figures and to talk with his bank and his grandpa. He owed the old man a call anyway.

He paid a dollar for an old science fiction paperback that promised some bondage and other fun stuff, then left with a smile on his face.

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Sean used his time at his house well. Fantasy baseball for one thing. The Bingles pitching needed a little of his time to make a couple of trade proposals. After that he showered and did what he could about his appearance. His hair was a bit on the shaggy side but it was too late now to go for a haircut. The best he could manage was a change of clothes—old soft jeans, a black Michael Gant Henley, his favorite beat up most comfortable boots in the world—and to stuff his laptop and a few other things in his back pack. Deciding it was time to give his car a run, he drove his much loved Toyota and parked it under the carport next to the single car garage behind the bakery. It looked almost at home. He then mounted the stairs and knocked.

Joe answered, and once more Sean was struck by how different he looked in jeans and, this time, a long-sleeved red and gray Phillies T-shirt. “Come in.”

The flat didn't look much changed from the night before when they'd hauled out the TV. Joe had mopped the kitchen floor, maybe, or vacuumed. There was a decent-sized flat screen probably moved from Joe's bedroom, now sitting on top of a cabinet Mama Jo had not taken with her. Otherwise the living room was pretty much empty. Fairly hideous mauve drapes covered the windows looking out over State Street. Some pillows and cushions lay in a heap near the center. A few large and heavy rugs—Turkish, Sean thought, at least the one on top—covered the carpet in front of the TV and looked like the spot from which they'd be watching the game.

“I'm not putting any furniture in here until I get rid of the wallpaper, get some fresh paint, and change the carpet. I'll pick something out this weekend.” Joe sat down first and pulled a pillow from the pile. “Make yourself comfortable.” He reached his arms around Sean, in a surprisingly artful move, pushed him backward and rolled him over onto the pillow. Sean looked up into Joe's grinning face. “I've been waiting all day to get you like this.”

This was promising. Sean locked his legs around Joe's hips and placed his hands on Joe's broad shoulders, doing nothing at all to stop the other man from swooping down for a kiss. He was already getting hard from thinking about what the night might have in store. Fucking like rabbits still sounded like a plan. He could tell Joe was getting hard too when he bumped his groin up for a little friction.

"Hey, tiger—" Joe grunted against Sean's neck—"don't you think we should eat first?"

"You serious? Who thinks of food at a time like this?" He worked Joe's T-shirt up to expose his chest and flat, dusky nipples. He propped his arms on the floor and pushed his face up into Joe's soft chest hair, searching with his tongue until he found a tempting jut of nipple and proceeded to latch onto it, licking and sucking.

"Oh, is that the way you want to play it?" That was all the warning Joe gave before he undid Sean's jeans and yanked them and his briefs down to his knees, something Sean facilitated by lifting his ass off the floor. What surprised him was to have Joe rock back, kick off his own jeans and briefs and then straddle Sean's shoulders, pinning his arms between his knees. Right above Sean's face hung the most delicious looking erect cock and firm furry balls.

Sean strove with everything in him to lick and mouth Joe's tempting flesh. Joe definitely had the advantage, though, and was both fisting Sean's hard dick and sucking at the tip. Apparently a lifestyle of furtive one-night stands had taught the man how to be devious. By twisting his torso, Sean was finally able to work Joe's knees back, not only freeing his arms so he could put his hands on Joe's tight, hard-muscled ass but also giving him a better angle on that meaty cock. Opening his mouth, he took Joe inside, his tongue lavishly stroking. Oh yeah... this was where he wanted to be. Under a hot man, feeling that other body moving with his, filling his mouth. And his own body was starting to gallop to the finish, driving hard, balls lifting and aching and... holy saints preserve him! Sean tried to focus instead on the cock in his mouth. Beautiful. Thick. Slippery with pre-come and Sean's saliva. He tipped back his head, taking Joe deeper, and clamped his hands hard on Joe's thrusting buttocks while he sucked for all he was worth.

He came before Joe, but only by moments. As he swallowed and sucked and hummed with happy fulfilment, he only then wondered if sex had been the right move. Sure, both of them wanted it, and needed it, but... maybe they needed other things more. Like trust. Or doing things together outside of work.



This was their chance for that, and it slapped Sean upside the head to realize Joe had proposed this evening as a way for them to do that, not hop in the sack.

Joe changed position and stretched out on the rug at Sean's side. He ran a hand over Sean's hair and looked down at him with an expression both puzzled and adoring. "You look like a kid. It's like sex takes ten years right off you. I can see how you must have looked in high school."

"It's the genes. My father looks younger sometimes, in the right light."

"Whatever you got, it must be some kind of magic. I can't seem to keep my hands off you."

He did a good job of keeping his hands off Sean in the bakery. Joe definitely had inherited some kind of discipline super power. Sean ran a hand down Joe's arm, admiring the flow of hard muscles under the other man's warm skin and body hair. "I love your body. That's why I watch you at work. I love seeing all this. And your eyes. When you look at me, I start thinking of all the things I can't do with you."

"The good news is we're not in the bakery. Maybe now for once we can both think straight."

With a laugh, Sean buried his face against Joe's chest and the soft fabric of the Phillies T-shirt. "That's what I was doing, taking the edge off our appetites."

"Oh, I don't know about that. My stomach is saying it wants more."

"Mine too." Sean sat up and pondered cleaning up before pulling his briefs and jeans back on. He looked around the room. "Do you know if there are hardwood floors under this carpet?" One of the first things Sean had done with his house was tear out all the carpet and refurbish the floors.

"Oh, there are." Joe got up and walked into the kitchen. He returned with some moist wipes. He handed one to Sean. "I think I'll just carpet the place. This room is right above the bakery. If anyone walks around up here, it might bother the customers."

That made sense, though it was shame, really, to waste the decorating potential. Sean wiped off his dick before tugging his jeans back over his hips. Before long he and Joe resumed sitting on the floor, poring over the Calzone's menu and ordering hoagies and cheese fries. Sean hauled his laptop out of his backpack and flipped it open.

"Let me show you my baseball team. The mighty Drexel Hill Bingles. You can help me keep track of my fantasy scores for the night."

"What's a bingle?"

"A single, when the player gets safely to first base. In Australia, though, it's a minor car crash. Either definition works for this team."

"Seriously, you put a lot of time into this stuff?" Joe settled next to him.

"Not just time. Money. If Dan and I win the league, we split a thousand bucks."

"A *thousand* dollars? How much does it cost you to play?"

"Three hundred upfront. We use the money to draft our players. There's a commissioner's fee too. But Dan and I split the cost, so I only paid one hundred fifty." Sean couldn't help but grin at Joe's disbelieving expression that anyone would pay so much for a fantasy game. "Hey, it's less than I pay for the gym I never go to anymore."

"Freddie does a football league, some sort of thing on Yahoo. He keeps trying to get me to play but I never have enough time."

"It doesn't take much time. See—" Sean showed Joe all his spreadsheets and the software the league used to track categories. Before they knew it, the doorbell rang to signal the arrival of their food.

Joe came back upstairs carrying a bag. They tore it open and spent the next hour watching the Phillies take on the Brewers. During commercials and the more mind-numbing parts of what was proving to be yet another boring Phillies loss, they looked over Sean's designs for the flyer that would tell the world—or at least the neighborhood—about Dippolito's taking part in the Philly Cannoli Festival.

"I still can't believe I let you talk me into that contest."

"I wasn't actually the one who—"

"No, you were."

Joe had a way of calling Sean on his bullshit that was actually quite wonderful. Mama Jo may have set the matter in cement, but she would never have chosen this course on her own. Now that she'd put the family behind the contest, though, there was no getting out. Sean flagged the flyer they'd both agreed on and made a note in his calendar to take the design to Babcock's the next morning for printing.

Joe turned off the game in the seventh inning. Once the Brewers were in the Phillies bullpen, the game was over anyway. As nighttime quiet settled over the apartment, broken only by the muffled sounds of light traffic or the occasional slam of a car door coming through the walls, Sean remained snuggled against Joe's body and waited. He didn't want to come across as pushy even though, all too often, he was.

"You want to sleep in my bed?" The question sounded hopeful. "You can be my first."

"First?"

"First guy I ever had in my own bed."

Sean would have done it anyway, but he was thrilled at the chance to leave his indelible mark on the history of Joe's bedroom. He followed Joe down the hall and this time didn't veer off to Freddie's old room. Joe left the light off, and they stripped by the glow of street lights and just a sliver of moon. Joe finished first and took a moment to run both hands over Sean's shoulders and down to the dip of his waist, where he continued to hold him.

"You're so damn hot, Sean. I can't believe I'm touching you." Stubble rasped Sean's ear as Joe murmured against his cheek and the combination produced a shiver that went straight to his groin.

"Then don't stop. Take everything you want." *Tonight. Every night.*

Joe turned him around, Sean's back to his front, and Sean softly groaned at the push of Joe's erection against his ass. He knew how big that beautiful cock was, and he wanted all of it. "Fuck this, Joe. Let's cut to the chase. I want you, all of you. I want you to fuck me."

"You sure?"

"Do you need my cat in heat impression? Yes, I'm sure."

"Yeah, and I want to give you a pounding to remember, but I want to do it right. You're too horny to think straight and I'm not sure where I hid the damn lube." Joe started opening drawers in the nightstand.

Sean smothered his frustration by bending over the bed and howling into a pillow. A moment later, though, when Joe's thick cock slid between his thighs and against his balls to tap at the base of his shaft, he uttered an "Oh yes!" of pure pleasure. "You find it?" He pushed his ass back harder, butting Joe for more as he looked back over his shoulder.

"Damn, you *are* like a cat in heat! Yes, I found it. And condoms too. We're good." Joe dumped a handful of foil packs on top of the nightstand, where they glinted like fitful jewels. Only a couple looked like they might be condoms.

"What are those?"

"Lube. Sample sizes. The kind you can carry in your pocket."

Of course. Perfect for one night stands and easy to hide from snooping mothers. Sean made an effort not to laugh and was helped when Joe tore open a packet of lube and began to apply it with indelicate precision to his asshole.

"Doing all right?" Joe asked.

"Oh yeah." More than all right. The simple act of being touched in a place so private made Sean yearn to be opened, possessed.

"I got what you want right here, babe." Joe proved his case by smearing more of the slippery fluid between Sean's buttocks before pushing his fingertip intimately inside. Sean relaxed and gave himself over to the finger sliding more easily into him with every circling movement, opening and teasing his tight, aching hole. "Damn, just... you look so fucking hot. I've been wanting to do this again since that day at your house when my finger sent you through the roof." Joe ripped open another packet of lube, probably using his teeth, and Sean felt more cool slippery fluid enter him with each increasingly deeper thrust of Joe's finger.

There, right there. Oh yeah. Joe had located his prostate and was massaging it with every penetration. Sean's cock had softened for a bit from the initial burn but now it hung stiff and aching, begging for attention. To his surprise, Joe pulled out his finger and gave him a slap on the ass.

"Turn over on your back. I want to watch your face as I fuck you."

The next thing Sean heard was the familiar sound of a condom being opened.

Sean wanted that too. Wanted it so much his cock stood at attention as he rolled onto his back and lifted his legs to hook over Joe's arms, both of them positioning his ass at the edge of the mattress. Looking up, he saw Joe's broad body backlit by the dim lights from the street, and Sean's cock thickened to full girth. The man looking down at him wore an expression he'd never seen before, neither tenderly playful nor a player's slightly superior smirk. Joe was about to deliver a serious fucking.

As Joe leaned over him, pushing his knees toward his chest and opening him further, Sean managed a gasp of "Oh God!" when he felt Joe's cock, sheathed and ready, at his entrance.

"Want this, do you?"

"Please, Joe!" If Sean could have pushed himself onto that cock, he would have. Joe held him down, pinned and spread.

Joe entered him slowly, a long push into the core of Sean's body. The burn was endless and wonderful, the pressure full and hot and deep. Sean kept his eyes on Joe's face, watching the way his smile of pleasure bordered on a grimace, followed by Joe saying, "God, you're tight. So fucking hot."

*Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me.* And then Joe did, ramming the mass of his muscular body into each thrust, driving Sean down into the mattress. Sean grappled with Joe's bulging arms and gasped as his legs pushed back until he could barely breathe, but he didn't need to breathe... Joe's cock in his ass was the only thing that mattered, taking them both someplace they needed to go. Hard, so damn hard, and Sean's cock was hard too, stabbing between their colliding bodies.

"Come for me, Sean." Joe grabbed Sean's cock and fisted it hard, and he was so near the edge he came with a cry of "Yes, yes... fuck yes!" He was flying out of his mind. Hot come landed on his chest and more on his belly. Joe let go then and reared up, hips thrusting deep and then again before he bent forward with a groan that would have sounded agonized except for the fact he'd just screwed Sean off the edge of the earth.

Joe managed another thrust, then a half-hearted fourth, before he collapsed forward onto his arms and planted a kiss on Sean's gasping mouth. For a moment, they shared the downward slide. Moving up for the kiss only hastened the departure of Joe's softening cock from Sean's now well-filled ass. Even after Joe withdrew and tossed the condom, he felt wonderful, creamy inside and out.

"Look at you, all spread out and happy. I didn't think it possible for a man to look that well-fucked."

Sean grinned up impishly. "Think much of yourself, Giuseppe?"

"Damn it." Joe looked down at him with a frown. "Use that name again and we aren't going to be doing this anymore. You realize that's the name my mother calls me when she's unhappy, don't you? Nothing kills an erection faster than a guy who sounds like my mother."

"I will never knowingly kill an erection. It's against my religion." Sean rubbed his hands again down Joe's tightly corded arms. "I promise not to call you that if there's an erection in the room."

"You better not call me that at all, if you know what's good for you." With a contented sigh, Joe helped move Sean's legs over, then heaved himself down on the bed beside him. "Did I hurt you?"

"Not even a little." Sean knew he'd be enjoying a sore ass for a while, but it would just remind him of the mind-blowing sex.

"I can probably improve my technique."

"You're already perfect. Don't change a thing." Sean nuzzled Joe's chest, enjoying the tickle of hair on his nose.

"You're perfect, too. I look at you and I get hard. Why do you think I make a point of standing behind that damn counter so much?"

They both laughed, though Sean found himself wondering if that were true. Did Joe find him sexy? Not just a gay guy who provided friendship with benefits? The possibility they might actually stumble into something more than that had occurred to him, but only in the same way he started every season hoping the Fighting Phils would win the pennant. In the realm of possibility, but fraught with problems.

Joe stirred, rolling away and leaving Sean craving his body heat. "Let's clean up. You want to spend the night? I can set the alarm so you have time to run home to change."

It was an opening he'd hoped for. "I came prepared. I have a change of clothes in my backpack. If you can give me a hanger, I might be able to get most of the wrinkles out of my white pants."

Joe popped his head around the corner from the hall. "If you were a woman, I'd call you a minx." He disappeared for a moment and then came back into the bedroom.

"I prefer to think of myself as hopeful." Sean took his cue and headed to the bathroom to clean up. One look in the mirror made him take a wet washcloth to his chest. Five of his seven chest hairs were glued down by come. After that, he tended to what was happening down below. When he walked back into the bedroom, he saw Joe holding up the covers.

"Get in here, you."

Was he doing the right thing? How much professional distance could he maintain if he and Joe became bedmates? In so many ways, sleeping with a man—actually sleeping with him—was far more intimate than having fun with his cock.

They arranged their bodies beneath a blanket and quilt, and their heads on old-fashioned down pillows, spooning until their combined heat created a cocoon of warmth. Sleep came on softly, just like Joe's breath on the nape of Sean's neck.

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Two days later a Saturday crowd filled the bakery. Donna Mae, Del, and both Penny and Jordana bustled around each other to serve customers. Sean had just finished restocking the cases with fresh pastries, trading out Freddie's delivered goods for dozens of emptied trays, and was locking up the cupboards in the back room when the door banged open so Angie could rush in. She carried a shallow white bakery box in her hands.

"Joey. Sean. Come here, you gotta taste these. I spent the morning driving all over Southeastern Pennsylvania." She put the box on the table in the kitchen area and popped up the lid. Nestled inside were eight cannoli, each sporting a little toothpick with a masking tape label. "I thought I'd track down the competition. None of them are winning any beauty contests."

Joe surveyed the rival cannoli and their tags. "Stopped by Peretti's, did you?"

"Let me tell you about Peretti's." Angie whipped off her winter coat and threw it on the sofa in the break room. "It's a nice shop, though good luck finding a place to park. Gotta love South Philly. Anyway, I took a number and started looking around. This guy behind the counter asks if he can help me. I say I got a number." She held up the imaginary number so both Joe and Sean could see it. "He says, I'll help you. I said I'll wait. Because I wanted to look around. So when my number came up this guy pushes aside the poor little white-haired clerk and starts hitting on me." She rolled her eyes. "I say I want a cannoli. He says 'For you, anything. I'll give you a Peretti special.' So I said 'The nice lady can get me a Peretti special.' He says 'Not like me.' So this *goomba* laughs, and he picks up a cannoli and sticks a piece of paper in it, and hands it to me free of charge. I get to the car and pick it out and it's his fricking phone number! He put his phone number in my cannoli! Am I expected to eat that? How do I know where those fingers have been? I'm not eating any cannoli made by a guy with penis hands."

“Penis hands?” Sean had never heard the term, although the possibilities sounded interesting.

Joe shot him a look. “You had to ask.”

“He needs to know.” Angie was not about to be shut down by her older brother. She turned to Sean. “You know how most men touch their dicks when they—”

Sean nodded, which was Joe’s cue to say, “Yeah, Angie. Sean and I know what men do.”

“This guy wasn’t wearing gloves and do *I* know if he washed his hands? Penis hands. I’m not taking chances.” She pointed at the offending cannoli. “You guys eat that one.”

They each picked up a different cannoli. Sean noticed the Peretti one was being shunned. He broke off a piece of his and put it in his mouth. A bit more sugary than a Dippolito’s cannoli but... it was good. Really good. Joe and Angie had done the same and they were having similar reactions.

“I still like ours better,” Angie said. “But these aren’t half bad.”

“Looks like stiff competition,” Sean agreed.

“I’ll say.” While Angie poked through the box selecting her next cannoli, Sean teased Joe by licking some creamy filling onto his lip, then quickly licked it off again. “That Peretti guy was pushy, but he was cute. Name was Noel. Can you believe it? Noel Peretti. Like some kind of Christmas carol. What kind of mother names her child Noel?”

“Seriously? You can ask that question?” Joe sampled another cannoli. “I’m afraid to go over the speed limit in case I have to show my driver’s license to the cops.”

“Live with it.”

“Does cute negate penis hands?” Sean asked. This seemed important to know.

“No. And I won’t give a chance to anyone related to the asshat that took out Pop Pop’s knee. Right now I want to pop a bullet in Noel’s knee and see how he likes it.”

From what Sean could see, Noel Peretti would do best to not hit on Angie Dippolito twice.



"Flipper said he'd help with the booth." Apparently Joe agreed things were getting intense. "He has one he uses at some of the park festivals. He'll let us use his generator and a fridge, too. It's really nice of him to come through."

"Flipper loves us." Angie licked cannoli cream off her fingers. "I'll be making the cannoli shells at Brooke Street anyway, so I'll bring those. You just need to bring the cream. Sean here got the flyers, right?"

Sean dashed into the office and came back with a stack for Angie. After looking one over, she flashed a big smile.

"These are great! I'll get some bodies out to spread them around."

He'd already put a stack out front and was just thinking he should check them when Donna Mae looked in. "Hey, Sean, someone to see you."

He walked out to see Dan standing near the cookies, wearing a Packer green parka and with Jenn waving at his side. "Hey, guys!" That his friends had stopped in made an already good day that much better. "Do you have a few minutes? Yes? Come on back!"

Donna Mae let them through the swinging door leading behind the counter and Sean walked Dan and Jenn around to the back. They arrived to see Angie shrugging into her coat and still arguing with Joe about someone having to take a damn bite of the Peretti cannoli.

"How about Sean?" she asked.

He held up his hands. "Hey! I already ate one two weeks ago for test purposes!"

"Fine, I'll get Freddie to do it." She wrapped the cannoli in wax paper and shoved it into her coat pocket.

"Dan, Jenn," Sean intoned. "Meet Angie Dippolito. This is her brother, Joe. Dan Wisniewski and his wife Jenn Sommers."

"You kept your own name? That's perfect." Angie nodded approval. Her eyes drifted down to Jenn's just slightly protruding belly, wrapped in a pretty lilac wool coat that practically screamed mother-to-be. "Are congratulations in order? Oh my God! When are you due?"

Dan's shoulders fell, and Sean led him and Joe away from the effusive women to a spot near the big mixer. "Dan, it's so great you stopped by. See—" he gestured at the ovens, and the racks holding breads and pastries—"this is

where I work.” Joe watched him the way he might a poodle who’d slipped the leash.

Dan nodded with what looked like appreciation. “Well, Jenn and I were in the area and I thought I should check out this place. You talk it up so damn much. Sorry we got sidetracked, Mr. Dippolito.”

“Joe.”

“Joe.” Dan bestowed a practiced Wisconsin smile that told Sean he thought Joe was probably okay. Like most Midwesterners, it took Dan a while to really open up. “Sean and I don’t get many chances to see each other since college.”

“The Bingles, right? Your baseball team.”

“Yeah.” The smile grew wider. “It’s what keeps our friendship alive and kicking.”

“Well, your team’s looking like a car crash at the moment, but I think things will pick up when you get Paulson back into your lineup.”

They talked baseball a few more minutes before Joe excused himself to go back out front. Jordana had rushed in to say they were low on cannoli.

Dan cocked an eyebrow at Sean. “He’s a nice guy. I expected him to be older. You’re not working here just for a change of pace anymore, are you?”

“I have to stay at least through the cannoli festival.” But Sean knew Dan had nailed him.

“Right. About that—” Dan looked around and saw Jenn was saying goodbye to Angie—“Jenn and I have decided to come to that, help out if you need it. It sounds like lots of fun and she has a cousin just across the bridge in Jersey. So if you need an extra set of hands, count on ours.”

“You’re a good friend.”

“Hey, free cannoli.”

And that was the gist of it. The big draw of the festival. And the part Dippolito’s intended to ace.

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## Chapter Eleven

“Here?” Sean looked around, taking in both sides of narrow Passayunk Avenue and trying to decide if their assigned location was a good one. It was early and half of the participating vendor spaces stood empty. The snow banks of the previous month had vanished weeks ago and pansies now smiled from window boxes and planters. A cluster of cannoli stands had been fully erected just north of their spot in what Sean considered prime exposure near a municipal parking lot and the alley where two TV stations had parked their production trucks. The Peretti booth was particularly obnoxious. Foam turrets stood at each corner and red, green and white pennants flapped in the breeze.

“It’s a good spot.” Once committed to the festival, Joe had taken most of the planning upon his broad shoulders. Among other things, he’d coordinated things with Flipper, who had supplied an amazingly quiet portable generator and a roomy mobile refrigerator for the cannoli cream. Three giant vats of cream made freshly that morning and needing only to be prepped sat cooling inside.

Sean wasn’t convinced by the spot, but if Joe was happy that was half the battle. At the family gathering that morning, they’d appointed Joe as General Cannoli. Freddie was Captain Obvious. Mama Jo was Queen Bee. And as much as Angie hated it, she’d been deemed Sergeant Unnecessary. Sean was Private Everything Else. Which was appropriate, because no one else was interested in the things he intended to do.

They’d arrived two hours early and that proved to be a good thing. Already entrants and sightseers strolled along the street but as of yet they didn’t constitute a crowd. The Dippolito team—sans Angie, who had yet to arrive with the shells and the sibling cousins, Katelyn and Tony—had erected the booth and used cheery Italian stripe skirting to cover Flipper’s tables. They’d even hauled in an old cannoli station from the original bakery furnishings, which had been stored in the shop’s basement, for Joe to use. The massive block of olive wood, with depressions in it for bowls of cannoli cream and shells, sat to one side of the stand with the rustic elegance of Italian royalty. Sean ran his hand across the surface, feeling scars worn to a glossy smoothness by use.

“I’ve never been in the basement.” Sean hadn’t even known the place had one. “What else is down there?”

“You think I keep an inventory? Old stuff. Trust me, most of it’s junk. Cake tops for *guido* weddings and that sort of thing.”

Mama Jo touched her fingers lightly to the wood. “It belongs here, in this neighborhood. It belonged to my father’s father, and our shop was just a few blocks from here. When Pop went back to Sicily, I kept it and Nick and I used it until we remodeled the shop. I’m just glad we kept the bowls.” The big, banged up stainless steel bowls sat freshly scrubbed and waiting for use.

“It’s a nice touch, Mom.”

“Nice? It’s perfect. I hope that rat-faced Sal Peretti sees it. See this spot here?” She pointed to a good sized gouge in one of the table legs. “Took Peretti two shots to hit my father’s knee. The first one ricocheted off the bread machine into this table.”

Seeing her somehow made being there seem less like an outing and more like a mission. Even the white Dippolito’s T-shirt with the bakery name and logo boldly plastered on the front that Mama Jo and all the Dippolito team save Joe—who wore his professional chef whites—sporting gave them the look of a small but determined army.

“I like the shirts, Sean.” Mama Jo spread her arms to show off how hers looked. “I told Sal to look for us. Oh yeah. I cornered him in the dining room while he was having his dessert, and I told him, ‘My family’s going to win this year at the cannoli festival.’”

Joe shook his head. “Mom—”

“Not now. I’m telling Sean something important.” Other members of the Dippolito team crowded near. “And Peretti said ‘Oh yeah?’ And I just walked out. Because I wanted him to ask questions. And he did. He knew my name before he finished his carrot cake.”

“Good for you!” said Delphine. She and Donna Mae stood by, wearing aprons over their T-shirts.

Joe rolled his eyes to Sean, as much as blaming him for this fiasco. Sean spread his hands. Was he really expected to know how anything would turn out with this family?

“Don’t we have to meet the judges or something?” Joe asked.

“Yeah.” Sean checked his watch. “Let’s go.” While Joe was doing the pre-festival meet and greet at the end of the block, Sean was going to see if he

could rustle up some press coverage. Jill had been the point person for Montgomery Whelan's media connections, but he hadn't been completely unknown. A few phone calls had turned up Melanie Rawson as one of the television reporters at the event. And strangely enough one of the guys in his fantasy baseball league was head programmer for a radio station and had agreed to try to scare up some air time.

A staccato of running footsteps preceded Angie bursting on the scene. "They blocked the road! I can't drive up with the van. I need help bringing over the shells. I got a million tubs of the things!"

At least there were plenty of willing hands on the scene. A stampede of Dippolitos and other help raced to Angie's aid.

Things were coming together.

"Watch the stand, Uncle Dom," Joe said to the elderly man, who nodded and waved his cane. As Sean fell in at his side, Joe growled to Sean, "You so owe me. And I can't wait to collect."

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"A cute family bakery? In the suburbs? I need more than that." Melanie held up her hand to signal she needed silence and listened through her earpiece to something her director in the van was saying. "Okay, Jorell. I'm good for sound." Turning back to Sean, the brunette with soft gray eyes gave him a look of pure pity. "I want to help you, Sean, but the features director wants something with mass appeal. If your friends win, I'll see what I can do to play it up enough for some air time."

Air time for her, she meant. If her story didn't make the cut, she might as well be invisible—and in television visibility was everything.

"How about a family feud?" At least she laughed. He had her attention. "I'm serious. Back in the fifties, when Sal Peretti was just a gangster with ambition, he drove a baker named Angelo Gennaro out of business using corrupt city officials. The final straw was when Sal shot Angelo in the knees."

"Peretti himself?" A glimmer of interest glinted in her eye.

"According to Gennaro's daughter, who saw the whole thing. She's now the Dippolito matriarch."

"Was the shooting ever reported to police?"

"I don't think so."

Melanie marched toward her van. "Give me something I can use. This happened ages ago. Driving a guy out of town isn't illegal."

"Shooting him is."

"True. But there's no record of the crime. Sean, listen," Melanie paused in front of the production truck with its big blue letters, "I'm not an investigative reporter. I'm stuck down here in the asshole called features. I need something visual. Something viewers will stop and say, 'Oh, I want to watch this.' Nobody cares about feuding Italian families." Her cool gaze flicked back to his. "You still good with Jill?"

"Peachy. She's in New York."

"Tell her I said 'Hi'." With a smile as bright as stage lights, she stepped her small tight body up into the truck and closed the door.

Yet another ambitious woman doing her bit of networking. If he got anything for her, she'd help him in a heartbeat. Sean pulled up his contacts and put in a call to Bill. "You're my last hope, Obi-Wan."

"Tell your guy if he wins, I can get him on Chucky's morning show. But I'm doing you better. Chucky's talking up the festival as we speak. I slipped him a voucher for a weekend at the Borgata to make sure your bakery's name comes up strategically often."

"I owe you."

"Yeah, you owe me five hundred dollars—and I don't see the Bingles winning the league this year."

Sean laughed. At least he was getting some coverage out of this. Sports radio was working class gold, and whether or not any of Chucky's listeners checked out the festival, any of them who cared about good cannoli would find out about Dippolito's. He told Bill the check was in the mail and said thanks.

The organizational meeting must have broken up because he saw a herd of men wearing white coats fanning out toward him. Joe was easy to pick out. No matter where he went, no matter what he did, he looked like he belonged. Like now. As he walked with a fellow baker, he listened attentively, his dark head bent slightly toward the animated, gesticulating man, his face thoughtful and handsome and completely at home on a street lined with tiny shops and trendy restaurants, most with Italian names. Someone should take a picture, Sean thought. He wanted that picture. And then Joe noticed Sean standing there and

his face broke into a big smile. He stopped to say something to the other man, who shook his hand before they parted ways.

"It was a very informative meeting," Joe said. They walked back along the street toward Dippolito's stand, about which the family—including a few newcomers like Dan and Jenn—looked to be gathered in force. "I found out people know more about us than I thought."

"Us?"

"The bakery. They don't know about *us*, as in you and me." His warm gaze almost made Sean blush. "I would like to keep it that way a little longer."

Sean stopped walking. This wasn't even the time, or the right place, for the question, but he asked it anyway. "*Is there an 'us'?*"

"Of course there is. Unless you don't want that."

"No! I mean... I do. I'm just not sure where we're at."

"Well, neither am I. But I like it so far. If I didn't, I wouldn't have exposed you to my family to this extent. Only someone important deserves that much grief."

"I like your family."

"And I love them, but they're a handful. Kind of like you." When Sean laughed, Joe laid an arm over his shoulder, and they resumed making their way along the lightly populated street back to the stand. "As far as they're concerned, we're as good as married. It's too soon for that, but we kind of rushed the introduction. How long have I known you? Three months? It took Freddie longer to marry Gina, and they had a way better reason to tie the knot in a hurry than any two gay men will ever have."

More stands lined the street now, being set up by yet more people making more noise. Several shops had opened their doors to welcome early comers for breakfast or coffee. As they neared the end of the block, Sean picked out the bright colors of the Dippolito's stand. People wearing T-shirts with those same colors milled around it. Someone saw them and immediately yelled. Katelyn raced toward them, long hair flying. "Uncle Joe! We've been robbed!"

"Hold on there!" Joe caught his young cousin by the arms to assist her stop. "What kind of robbery are you talking about?"

Sean was wondering the same thing. They were handing out samples today, not dealing in cash. But they did have some equipment on site.

“Someone took the cannoli cream! All of it!” Katelyn grabbed a handful of Joe’s sleeve and tugged him over to the stand, where confusion reigned.

When Sean caught sight of Uncle Dom looking shaken and sitting in Mama Jo’s bright blue all-weather chair, he knew where to start. He walked over to the old man. “What happened?”

Dom wrung his hands and shook his head. “I was just talking to some old friends from the neighborhood. A few old friends. How could I have missed it?”

“Missed what?”

“The rat bastards who took the cannoli cream right out of the refrigerator behind my back. I should’ve been watching—”

Sean clapped Dom on the shoulder and told him it would be all right. He wasn’t sure of that, though. When he turned back to find Joe, he saw General Cannoli running a hand through his hair and looking at the refrigerator in disbelief.

“Who would want that much cannoli cream?”

Mama Jo stepped forward, jabbing her finger down the street. Tears glinted her eyes. “It was Sal Peretti! It’s exactly the sort of thing he would do. Who else could it have been?”

Would it be too obvious to mention they were at a cannoli festival? A dozen other vendors might have use for it—or a reason to deprive them of their product. Angie looked hurt and disgusted, Freddie like he wanted to take someone apart. But Joe just nodded, and Sean could tell he was juggling a hundred things in his head as he looked first from the open, empty refrigerator and then at the wooden cannoli station with its big stainless steel bowls.

“It doesn’t matter right now who did it.” Everyone except Mama Jo fell silent as soon as Joe spoke, and to her he held up his hand and spoke louder. “I don’t care about Peretti! I don’t care who did it. It doesn’t matter! Right now what matters is that we can make some damn cannoli! We have the shells, right, Angie?” She nodded and pointed to the several stacked containers holding hundreds of cannoli shells. “So all I need are some ingredients and I can make up the cream. How long do we have until this thing starts, Sean?”

“An hour, but people will show up early.”

“Then I’ll give them a show. The first batch won’t have a chance to rest, so I’ll have to be creative. Where’s that pad of paper? Here’s what we do.” He



began scribbling, sheet after small sheet, tearing each off and handing it to one of his team. “Freddie, you get over to Calabrese’s quick and buy the ricotta and impastata, and this much mascarpone. You know who to talk to there. Angie, hand him the company credit card. Don’t argue.” He singled out someone else. “You, Katelyn and Tony, there’s a kitchen supply store on Christian street, corner of 12<sup>th</sup>, get these things, exactly like I wrote them. Tony, you got a card, right?”

In twos and threes, Dippolito relations began racing everywhere. Jean Renard—newly arrived and looking years younger in his T-shirt than he did in a vest—hustled off with Mama Jo, clutching a piece of paper in hand. An entire gang led by Gina in her wheelchair took off for the Italian Market. Even Dan and Jenn got a list of items to procure from the Acme supermarket a few blocks over. Only Dom, Flipper, and Sean remained.

“What do I do?” Sean was as ready to run as the others.

“Everything else. I’m making this up as I go.” If Joe was feeling any desperation, Sean couldn’t see it. All he saw was passion and the cunning of a practiced general mapping out a complicated battle plan. “I have the recipes of a hundred old Italians in my head, so I have an idea for the first batch. It’s going to be a little different, but very Italian and completely delicious. By the time of the judging, I’ll have made up more of our original cream. You—” he pointed to Sean—“be a marketer. Pull out all your stops. I don’t care what you do. Get me some foot traffic over here. Can you do that?”

“Just call me Private Everything Else.”

Sean jogged toward an alley in search of a quiet place from which to make a couple of phone calls. Whatever Joe was up to, he didn’t have ingredients yet. Sean had time to work a little magic. He drew a deep breath and pulled out his cell. His first call was to Bill, asking for a push and the direct call-in line for Chucky’s show. The theft of cannoli cream, while hardly a big deal, was just funny enough to play well on talk radio. Sean could talk that up for fifteen minutes. He followed up that call with one to Jill. If she considered him a friend, let her prove it. Besides, she ate up being one of Melanie Rawson’s rock stars.

“Leave it to me,” Jill said. “I’m dating a network executive for NBC.”

Three minutes later, Melanie called Sean.

“I can get you a camera crew. What do you have for me?”

“Dippolito’s had their cannoli cream stolen. At this moment they’re running all over South Philly on a scavenger hunt for ingredients and are going to be making new cream from scratch. Not to mention there’s a good chance someone will be kneecapped if they figure out who stole it.”

“Stolen cannoli cream? Lord give me strength—”

“It’ll play and it’ll be feature worthy. Trust me. The guy making the cream is hot.”

“Gay hot? Or for me hot?”

“Is there a difference? Viewer hot.”

He was doing it again, making wild pitches. Sure, he thought Joe hot enough to scramble the brain of any human with an active libido, but was it right to sell a man’s sex appeal instead of his talent at his job? Besides, Joe did have audience appeal. He had it in spades. People from all over Delaware County loved the man.

Melanie sighed into the phone. “I better see a kneecapping.”

After hanging up, Sean walked back over to Dom, who looked up at him wanly. Joe was talking earnestly with Flipper while the two men moved the heavy olive wood cannoli table to the center instead of the side of the stand. “Hey Dom,” Sean said. He squatted down beside the older man. “Do you know of any old friends or people living near here who might want to come over and wear a T-shirt? I have a dozen more in the box over there.”

“Sure. I know a few. My aunt Sarah lives just a block that way.”

“Great. Get in touch with her and see how many people you two can get to show up. What about Italian music? You know, the stuff you grew up with.”

“Don’t do it, kid.” Dom shook his head. “You seriously want to play ‘That’s Amore’ near my nephew? He hates it when I sing those songs. He’ll shut it off.”

“No, he won’t.” Sean brought up his favorite music site and opened the search function. “Give me some good ones.” Inside of ten minutes he had a playlist of old favorites sure to warm the hearts of Italian-American grandmothers and bring smiles to the faces of tourists. Joe could kill him later. A few other stands were playing music, including Peretti’s, and so would they. He thanked Dom and did a quick phone search for the nearest place he might buy a cheap set of speakers for his phone. Ten blocks. Perfect.

Thank God he'd kept up with his running. He was going to be doing a lot of it.

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It turned out Dom's aunt Sarah was a hundred years old. Literally. Though she was too frail to attend the festival herself, she had a sharp mind, a lively tongue, and an address book thicker than a New York phone directory. Sean had picked up colored markers and a stack of big labels, and he stuck one with the words 'I Want a Dipp! Dippolito's Cannoli' on every one of Aunt Sarah's many volunteers. Their only job was to walk around the festival looking happy to be there.

The real reason people wandered over to the Dippolito's stand, though, was to interact with Joe as he mixed up cannoli cream on the spot and allowed people, especially kids, to fill their own cannoli. Along with Donna Mae and Del, Flipper helped out and was surprisingly good at engaging children and handling a pastry bag. But it was Joe who shone. He bantered with the bystanders, let them suggest an ingredient to add to their own bag of cannoli cream, adding and mixing and letting them share their results with other patrons. The crowd was steady and happy, laughing and talking and vying for room at the front.

"This is good stuff. Really good," Joe said after tasting the latest variation. He never held back an opinion. "I can tell your grandmother was a great cook."

The lady wearing red gingham beamed. "Oh my God, her ravioli were like pillows—"

As a lively version of 'Quando, Quando, Quando' swelled from newly purchased office supply store speakers, Sean made his way over to Melanie, whose camera crew was positioned to catch different angles of the action. "What did I tell you?"

"He's good. The verdict isn't in yet on the cannolis." But she was smiling. "I'm interviewing him in a few. But I love the way he connects with everyone he talks to."

Hadn't that always been the magic at Dippolito's? Personal attention. Homemade products. Being able to talk to the owner.

"It's a great bakery," Sean said. He didn't offer up that he really loved his client. Joe might be focused on the festival right now, on making custom cannoli creams until his own recipe could sit and rest and come to room

temperature under the covered table at the back, but later after all this was done... Sean had plans for how they might unwind.

He saw Angie leave from behind the stand and watched as she snuck around behind the camera crew. Where the heck was she going? Sean left Melanie plotting her interview and skirted the crew until he saw Angie again, engaged in lively argument with a tall brown-haired man wearing a red and white checked T-shirt and black pants. Oh fuck. Those were the uniforms the Peretti bakers wore.

“—then prove it!” Angie was more than in the man’s grill. She looked ready to eat his face.

“I can’t prove I *didn’t* steal something!”

Sean ran up to Angie. “Maybe now isn’t a good time for this.” He gestured to the news crew.

“It’s perfect. Christmas Face here and I are just having a little talk.” The expression on Angie’s face warned Sean his life was now in danger too.

“Who’s this?” Noel put a slight growl behind the question.

“Just Sean. He’s part of the family, so bug off. My beef is with you and your grandfather, who shot my Pop Pop in the knee and stole our cannoli cream!”

“Oh come on! Nobody got shot! And I don’t know who stole your cream but it wasn’t us! My grandfather’s wearing a cheesy crown and conducting audience down the street. He’s eighty years old.”

“Go away or I won’t be responsible for what I do to you next—”

It was a fair warning. When Noel gave Sean an exasperated look, Sean waved him to leave. But when they both turned around, they found Melanie Rawson standing there with a microphone, a cameraperson, and a million-dollar smile.

“So,” said Melanie brightly. “What’s this I hear about stolen cannoli cream?”

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## Chapter Twelve

Dippolito's made the news. That was the *second* best part of the Philly Cannoli Festival. The best part was when the judges handed a smiling Mama Jo a giant gold-plated cannoli on a stand with a plaque that pronounced Dippolito's as having Philly's Best Cannoli. Despite the odds, Joe's on-the-fly recreation of the family's cannoli cream recipe had won the day. The stolen cream—if anyone had used it—had lacked the secret ingredient Joe always added at the last stirring. He'd had it with him in his pocket flask. The picture of Mama Jo and her family with their trophy in the *Inquirer* was priceless. And suitable for framing.

Being on television was even more fun because Flipper's wife taped it and the family could haul it out for laughs. Or recollection. The segment about the festival was fun and showed the bakery in a great light, but Joe's interview had gone better than even Sean could have dreamed. He hadn't anticipated Melanie Rawson would go for the heart or that she'd find Joe's while talking about investing in community, delivering top quality, and making strong connections with other people. The segment got picked up for replay and led to a feature on community-focused small business in *Forbes* magazine. But it wasn't Joe who went truly global.

Video cameras and cell phones had captured Angie and Noel laying out Sal Peretti's dirty laundry, a spectacle helped immensely when Sal himself barreled in, fist raised, and called Angie a liar—only to be called out personally by Mama Jo, telling her story and revealing herself as Josephine Gennaro. This was followed by Noel shouting at his grandfather, "You *shot* him? You told us you released a basket of rats into his bakery!" So the story came out. It even made the rounds for a week as a color feature on news networks with the headline "Cannoli King Dethroned by Own Crime."

Jill pronounced Sean a genius ("I had nothing to do with that." "Take the credit."). And the story got enough play Sean's family heard about it in Oshkosh.

"Is that the bakery you were talking about?" His mother called the same night she heard.

"Peretti's was the rival bakery. I work for Dippolito's, the one with the guy who got shot."

“What kind of people are you hanging out with?”

“Good ones. I’ll send you the interview with Joe. I think you’ll like him.”

“I was hoping you’d find another job. A real one. You have so much talent, Sean. I hate seeing you waste it. Kathy and I were talking about you just the other day and saying how much we think you should come back home.” It was the same thing she said in almost every communication.

“I like it here.” He more than liked it. He had no intention of ever going anywhere else. “I’m starting a business. My own business.”

“Another marketing firm? You always were creative. Just quiet.”

“I’m still quiet, but I’ve learned a lot about what’s important and what I like to do. I’m starting a coffee shop.”

Between his buyout from Montgomery Whelan and his check from Jill, Sean had been able to purchase Jean Renard’s bookstore and still have money for renovations. He just wouldn’t have much of a savings account anymore. His mom no more understood why Sean would start a coffee shop than why he would want to work in an Italian bakery. Neither business made any sense to her. She told him being gay didn’t mean he had to throw away his money and his life, and that she thought he was being foolish with both.

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“Are you sure you want to do this?” Joe asked. It was late afternoon, and they’d finished Sean’s last day of official employment.

There was no place in the world Sean would rather be than nestled against Joe’s body. Especially Joe’s body in bed after sex. The man was as solid as granite. No matter how long their day, Joe always smelled clean, like bread in the oven and toasted pine nuts mingled with just a hint of spicy deodorant that was simply perfect. It helped that the new-carpet smell had faded from the flat.

“Opening the coffee shop? Or selling my house?” Sean spent less and less time at his house and was considering selling it.

“I meant the coffee shop. I wasn’t aware you were selling the house.”

“Just thinking. Angie asked me about it. Did you know she’s seeing Noel Peretti?”

Joe groaned. “Oh fuck. She’s trying to kill her mother, isn’t she?”

“Probably.” Sean had a good grip on Dippolito family politics. “I think it’s a good thing to get stuff like this all out in the open. Everyone can move on.”

"You mean like you leaving me and moving on to run a coffee shop?"

That was Sean's cue to turn up the playful. "No. I'm not leaving you. I'm leaving my *part-time* job with your bakery and taking up a *full-time* position next door as owner of the new Library Café. I figure you won't get bored with me as fast—because we'll no longer be spending all our time together, including in bed."

"I'm going to miss your help in the morning."

"Well, I can still help in the morning if you like. Then I'll go over and work in the coffee shop until we close. That'll give you time to look over your spreadsheets." The more he thought about it, the more he liked his plan. He'd already hired Katelyn for the summer, along with a full time barista already trained on the equipment he'd bought. "We'll see even more of each other once we've opened up the wall between our shops. Customers might like walking over for some coffee, or a cannoli."

Joe nudged closer and pressed his mouth to Sean's ear. "I'm just waiting on Mike for that job, because it has to be done right. He got the permits and will do it next week. I like the idea. That way if you become more popular than the bakery I can cash in on the overflow."

Just the thought was enough to make Sean laugh. With the recent publicity, the bakery was doing better than it ever had. Sightings of Dippolito's T-shirts—sold in the bakery—were becoming a daily event. Sean had already put his artist in Chicago on designing something quirky and fun for the Library Café. When the shop opened in two weeks it was going to be an event.

For one thing, he loved the concept. He'd kept many of the old bookcases, had them sanded and painted with fun colors, and planned to stock them with all the bookstore's left behind, unloved books. Café patrons could read books at leisure, even borrow them to take home. Or keep them for that matter. They would also be welcome to bring books they no longer wanted, and Sean would put them out on the shelves for other people to enjoy. Tucked between the book stacks would be sofas, chairs and tables so his customers could be comfortable while they enjoyed a cup of coffee and something to eat from his counter. And for those customers who wanted a quick bite or to watch for their trolley, there was a long counter at the front with seating and barista service. He'd already arranged with Joe to provide the baked goods, including Sean's signature unicorn horns.

Books, coffee, and cannoli. Sean believed he'd found the perfect recipe. And the perfect man.

"You did it right." His and Joe's body warmth was enveloping them both in a delicious, post-coital haze. Sean's thoughts were a bit fuzzy, but the idea seemed important. "You stood your ground. With your bakery. With your family, about being gay—you made them look at you and accept you the way you are."

"You're overthinking it. I didn't do that." Joe's sleepy voice betrayed how near he, too, was to dreamland.

"You did. I didn't. I left home. I made it easy for them. I left Wisconsin altogether. Maybe I call home a couple times a month. To them I'm just out there somewhere, someone they don't have to think about too much. It's easy for them to never think about my being gay."

"Do you think about them being straight?"

"No."

"Then you're overthinking it." Joe wrapped his arms around Sean and pulled him in for a kiss that softly told him just how much he wanted them to be together.

Sean overthought a lot of things. "So... us? I spend so much time over here I thought maybe—"

"You want to move in?"

Had he actually heard Joe ask that question? "Ah... yes, that is where this was headed."

"I'd like that. Half your stuff is already here taking up Freddie's old room anyway. Hell, you can have his room for your office." Joe sounded more excited now than sleepy. "I would have asked sooner but I didn't want to be the guy who pushed you to move out of a perfectly fine house."

"Really?" Talk about overthinking things. Sean decided not to retort. He'd just gotten what he wanted.

"You're my first relationship of any duration. I don't know what the rules are for that sort of thing. I only know I don't want to be the one who chases you away when all I'm trying to do is make you stay."

"Do you realize you're telling me what you don't want? I'd really like to hear what you do want."



Those chocolate-brown eyes looked into him. “I thought you knew. I want a partner. The kind of guy who makes me feel like a million bucks every day and can put up with the crazy hours and the family, and everything that comes with me. I want you, Sean.”

“You haven’t even met *my* family yet.”

“Yeah, well, maybe that’s a good thing.”

Joe’s teasing smile made him laugh. Sean looped his arm over Joe’s neck and tugged the other man on top of him. “Then it’s your lucky day, boss, because that’s exactly the kind of position I’m looking for. I want the job. Not only am I moving in, I’m staying forever.”

**The End**

## Author Bio

*Tali Spencer fell in love with writing at an early age and never stopped. Thanks to a restless father, she grew up as a bit of a nomad and still loves to travel whenever she can. Her longest stint in one place was Milwaukee where she went to college, enjoyed a series of interesting careers, and raised three surprisingly well-adjusted sons. She later married her true love and put down new roots in Philadelphia, where she lives in an ongoing Italian American family sitcom. At least she's learned how make good pasta. When not writing, Tali reads everything from sweet goofy romances to exotic cookbooks, manages her fantasy football team—go Gekkos!—and takes long walks with her loving, if slightly neurotic, poodle.*

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