

A photograph of two men in white tank tops embracing on a bed. The man on the left is leaning back with his head tilted up, while the man on the right leans in to kiss his neck. The man on the right has a large tattoo on his left shoulder. The background shows a window with trees and autumn foliage.

Naaju Rorrete

Mad Passion

Featured In The Love's Landscapes Anthologies

Table of Contents

Love’s Landscapes.....	3
Mad Passion – Information.....	5
Acknowledgements.....	6
Mad Passion	7
Chapter 1.....	8
Chapter 2.....	16
Chapter 3.....	23
Chapter 4.....	31
Chapter 5.....	39
Chapter 6.....	42
Chapter 7.....	50
Chapter 8.....	54
Chapter 9.....	62
Chapter 10.....	70
Chapter 11.....	75
Chapter 12.....	81
Chapter 13.....	88
Chapter 14.....	95
Chapter 15.....	102
Chapter 16.....	105
Chapter 17.....	109
Chapter 18.....	115
Chapter 19.....	120
Chapter 20.....	129
Author Bio	132

Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

MAD PASSION

By Naaju Rorrete

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.

All rights reserved worldwide.

This eBook may be distributed freely in its entirety courtesy of the Goodreads M/M Romance Group. This eBook may not be sold, manipulated or reproduced in any format without the express written permission of the author.

Mad Passion, Copyright © 2014 Naaju Rorrete

Cover Copyright © 2014

J. M. Angueira a.k.a. Naaju Rorrete

The images depicted in this book cover are used under a non-exclusive license granted by Scarlett O'Hara S.L.

The models' pictures depicted in this book cover are for illustration purposes only and the content of the book and its narrative are not related to the models portrayed in such cover. All models were over the age of eighteen years at the time of the creation of such depictions.

All appropriate records, including models' releases and photo IDs are kept in the office of Scarlett O'Hara S.L. Apt 29, 03580 Alfàs del Pi, Valencia, Spain.

This ebook is published by the *M/M Romance Group* and is not directly endorsed by or affiliated with Goodreads Inc.

MAD PASSION

By Naaju Rorrete

Photo Description

Two young, handsome men kissing against the background of a summer day in the woods, while one of them is carrying the other in his arms.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

The guys in this photo have come to a big revelation, and they could not contain themselves. Perhaps they have finally figured out their feelings for each other, or perhaps the one who's picking the other guy up has finally proposed on this fine Summer day, after all that they had gone through. I just want a story about how they came to be at this point in time. I don't care if the story is sad or happy, I just want a happy ending.

Sincerely,

Angela S.

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: enemies to lovers, first time, construction, banker, homophobia, sexual repression, anger issues, hurt/comfort, family, men with kids, crazy ex, hurricane

Word Count: 42,372

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Angela Stiver, whose brilliant prompt urged me to write this story. The warmest gratitude to Debbie McGowan, who generously dedicated countless hours copy-editing this story. Extra special thanks to Anna, Averin, Jackie, Rissa, Donna and D.C. for the attention and time invested in proofreading this story. And my deepest appreciation to C.M., who worked so hard formatting this ebook.

Also, lovingly thanks to Pat, who is my cheerleader and always believed in me.

This book originated as part of the M/M Romance Group's "Love's Landscapes" event. My deep gratitude to the Moderators of this year's event, Raevyn, Sue and Shaz, for their hard work.

Group members were asked to write a story prompt inspired by a photo of their choice. Authors of the group selected a photo and prompt that spoke to them and wrote a short story. The result is that there are nearly two hundred M/M stories available and free. Joining the group will allow you to read all those stories and much more, but mainly, you will find like-minded friends.

MAD PASSION

By Naaju Rorrete

Chapter 1

Brigantine Island, New Jersey, on the afternoon before the storm.

The familiar shore scenery disappeared as Travis drove like crazy, risking a speeding ticket because he was so late that Nadine, his babysitter, would get upset with him again, and she would charge double for the last extra hour.

Maybe he should marry her; she flirted with him all the time, and she was good with his kids.

Only problem, she was sort of the high maintenance type in more ways than financially, and he—well, he had too many issues to deal with lately.

Simply having someone to look after his kids wasn't a good motive to offer marriage to her, right? Travis hoped that she'd understand that he had a long day at work because they were getting ready for the incoming storm.

Oh. Damn. Speaking of which, he'd forgotten again to go to the grocery store before coming home. And doing shopping with the children always had been...

His car's wheels skidded loudly against the sidewalk as he abruptly stopped behind the vehicle parked in his driveway. Travis had already made the turn to park and almost hit the van, too caught up in his thoughts to notice the intruder's vehicle in there.

"Who parked that dirty van in my driveway?" He looked around for a few seconds and saw a man standing next to Nadine on his front porch. It seemed that she had just finished serving him a glass of ice tea. Adding injury to offense, that person was drinking his hard-earned ice tea. Like money grew on trees.

Visibly tattooed and disheveled, he fit the profile of an intruder in Travis's book, because the man looked like the robbers who raided the bank where Travis worked. It had been the scariest experience in Travis's whole life—one he was still trying to overcome—and this was simply the drop that made his cup overflow. It had been a very stressful day, after all.

Travis got out of the car in berserker mode, while his kids ran to meet him, jumping with happiness.

"Daddy's home," announced his eldest son, while his baby girl ran to him exclaiming, "Daaddy!"

But Travis was so upset that he didn't hug his kids like he usually did when he came home, and simply patted the children's heads. Seeing them normally had the effect of calming him down, but today it hadn't worked. So, still boiling inside, he picked up his little girl and kissed her, but immediately left her on the porch and kept walking toward the couple, followed by his three children.

Defiant, Travis stood in front of the man, who stopped drinking and mechanically handed the glass to Nadine without taking his brown eyes off him. Travis asked in a brusque manner, "What the heck do you think you are doing?"

Regardless of his condescending tone, listening to him shook Joe in an unexpected way. He felt that the world stopped, or rather started going in slow motion, because his voice touched him right through to his soul, and Joe got the impression of meeting his fate, even if he didn't know if it was going to be for bad or good. His instinct told him as much, before his mind took over and reality hit him. That type of thing didn't happen, at least, not to guys like him.

Nadine had warned him a few seconds ago that The Psycho had arrived. She'd also told him that he hadn't always been like that; all the weird behavior started after his wife's death. Travis had gone from depressed and grief-stricken to short-tempered and rude. Nobody ever knew what he would say or do next.

A pity, according to the friendly babysitter—because he was so handsome. Joe silently agreed with her.

The angry man standing in front of them looked like an angel.

On second thought, with his lean muscular body, he seemed more like an archangel or a fallen angel. Yeah, an angel with an evil calling. Joe found himself staring in awe at the impeccably dressed man, who looked as if he had walked out of a men's fashion magazine.

"Who do you think you are, eh? My driveway isn't a public parking lot." An index finger was wagged in his face, and somehow Joe found it more funny than offensive.

Knowing that he had to say something, he admitted, "I'm sorry. I thought that I had left enough space for another car. I will move my vehicle to the street as soon as you move yours."

"Move it? You must leave at once." The finger now pointed to the road.

Joe couldn't help it and smiled while asking, "You are Travis, right? If that is true, then I have an appointment with you." Joe paused and stared at him before adding, "For which you are already late."

Still wary, the other man narrowed his eyes. "And you are?"

"Joe from The Handyman."

Because of the brief expression that crossed Travis's face—apparently he'd forgotten the appointment—Joe added, "I'm here to do the estimate for the home repairs, and, as you urgently requested, to board up windows before the storm."

To Joe's surprise, Travis looked him up and down and said, "I asked for a professional person, and they sent me—" he waved a hand before adding, "you."

Joe started, "Travis, if I offended you by—"

But he was quickly interrupted. "For you, I am Mr. Anderson."

"Really?" Was this guy for real? Keeping distances and things like that?

Joe breathed and made his last attempt to save the potential business transaction. "Mr. Anderson, what—according to you—is so wrong with me?"

"What is so wrong about you?" He again looked Joe up and down. "What isn't? Look at yourself, your tattoos and that tacky earring, besides dressing like a bum." Then he narrowed his eyes and asked, "Are you an ex-convict?"

Okay, even if they needed this contract, Joe had his limits, and this was it; he was going to get out of there this very moment, because the guy was truly insane. "Mr. Anderson, no, I've never been arrested. This is The Handyman's summer uniform, and this was my last appointment of the day. So yes, I have some paint and dust on my uniform, but I'm not dirty." Joe breathed deep and his eyes met the blue ones as he added, "And my tattoos and earring are a very personal thing."

Travis raised a brow while he stared at him with a doubtful expression. Absentmindedly, he extended his arm, took the glass from Nadine's hands and drank the ice tea that Joe had left, but when he realized what he had done, he quickly spat any liquid still in his mouth onto the grass.

He gave the glass back to Nadine, who looked at Joe with an I told you so wide-eyed expression, before picking up the little girl in her arms, saying, "I'll be inside. It's time for the kids to have their snacks."

Without taking his eyes from Joe's face, Travis agreed with her. "Please do. I'm paying you double for the whole hour, anyway."

"Yes, you are," she said and, rolling her eyes, entered the house. The other two children followed, after staring at their father for a few seconds, as if they wished to say something, but wouldn't dare. Joe assumed they were about eight or nine years old.

Once the children were inside the house, Joe said, "You're fast to see others' flaws, but what is wrong with you? Spitting like that is truly bad manners."

Travis seemed genuinely surprised by the question. "Are you serious? With my luck, I could get one of your STDs."

Joe could hardly believe it. "Mr. Anderson, I'm not sick, so don't worry, you won't get infected with anything."

Travis's expression was even more annoyed than before. "I doubt it. You look like the type of person who would be intimate with anybody without thinking. Like a savage urban beast."

Joe might have lost his time, but he wasn't going away before telling this guy a couple of things. Especially because his gaydar had started going off like crazy. He promised himself that one day Travis was going to drink more than his saliva, and that thought gave him an idea. So aloud, he informed him, "I always use protection and I don't swallow, no matter how clean the guy says he is."

"What did you just say?" Now Travis was truly outraged.

"You heard me, and don't act as if you don't know what the hell I'm talking about." For the first time since they were talking, Joe felt he had the upper hand. "You see, you don't have a monopoly on insulting people you don't know, judging simply by the way they look, or by assuming the wrong ideas."

"I don't think I'm wrong about you." Travis glared at him obnoxiously. They were about the same height, but Joe was stronger.

"Well, allow me to return the favor." He gave him a once-over, slow and offensive, head-to-toe, and when his eyes met the blue ones again he said, "You, Mr. Anderson, are very sexually repressed and frustrated."

"How dare you!"

"You started the profiling, remember?" Joe paused to see the effect of his words and when he confirmed that they had distressed Travis, continued, "And

the worst is that no woman will ever satisfy you, because what you need is a man, Mr. Anderson.”

When Travis opened his mouth and no sound came out, Joe added, “And I’m sure you would love to have intercourse with a savage urban beast.” Stepping closer until only a few inches separated them, he concluded, “And that is what you really have against me—the fact that I remind you of your carnal instincts.”

When he had argued with other guys in the past, stepping this close had sent those guys running. But to his surprise, Travis not only stood his ground, but also furiously asked, “Do you want a piece of me?” He stepped backward, but only to remove his suit jacket and tie, placing them over the porch fence. Shirtsleeves rolled up, he confronted Joe again.

All the while, Joe observed, fascinated by the body that the white shirt displayed rather than covered. “A piece? No way. If you weren’t such a hypocritical bigot, I would take all of you.”

In that instant, Travis attempted to punch him, but Joe easily dodged the blow. Frustrated, Travis launched himself again.

Joe smirked. “Speaking of all of you—literally.”

They struggled on for a few seconds, but then separated, looking at each other and heaving. Then, as if he hadn’t had enough, Travis abruptly lunged again, and once more Joe stopped the attack easily, but for a moment held the other man in his arms and against his chest. Travis elbowed him in the side and somehow they ended up rolling over the grass, until they rolled under a bush that stopped their movement.

The guy truly wanted to fight, but that was the last thing on Joe’s mind. Having Travis’s lean, muscular frame pinned down under his own, Joe imagined for a second how it would be to kiss that impertinent mouth, or trace every inch of that body with the tip of his tongue.

Travis tried taking the upper hand, but Joe kept him in place while whispering, “Didn’t you ever hear of make love, not war?”

The next struggle brought their faces together. Joe touched his lips to Travis’s on a whim.

Travis simply gazed at him open-mouthed. Lowering his head, Joe took Travis’s lips with his. Travis opened his mouth to oppose it and it was his downfall. Joe kissed him as much as he wished, first using only his lips, as

tender as he could, later sucking his tongue, playing with it. Neither of them closed their eyes.

During the whole kiss, Joe was looking into Travis's eyes, trying to read his real feelings. He could feel Travis's body trembling and upset against him, and he could also smell his scent. It was a nice one, in spite of Travis perspiring. It was a unique mix of Travis's own scent and a trace of cologne, which he had probably applied that morning after he'd showered.

A shower—for a moment Joe had a vision of both of them taking a shower together, and when his body started to react, Joe released Travis as fast as he could. Rolling back into the garden, Joe stood and distracted himself by dusting the soil from his clothes.

Travis joined him a few seconds later, shaking his head in disbelief and saying, "You are truly gay. And I thought you were simply trying to insult me when you said those things about what you do with men."

They were both trying to catch their breath after the short struggle, and Joe replied, "I've never met a fake gay in my life, just a bunch of those who are in deep denial, like you."

Travis shook his head. "You not only insulted me, you took advantage of me. Those people at The Handyman are going to hear from me. I will contact the president of the company, I will file a complaint. I—"

Joe was shocked by his words, but not hurt. For some reason he couldn't take him seriously. Not yet.

"Please, Mr. Anderson, calm down, I apologize if I made you upset in any way."

"Too late for apologies, because I'm going to file that complaint."

"Do you have something against gay people?"

"No, but it's the type of person like you, who makes every gay out there look bad—"

Joe interrupted him. "Again, you are judging me without knowing who I am. I'm a hardworking person, who supports his family."

In that instant the two older boys came running onto the porch again. They were looking at the men with concern, especially the one who seemed the older. Nadine followed them, carrying the girl.

“You’re married?” It sounded as if Travis couldn’t imagine a human being willing to do such a thing with Joe.

“No, I’m single. But I’m responsible for my family. And I can assure you that my mother would take offense at your wrong opinion of me.”

“Poor woman. I can only imagine what she has been through with you.”

“Yes, my poor mother. She has suffered so much.” Joe would never know what impulse had him admitting that, but somehow he wanted this person to know that he was being unfair, so looking into Travis’s eyes, he explained, “My father is dying of cancer. My sister is still in college and working part-time, and I am the only one working full-time in the family, but I will be fired because of your customer complaint.”

Everything he’d said was true, except he couldn’t be fired from his own business.

Once again, he’d wasted his time, because Travis didn’t buy his explanation.

“Lies. You will not make me change my opinion of you. I will file a complaint, not only with your company, but with the Division of Consumer Affairs.”

The man was impossible. Joe knew that Travis was not yet a customer, so complaining to the Division of Consumer Affairs would go nowhere. He gave Travis a last look and headed toward his van. The man really looked and tasted great; what a shame he was a little wacko.

Joe placed his hand on the door handle and heard Travis asking, “Where do you think you are going? I didn’t say you could go.”

“Bossy, aren’t we?” For a moment, Joe wished he were into leather, to dare to tie Travis to a bed and do things to him until he’d admit his true nature and deepest desires. He bet that would work wonders—much better than electroshock.

“I’ll be right back,” he said over his shoulder, and pushing his silly fantasies aside, he reached out for the family pictures he’d printed a couple of weeks ago. He’d framed the pictures side-by-side, and every time he’d regretted quitting his corporate job to come to his hometown, taking over his family’s business, he would take a long look at the photographs.

Joe instantly cooled down, and raised his eyes to look at the beach that was only a block away from the house, the waves crashing higher and faster

reminding him of the incoming storm and the many pending tasks he still had. He stood in front of Travis and handed him the picture holder. “Here. Please take a look at these. I’m not lying.”

Travis took the frame from him without a word and looked at it, while Joe explained, “This is a picture of my family when I was a kid, and this is the most recent picture of us—I took it last week. I wanted it as a reminder of why I’m doing this job and putting up with people like you.”

“Can I see the picture, Dad?” asked the older of the two boys.

Travis leaned forward so the kids could see the picture, and Joe standing next to them elaborated a little more. “That is my dad, before and after he got sick. He worked so hard all his life for us, but now it’s my turn. Please give me another chance, Mr. Anderson.”

Chapter 2

Travis's mind and feelings were all over the place; he had gone from furious to shocked. A man kissed him and he allowed this to happen. Twice. The first kiss had taken him by surprise. But he remembered clearly, the moment when Joe faced him, right before the second kiss. He'd breathed the same air, he perceived the desire in Joe's eyes, he saw his mouth closing in on his, and he could have stopped him. He had been unable to resist the curiosity of knowing the taste of another man.

Making an effort, he took a careful look at the pictures in front of him. The first one was a happy family, and the second was of the same family, except the father was wearing an oxygen mask, and he looked so different from the one before—kind of worn out.

One thing caught his attention, in spite of whatever they were enduring: all of them were smiling, and the scene had a sense of family love that Travis had known when his wife had been alive. They were a happy couple that succeeded in making a happy family too. It had been their childhood dream, both coming from foster homes and having never met their biological families. He felt the sadness taking a grip of him, like it did every time he remembered Sophia. Before nostalgia became obvious to the man in front of him, he centered his attention on the present.

He silently returned the photographs and tried to look at the man with a different attitude. He needed to work more on his compassion.

How could have this stranger have guessed his innermost feelings? His weakness?

The intruder was wrong about one thing. Although Travis had spent most of his adult life hiding his attraction to men, he didn't like the average type of man Joe was; the rough around the edges sort had never interested him.

Because Joe was average in every possible way—from his height to his appearance—yet for some unknown reason, Travis was having a hard time taking his eyes off him. His attraction to men had been more like admiration for the way they looked, or in the case of some of his professors, how smart they were. Travis had never experienced the raw sexual energy that pulled him to Joe. He shook off the thought emphatically; never again would he allow himself to think this way. He knew better than that, he was stronger than that.

The guy was almost his own height, but stronger, and obviously a street fighter. And so infuriating.

What the heck was he thinking picking a fight with someone like that? He could have ended up on the grass, beaten and humiliated in front of the kids. His sons. He glared back at the bushes Joe and he had been under when Joe kissed him; there was no way the kids could have seen them from the deck, but they must have seen when he had thrown himself against the man. Now, they were looking at him in silence. He saw concern in their eyes; a sight he had not seen since their mother passed away. In that moment, Travis despised Joe even more.

“You scared my kids,” he accused him point-blank.

Joe frowned, and for a moment Travis expected him to contradict his accusation, but instead the man addressed the kids directly and said, “I’m sorry, children. I didn’t mean it.”

He ended his words by giving them one of his easy smiles—the guy smiled all the time, apparently.

The boys smiled back at him and switched to what Travis called their “team mode”—they would join forces for a cause that they thought was worthy, and usually that meant against Travis. God help him.

“It’s okay, Joe. We were watching from the window, and saw how Dad attacked you,” Travis heard Edward, his older son, saying.

“What?” Travis looked at his sons in astonishment.

His younger son, Richard, explained, “Our Dad is short-tempered, and he misunderstood. We want to apologize for the way he behaved toward you, and we would appreciate it if you reconsider fixing our home.”

They were taking turns speaking, like a team, as usual. For Travis, it was a double vision of a younger version of himself—judging him. At least, they sounded like his children, polite and well spoken. But wait—that last part Travis strongly disagreed with.

“Wait, children. What are you saying? This person is not welcome around here.”

Edward replied, “He’s done nothing wrong, Dad. And he already apologized for parking on your driveway and now that everything is clarified, maybe you can let him do what he came here to do.”

Joe smiled again briefly at the kids, but put on his most serious face when Travis looked back at him. Travis felt like telling him, I saw that, you hypocrite. But before he could say anything else, he felt Richard discreetly elbowing his side. "Now it's your turn."

"For what?" Travis was still trying to figure out what they were trying to do. How was it possible that they seemed to like this person?

Edward patiently explained, "You owe Joe an apology. Remember the other day at school?"

Oh, Lord. His kids were feeding him with his own medicine. He made them apologize to the kid who they alleged was bullying them. Well, he had no choice, unless he shared with them why he found this intruder so disturbing and annoying—something he himself wasn't comfortable even thinking about.

"Dad? We are waiting."

Travis sighed. "Fine. Mr...?" Gosh. He didn't even know the guy's last name.

"You can call me Joe." There was no smile for him, Travis found out.

"Whatever. If I was rude, please accept my apologies, Joe." He managed to get those words out of him.

"Apology accepted," Joe nodded.

The kids seemed pleased with what their joint effort had accomplished. Travis felt ashamed of his behavior; lately he'd been losing his patience too often. He had been so rude, and so insulting. It was as if he wanted Joe to hate him deeply.

"What about the job, Mr. Anderson?" Joe asked, looking directly at him.

Travis felt those unwelcome feelings again. He had struggled with these feelings for years. They were his shame, his reason to feel less than others, and this man disturbed him. It was worse than he had first thought. He liked what he felt in his arms. It was crazy, but he did.

For a moment, he wanted to stay there forever. Protected, accepted, and when the forced embrace ended, he read the passion in Joe's eyes, and it scared him. Never before had he been in another man's arms; he'd never dared, and when he hurled himself at him, his intention was to hit him, never expecting the guy knew how to grasp him in a wrestler's move.

Travis couldn't hold Joe's stare. Avoiding his eyes, he answered, "I won't file a complaint yet, but I will think about it. And I'll call you to let you know my decision."

"No problem. Can you please move your car, so I can leave?"

Without saying anything, Travis walked to his car and moved it out of the way. Meanwhile Nadine, who had stayed silent during the whole confrontation, followed Joe. And now what? Was Travis going to lose his babysitter to this person too? He stood by his car, looking at them and making an effort not to say anything.

"Can you please give me a ride, Joe?" It sounded like she was asking for a date, and Joe could see Travis's mean expression, while waiting for his answer. Maybe he was wrong and the guy didn't belong to his team, or played for both teams. Whatever it was, Travis clearly didn't like him being friendly with the young and pretty babysitter.

For a second, Joe considered giving her the ride simply to bother Travis, but he had met his share of girls like Nadine, who wouldn't understand that he wasn't into anything but friendship with them. So he said, "I'm sorry, miss, but it is against the company rules to drive non-employees."

She pouted and whispered, "I see."

Joe gave her one of his charming smiles as consolation and left. He drove mechanically toward his home, but couldn't stop playing the whole incident over and over in his mind.

He could not believe it yet. The first person in such a long time that he'd found himself truly drawn to had to be so weird. And if that wasn't enough, he had to look so much like Matt. But at least thinking about Matt didn't hurt—not the way it used to. To forget about it, he recalled the glance he took at Travis's chest while they were wrestling; the man had soft hair in the center, unlike Matt, who hardly had any hair anywhere. Damn Matt.

Joe made an effort to remember Travis again, how he felt under him, and the tenderness of his mouth. And yes, he had pinkish nipples. "Huh. I wonder if everything else is as pinkish..."

"There you are. Are you okay?"

He jumped in his seat, startled by his sister. All of a sudden, he realized he was parked outside his parents' house. Today he was more distracted than usual, but at least he managed to get home without causing an accident.

“Joe, I’ve been calling your cell all afternoon,” Mary said, staring at him as if she doubted he was truly all right.

“You won’t believe the day I had.” He got out of the van and started to tell her. “My cell drowned in a toilet and my last…” He hesitated and quickly asked, “Mary, is there something wrong with Dad?”

“No. Dad is fine. It’s worse—well for you, it will be worse. Come with me.”

He followed her to the side of the house. From there, they could see the deck, where his parents were seated. His father was reading the paper, while his mother was sitting next to a handsome young man, who was laughing at something she had said.

“Matt is here,” Mary announced unnecessarily and with a theatrical tone. Joe hid the expression of pain and focused on what she was saying. “I came out here to intercept you. It’s your choice. You can run away now, or confront him. I suggest you disappear, and I’ll make something up.”

“I’m not running away. This is my hometown. He’s the one who has to leave. Besides, I’m not going to leave you all alone with that storm coming,” Joe said, fast recovering from the bad surprise.

“Joey, he’s not playing games. He told me clearly that he needs you by his side, and he won’t stop until you are back in his life.”

“He can’t make me go with him, don’t worry. I will be fine.”

They started walking toward the house, side by side. It was a big property, which originally had been a farm that his father had later adapted into a compound, where he hoped his two children would live with their children. The main house stood in front of two smaller houses, one on each side, the three houses linked by a pathway, with a patio in the middle.

“Matt bought the property next to ours, Joey,” Mary said.

“Excuse me?” Joe stopped abruptly.

“I heard him telling Mom about it.”

Joe shook his head. “When will he accept that we’re done? Mary, I’m going to tell Mom the truth about Matt and me.”

“Wait. Think of Dad. Please don’t. Mom thinks that the only good influence you have in your life is Matt McAlester—she even brags about it to her friends, about how we are acquaintances with the McAlesters.”

Joe closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. When he inhaled, he caught Travis's scent. It was probably his imagination, or maybe the place on his own shirt where he had held him. Truth be told, the cologne the guy used had a lingering effect.

“Mary, I met someone today.”

“A guy?”

She still asked this question every time, even if she had been the first one to know Joe was gay. He wondered if deep down, his sister, like his mother and father, kept hoping for a miracle—that he wasn't gay after all. One day they would have to give up those false expectations. He'd never dated a girl in his life, and got out of the closet as soon as he had known where the door was.

“Sure, it's a guy, Mary. It won't be easy though, but he will give me the strength to resist Matt.”

“What are you talking about, Joey? Did you bump your head or something?”

“No. The guy is a little crazy. The most beautiful nutcase I've ever met, and of course, he thinks of himself as straight.”

Mary was speechless for a few seconds, and when she finally said something, it was, “And you, my dear brother, are a masochist.” She made that funny gesture with her mouth and nose that signaled she thought Joe was responsible for anything that went wrong, and said, “I hope it's not Mr. Anderson you're talking about, Joe.”

“Do you know him?” Oh, no. If the guy was a friend of one of Mary's friends, he would never hear the end of it.

“Not really. I made the appointment and spoke with him when he called. Someone at his workplace recommended us to him.”

“Jesus. This might cost us two customers instead of one.”

“What did you do, Joe? How many times do I need to tell you that the customer is always right?”

“The only thing I did, which I appreciate can be maddening for some, is that I parked on his driveway. And I apologized for it, but he said a bunch of insulting things to me, and my gaydar—”

“Your what? Not again, Joey, please? We agreed that you would ignore other people's sexuality, especially if they're customers.”

“I know, but in this case I couldn't help myself, when he—”

Mary raised a hand to interrupt him. “In this case, your intuition might cost us a lot, because Mr. Anderson is the new general manager at our bank—the person who approves the commercial lines of credit.”

“Fuck.” Joe usually avoided saying the “F word” in front of her, because like when they were kids, she would feel free to repeat it.

“Yes, you fucked the chance of getting a new contract.” She pointed at him and kept walking toward the house.

Joe followed her, thinking that fucking Mr. Anderson might be worth losing two contracts, but knowing his very life might be at risk, he kept that thought for himself. She continued talking in the same way she did when she was mad at him. That girl never learned who was the big brother.

“Let's hope he doesn't feel aggravated by your treatment of him. Now, we must find a way to fix this mess. I'll call him first thing in the morning and see if he would agree to have someone else from our company doing this job for him.”

“Please do. If he's the person who has to approve the credit line for the solar energy project, we're doomed.”

“Thanks to you.”

Joe nodded, showing all the remorse he was capable of in his expression, but remembering the stolen kiss. Yeah, they were truly doomed. He continued walking next to Mary. She was great at dealing with people, unlike him. Joe was counting the days until she finished school and started working full-time at The Handyman.

“Let's go. The sooner we get rid of Matt, the better. We still have a lot to do to get ready for the storm.”

The storm.

Suddenly, Joe remembered that Travis and his family lived right in front of the beach. He didn't have the opportunity to do an inspection of their house, but he was sure that it would not withstand a superstorm, like the one the weather forecast had been talking about during the past week.

Joe hoped that Travis had the common sense to listen to the storm evacuation orders issued for people who lived by the shore.

Chapter 3

When he saw Joe, Matt almost ran to him. That was the first thing Joe noticed. The second thing was that time had made Matt better looking, if that were possible. Joe observed his former lover hesitate, as he realized the smile Joe gave him had been only on behalf of his parents, and it didn't reach his eyes.

"Matt, what a surprise." Joe tried to hide how unpleasant it was. Next, Joe kissed his mother on the cheek, patted his father's shoulder, and on purpose stayed a few feet away from his so-called friend.

"Well, since you're always so busy, I decided to visit your parents, knowing that sooner or later, you'd show up," Matt said.

Joe truly hoped the day couldn't get worse, because after ten months of avoiding Matt, in every possible way, he now stood in front of him.

The way he looked him up and down, told Joe that Matt still found him attractive and, like Travis, he disapproved of Joe's work uniform.

Joe's mother, Christine, stood next to her son's friend. "I've invited Matt for dinner, Joe," she said.

"Really? Then, I'll see you at dinnertime, Matt." And without any further delay, Joe headed toward his own house. He heard his mother call after him.

"Dinner will be served in an hour, Joe."

"Yes, Mom. I'll be right back, I'm only going to take a shower."

He had barely looked at Matt before leaving the deck and crossing the pathway to his place. Joe hoped that it would be enough for Matt to understand that they were history.

Once inside his room, while removing his clothes, Joe couldn't help but recall their story. He and Matt had met at the expensive college his mother insisted in sending him to. On that very first encounter Joe fell in love with Matt; apparently, he had a thing for good-looking, sophisticated men.

They had been assigned different roommates, but Matt found a way to move in with Joe by changing places with Joe's roommate. He'd probably used his money and influence to achieve that. And he had been the one who had seduced Joe first, too. Matt's fragile appearance was misleading, because he was really a tough person—someone who would manipulate the world to his own benefit.

Matt's voice always had the right tone. Never shouting or cursing; a beautiful voice, even when lying.

When they graduated from school, they'd moved together into a nice co-op in Manhattan, and Joe got his dream job at a Wall Street brokerage firm, while Matt had a decorative position in his family business, and for a few years, they'd been a very happy couple.

But there were a lot of lies between them, all on Matt's part.

The first couple of times he'd been unfaithful, Joe hadn't been able to prove it, but by the third time, there was no way to deny it. Joe had found Matt in their own bed with some random guy, and it had been the end of their romance, at least for Joe. Matt had never given up trying to get Joe's forgiveness and another chance for their relationship.

That horrible day, Joe didn't know how he had been able to walk around their apartment, gathering only his most essential stuff, while Matt followed him in disbelief, asking for Joe to wait and talk about what had happened, saying that Joe would not survive without him. But he had.

He'd come back to his hometown of Galloway, New Jersey. His return had coincided with his father being diagnosed with cancer, and Joe forgot all about working on Wall Street, and took over the family business. What he'd learned from his father while growing up ended up being more useful than anything he'd been taught at school.

But it had been harder than Joe could have ever anticipated, when he discovered the corruption going on inside his own company, where the foremen were stealing materials and reselling them.

Keeping that from his father had been the most difficult task, because some of the people Joe had to fire had been working with his dad for years, and the deception could have affected his father's health. After the business had been cleaned up, Joe put all his efforts into improving The Handyman, turning it into a highly successful construction company. Part of it had been luck, because the timing was right—the real estate industry had started to revive. The other part was Joe working seven days a week, twelve- and fourteen-hour shifts, during the last ten months.

Joe got under the shower, having the coldest water he could handle running over him.

"I hate you, damn it. Matt, I really hate you," he muttered as he left the bathroom wrapped only in a towel. He picked up the T-shirt he had just taken

off, shaking it to get the dust off, before putting it in the laundry hamper, and he again smelled Travis's cologne. He hugged the shirt against his face and let himself fall onto the bed.

I'm acting like a teenager, but Travis hates me.

All of a sudden he felt so tired. He looked at the clock next to his bed; he could afford a twenty-minute nap before dinnertime.

Joe had never felt more relaxed in his life. He wished to continue sleeping forever, but the warm hands touching his body in the darkness were hard to ignore, and the mouth that met his own in a deep kiss slowly awakened him. At first, he thought he was in the middle of a wet dream, and the owner of those hands and mouth was the man he'd craved all afternoon. When the hot mouth went downward, kissing his neck and chest, Joe whispered, "Travis..."

The contact ceased and a painfully familiar voice asked, "Who is Travis?"

Joe scooted in the bed and lit the side-table lamp, to find Matt kneeling in front of him. "Matt? How did you get in here?"

Matt sat on his haunches and gave him that dreamy-eyed gaze. "When you didn't come to dinner, I volunteered to fetch you. The door was open, and you looked so tempting in here. It brought back so many memories."

Joe was fully alert now. "Memories you'd better forget. Get out of my house and my life, Matt."

"No, I'm sorry, Joe, but I can't." He moved closer and slipped his hand between Joe's legs, easily removing the towel and grabbed Joe's cock, which started to respond to the expert touch immediately.

"We've been through this, Matt. I forgive you, but I can't forget. So please, don't push it."

"Why not? See, you need me." Joe's erection announced the months of abstinence, and the temptation to give up and forget what Matt had done was so strong.

Joe closed his eyes, and heard Matt saying, "All I ask is another chance, please?"

But when Matt leaned forward and kissed him, Joe recalled another kiss—the one he stole from Travis, and it was that mouth he craved. The image he thought long-forgotten replayed in his mind: Matt on their bed, legs spread wide-open while another guy fucked him. The nausea Joe felt that first time came back, and he pushed Matt so hard that he nearly fell off the bed.

“Hey! There’s no need to get physical with me. You’ve never been like that, not even...” He trailed off, obviously thinking of that day. “Joe, if you didn’t beat me that day, why would you do that now?”

Joe walked away from the bed and, pulling a drawer open, picked out underwear and a pair of sweatpants. While dressing himself, he said, “Matt, I don’t trust you. I will never be able to again, so get out of my life.”

Matt stood in front of him. “Is it because of this Travis person? Are you in a relationship with him?”

Matt finished putting on a T-shirt. If Matt believing he was in a relationship would send him away, so be it. “Yes,” he said.

“Who is he? Some Jersey boy?”

“That’s none of your fucking business,” Joe answered bitterly.

“It is my business, because he is standing between us.”

“Travis is the best thing that ever happened to me, don’t you dare to interfere.” Joe saw the pain in Matt’s eyes; lying about Travis was worth it.

Besides, the chance that those two would ever meet was so remote.

In fact, the chance he’d ever meet Travis again was zero. He walked out of his house, closely followed by Matt, who told him as he passed by, “I’m not going to give up on you that easy. You’ll see.”

And to Joe’s surprise, Matt continued walking toward the driveway and his car. Joe stood there, watching Matt drive away, until he heard Mary’s voice calling him from their parents’ front door.

“Joe, you’ve got to see this. Come on.”

He entered the house and didn’t need any more guidance to know what Mary wanted him to see. The widescreen TV that his parents and sister were watching displayed the images of the satellite profile of the storm.

Joe sat on a couch next to his mother. His father was on his recliner, where lately he spent most of the day. Mary stayed on her feet. By the way she paced in front of them, Joe knew she was very excited. Maybe a little scared. “That thing is huge, Joey.”

“Yes. No wonder they’re calling it a superstorm. But we will be all right in here, Mary.”

"I told her that many times," their father said. "If there is any place prepared for something like this, it is our home. Right, Joe?"

"Yes. I will be testing our solar panels' power in an emergency for the first time."

"I don't know much about solar panels, but I think that you should take them down until it passes," his dad suggested.

Joe thought about it; the panels were weatherproof, but maybe it was the best not to take any chances. It would mean a whole day of work to remove them and another day to put them back. In another time, he would have said no way, but he didn't argue with his father anymore.

"I'll do it tomorrow morning. We have time before it gets here, right?"

"About another day until it hits. There are mandatory evacuations at the shore," his mother said.

At her words, Joe recalled Travis and his kids again.

"Why didn't you wake me up for dinner?"

"I sent Matt to wake you. Where is he?"

Joe regretted asking, and answered her question with the first thing he could think of. "He had to leave in a rush, but he'll be back."

"Great. At least we'll get a break from him," Mary said as she sat next to Joe.

"What's your problem with Matt?" their mother asked. "He's been Joe's best friend for years, but you never liked him."

"I guess I don't like certain types of people, Mom."

Before they dragged him into the conversation, Joe headed for the kitchen and tried to get Mary out of trouble too. "I'm going to get something to eat and see what I can do tonight to prepare the house. Can you call Daniel and ask him if he can come over, Mary? I think that some of the construction materials in the warehouse will be safer if we keep them here inside the sheds."

"Are you sure?" His father was questioning his reasoning again; having been an active man, it was hard to be only a witness.

"Yep. The office building might take more damage than here. Besides, the sheds here are strong enough to take that storm, but sadly not big enough to put all the stock in."

His father nodded, satisfied, and Joe breathed, relieved. His old man had built those sheds decades ago; the fact that they were still useful contributed to making him feel useful as well.

Joe ate some leftovers, and a couple of hours later, he sat again in his parents' living room, with his mom, dad, Mary and Daniel, who was his assistant at the company, and also his future brother-in-law; he was going to marry Mary in a few months.

Joe noticed that his dad was falling asleep in his recliner, and his mother lowered the sound on the TV, before she placed a blanket on him. When she looked up, her eyes met Joe's. She smiled at him, but her eyes spoke of the sadness of losing her husband little by little.

Mary and Daniel were holding hands and whispering about their plans.

In that moment, Joe acknowledged that his family was all he cared about in this world, yet he also felt that something was missing from his life; or rather, someone. It was about time he found somebody to love again.

His mother sat next to him. "Why were you so cold with Matt?"

"We've changed, Mom. We don't have anything in common anymore."

"That's sad, Joe, because Matt bought the property next to this one, hoping that you were going to renew your friendship."

"I know. Mary told me." The idea that she already knew the type of relationship he had with Matt, crossed his mind. There was the chance that Matt himself had told her the edited version of it, and one that favored Matt. Whatever it was, it wasn't going to work.

Joe felt grateful when Daniel interrupted: "Joe, some customer was calling for you until I left the office. He called like three times in less than an hour, asking for Mr. Joe."

Joe felt a flutter of hope that it could be Travis, but waited for Daniel to finish.

"He was very concerned that 'Mr. Joe and nobody else' does the estimate for him. He also needs someone to board up his house. It's urgent."

"Mr. Joe? What is that about?" his mother asked. He suspected that she imagined there was more than a commercial interest in the frequent calls.

"I forgot to tell him my whole name, Mom. Daniel, please send somebody else. I'll be busy tomorrow, checking the battery bank and taking down the

solar panels. Yes, send Frank or Lou. They're feeling better, right? I only went today because we didn't have anybody available."

"The guys will be back at work, but we have a problem, boss. Mr. Anderson doesn't want anybody else but 'Mr. Joe'."

Joe smiled. Really? Uh. He wants me.

Mary waved a hand in front of his face. "Hey, big brother, what should Daniel do?"

"Yes, Joe, what should I do? He sounds like a difficult customer."

"He is, you have no idea. But I think you'll be able to handle it without conflict. You'll have to, because I really can't." He wanted to see Travis again, but what if his attraction for the man grew and they never got anywhere? It wasn't such a good idea to feel hope for something that would never happen.

"Okay. I'll go, as everybody knows I like to do estimates so much," Daniel said, the words full of irony.

"If you don't want to do it, simply reschedule it for another day, maybe after the storm. In the meantime, send any of the crew to do the boarding up for him," Joe suggested.

"By the way," his mother interjected, "who's going to do the boarding up in this house?"

"I'll do it, Mom," Joe volunteered.

Daniel placed his arm around Mary's shoulders and said, "It's settled. I'll do the boarding up and the estimate for Mr. Anderson first thing in the morning, and later, I'll come here to give you a hand with the solar panels and the supplies."

"Sounds great. Ah—Daniel, don't park in his driveway," Joe warned him with a naughty smile.

"Why?"

"A long story, I'll tell you about it some other time." Yeah, he would tell him the censored version, without the stolen kiss.

Later, when Daniel left, Joe almost ran after him to tell him he would go instead. Why waste another chance to see Travis? But on the other hand, what was the point of seeing him again? The man was straighter than a candle, which he would love to heat until bending, but no, better not. Instead, he put all his

thoughts into his new business plan. With the real estate industry still in crisis, he needed to change the goals of his company once more, and solar energy was the new road on which he was going to take the company forward.

Chapter 4

The next morning, Joe went to The Handyman's office to personally supervise that the supplies were stored in the safest location, and to take home with him what could be stored at the farm. He was getting ready to leave, leading a little caravan of pickup trucks, when he saw that Daniel had come back from Travis's home with a concerned face.

Joe couldn't imagine Travis having issues with Daniel. The man managed to keep his uniform clean, and didn't have any tattoos. Joe told the crew to wait, and entered his office, where Daniel and Mary were discussing something.

"What is it?" Joe asked squarely.

"That guy, Mr. Anderson, is on his way. He insisted it should be only you working at his property."

"Travis is coming here? Did you tell him who I was?" Joe could only imagine Travis's reaction when he found out the truth. Nothing good could come out of this.

"He was very concerned about you being fired, he said, and I'm quoting—no disrespect, Joe..." Daniel paused.

"Go ahead, what did he say?" Joe couldn't wait to hear Travis's most recent opinion of him.

"He said, 'If that punk got himself fired, I'll be in big trouble.' It took me a while to realize he was referring to you."

"So today, I'm a punk. Yesterday, I was a bum."

Mary laughed and Daniel joined her. The more indignant Joe's expression became, the harder they laughed.

"Anyway, I had to tell him that you were one of the owners," Daniel said. The phone rang, stopping him from explaining further. Mary picked it up and listened.

"Please, tell him we will see him shortly." She hung up and turned to Joe. "He's here."

Joe looked over at the security monitor on his desk. He could see Travis pacing anxiously in the small space of their front office. Mary leaned over and

said, "Oh my God, he is so cute. Joe, I would do anything to spend time with that guy."

"I'm here, Mary. Show some respect for your fiancé," Daniel told her without humor, and she laughed some more before saying, "I'm sorry, Daniel, but the guy is really hot."

Joe didn't know what to say for a few seconds, then he asked Daniel, "Did you do the estimate?"

"Yes. It took a lot of persuading, but I used the storm as a reason for having the estimate done today. The truth is that after the storm, we'll be so busy that he would have to wait months. I also did the boarding up—I used marine plywood, but I don't think it'll be enough to protect his house from the storm."

"Great argument," Mary praised Daniel. "See, Joe? That's one of the hidden talents of my Daniel." Mary hugged her fiancé around the waist. Joe knew that she was trying to make the man forget her earlier comments, because Daniel had many qualities, but one enormous flaw: he was jealous to an extreme.

"Okay," Joe agreed reluctantly. "I will see him. Please send him in, and Daniel, take the trucks home. I'll meet you there as soon as I finish my talk with Mr. Anderson." Daniel's expression didn't change. "Is there something else, Daniel?"

The man handed over the forms he used to gather the information about Travis's home. Joe read them and frowned a couple of times. He looked at Daniel, surprised.

"What is it?" Mary asked.

Joe put the papers aside. "I can't believe it. The house has so many violations that it's impossible it passed an honest inspection of the Housing Department. The worst part is that the house is unstable."

"But if they're living in there, it must have passed the inspection, right? One needs a certificate of occupancy to move into Brigantine, and in order to give one of those out, the house must have been inspected recently."

Daniel shook his head. "It depends on how he got to live in the house—if he moved in with someone who owned the property before, and that someone didn't seek a occupancy certificate, for example."

"Did you say anything, Daniel?" Joe asked.

“To Mr. Anderson? No. I wanted to discuss it with you first, but I asked him if he was going to obey the mandatory evacuation, and he is planning to stay there during the storm.”

“No way. He can't stay there.” Mary exclaimed.

And Joe, who since yesterday had been thinking about that, said, “I was afraid he would do something like that. He is a little snobbish, and going to a public shelter must be worse than dying.”

“Well, that's his choice, but what about the kids? Because he has kids, right?” Mary asked.

“Yes, he does. Three of them,” Joe found himself explaining.

“What are we going to do, Joe?” Mary frowned. “We can't simply forget about it, knowing that Mr. Anderson's house would probably collapse during the storm.”

Joe waved both hands in the air. “I'll do my best to explain the situation to him. Hopefully he'll understand the danger they're in.”

Daniel opened the door. “Okay. I'll send him in on my way out. I'll see you later.”

The couple was leaving together when Joe called out, “Mary, please stay with me.”

She turned around in awe. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” The temptation to see Travis alone was strong, but he needed to convince the man to find a safe place for his family during the storm, and being by themselves in the close space of an office would not help. Joe simply knew it wouldn't. Without his kids as witnesses, Travis might react worse than the previous day.

Mary kissed Daniel, and after he left, she faced her brother. “What's the deal, Joe? I thought you were dying to be alone with this guy.”

“I am. That's the problem. But as you know, this is an emergency, and I need your help. Please think of something.”

“Okay. This might be our chance to get in his good graces again.”

In that moment a knock was heard. “Please come in,” Joe called. The door opened. “Good morning, Mr. Anderson.” Joe sounded as professional as he could, trying to ignore Travis's body and the memories of having him under him.

“You took a shower,” was the first thing Travis said to him. And of course, that brought back fully his fantasies from the previous day. Thank God Mary was in the room.

“Yes, I must do that at least once a month,” Joe answered with the same serious tone he used before. But when Mary discreetly nudged him, he quickly added, “Mr. Anderson, this is my sister, Mary Caprotti.”

Travis turned and faced her with a courteous smile, which he hadn't shown yesterday. After sharing a brief handshake with Mary, he asked Joe, “So you would be Joe Caprotti?”

“No. My name is Giuseppe Caprotti, but I prefer being called Joe.”

“Very Italian, indeed.”

There was something between the lines in the way Travis said that, so Joe replied, “Yeah. Like many of us around here in South Jersey, but before you get any ideas, let me clarify that my family is originally from Naples, not Sicily.”

“I wasn't going to say anything about it,” Travis stated with a calm expression that Joe imagined he used most of the time. Otherwise, how could this person be the general manager of their regional bank? Joe decided to play along; maybe that credit line wasn't lost after all.

“How may I help you, Mr. Anderson?” Joe pointed to a chair next to the one in which Mary sat, observing both men in silence.

Travis hesitated for a few seconds, but sat down, as if what he came to say needed it. “It's my kids. They think you were fired because of me.”

“Me? Fired? Why?”

“This morning, when the other person did the estimate and boarded up the house, they thought the worst.”

“Speaking of which, are you going to leave the island?” Joe asked.

“No.” Travis didn't look him in the eyes when he said so, but Joe knew he was deadly serious.

“No?” Joe stood behind his desk. “Do you know that if you choose to stay home, and later must be rescued, there will be emergency personnel who will risk their lives in order to save you?”

“I admit to not thinking of that, but I'm here because the children want to see you, and be assured that you still have a job.”

“In that case, tell them that I’m fine, and still working. No problem.”

Travis got to his feet, and now they were face-to-face, with only the desk between them.

“They insisted that you do the job. And it is your fault, for telling me in front of them that sad story about your sick father.”

For the first time, Mary spoke. “Why did you tell them about Dad, Joe?”

“It’s complicated,” Joe admitted, hoping she’d forget about the whole thing.

“No, it isn’t. You wanted me to feel pity for you,” Travis accused.

“No, I didn’t.” Joe denied it, but maybe there was something of that.

“Yes, you did, and you even lied. It’s obvious that you own this place, and can’t be fired.”

“I didn’t lie. I was simply trying to make you understand that you were being unfair with me.”

“Enough!” Mary shouted. And when they were silent, she added, almost in a whisper, “Sit down, both of you.”

They did, still looking at each other as if they were to jump at one another for a wrestling session.

Mary stared at Travis and said, “Mr. Anderson, I’m Joe’s sister, but I don’t play games like he does. This is an emergency—a life-and-death situation. The man who made the estimate discovered that your house is at risk of collapsing at any moment. Even without the storm.”

“At risk of collapsing?” Travis repeated as if he were in a trance.

Joe took over. “Yes. I don’t know how you managed to avoid inspections all these years, but before we can repair it, you will have to relocate to another place.”

Travis was still speechless.

Mary asked, “Mr. Anderson, do you have any relatives or friends on the mainland that you can stay with during the storm?”

“No, I don’t. I knew the house needed repairs, but I never expected this.” Travis looked at her. Joe sighed—the malice he perceived yesterday was gone; now the man was pure angelic. And there was a vulnerability in him that provoked a desire to protect him.

Mary rose. "I'll be right back."

"Do you need to go now?" Joe asked, but he really wanted to say, don't leave me alone with him.

"Yes, I need to make a phone call. I trust you won't kill each other in the meantime." She faked a smile and glanced at both of them.

"No. Of course, not," Joe quickly said. She left, and Travis avoided Joe's gaze by looking at his own hands resting on his lap.

Joe resisted the temptation to ask something provocative. Taking a notepad, he started to make a list of all the things he had to do once he got home. Every so often, he peeked at Travis.

"Did you tell her?" Travis asked.

"Tell her what? How offensive you were yesterday?"

"No. What you think of me."

"Oh. Don't worry. I'm not going to tell everybody how much you need to get laid," Joe said with a smile that by now, he guessed, bothered Travis.

The man stood and walked to the door, just as Mary came back, and gestured for him to sit down again. Travis sat, still avoiding looking at Joe.

"Mr. Anderson, I was on the phone with my parents. We offer you and your family our home to stay in during the storm."

"What do you mean?" Travis gaped at Mary.

Joe was surprised too, but he let her explain.

"We live in Galloway. Our home used to be a farm, and it's big enough to accommodate a few families. You and your family are welcome to stay with us."

Being astonished by what she was offering, Joe asked, "Mary, did you tell Mom about his three children?"

"Sure. I told her that it was a family, who are customers of ours, but also friends. Because, we're friends too, right?" For some reason she was mad at him; Joe knew it. So, he sat back in his chair and left Travis and Mary to talk about the issue.

"It's very generous of you, but I don't know you. None of you," Travis said.

Mary replied, "Good. We don't know you either, but we're willing to trust you. Right, Joe?"

“Yes, we are,” Joe muttered.

For the first time, Travis looked at him and seemed a little calmer. “Do you have a problem with that? I mean, with us staying with you?”

“Me? No, of course not. You are welcome to stay with us. Forget all the things we said to one another.”

“Joe has no say in this. Mr. Anderson,” Mary said. “My parents are the ones who decide, and they have extended an invitation to you.”

“Thanks. But I hadn’t accepted yet,” Travis told her, adding apologetically, “I need to think about it.”

Mary looked at Travis through narrowed eyes. Joe could tell that she was upset under all that niceness, which was confirmed when she said, “Well, you better hurry. That superstorm is heading this way, and in a few hours, the roads and bridges that connect the barrier islands with the mainland will be closed, and it will be too late for you to come to us.”

Travis looked at Joe again, as if he were expecting Joe to make the decision for him. It was so weird, but it was what Joe felt. He wrote their address on a piece of paper and handed it over to Travis. “This is where we live. Feel free to show up at any time, we will be expecting you.”

“Thanks, I truly appreciate this offer. I’m so surprised by your generosity that I don’t know what to do.”

“Do what is best for your children,” Mary said. “From Brigantine, regardless of how late it is in the evacuation, if you drive through the Atlantic City–Brigantine Connector, you can take Route 30, until you find Route 9, then make a right and take Route 9 until you see the firehouse, then you make a right, and in about two miles, there we are.”

Travis left, promising to consider the offer.

Joe sighed. “Thanks, sister. I appreciate your help so much.”

“I didn’t do it for you, or him. I did it for his family. They don’t deserve to be in danger because he is so stubborn.”

“I guess they’ll be staying in your house, right?”

“In my house? Well, it depends. Mom invited the Collins, and the Smiths to stay with us as well. And I invited Lucia and her kids—being my best friend, she is staying with me. There is a room left, but it’s too small for a whole

family, so I convinced Mom to let Matt stay in there. Guess what? I'm spending the storm aftermath with your stupid ex."

"Matt? Hasn't he gone back to New York?"

"No. He's at his new home, but he doesn't have any emergency power. So Mom invited him to stay at your house, since you guys were roommates before."

"No. Mom can't do this to me, Mary."

"I saved you, big brother. Matt will stay with Lucia, the kids and me. I hope the kids drive him crazy enough to go back to his home."

"Thanks. But what about Travis and his children?"

"You mean, Travis's family? Well, I hope his wife will like your place, because they will be staying with you. Perfect, isn't it?"

"Which wife?"

"Travis's. You said he has a family, I suppose he has a wife too? Or is it a husband? Yeah, you said something about your gaydar picking up a signal."

"Travis had a wife, but she died a couple of years ago."

"Oh. Gosh. None of you said anything." She opened her eyes wide and dropped onto the chair. "And I thought you were going after a married man."

Now Joe understood why she was upset before. "Of course not. Even I have limits. I thought I told you about his wife's death, but I guess I didn't."

"Well, you're roomed with Travis and his kids, unless you'd prefer Matt. Take your pick."

"No way. I'd rather take my chances with Travis and the kids. I'll probably stay in the main living room anyway."

"That will be a very busy place. Mom already started to put all the couches from the attics in there. We'll be spending the storm all together, among the Collins, and the Smiths."

Chapter 5

Standing on his front porch, Travis contemplated the waves for a few minutes. Nothing could take Joe out of his mind, or the sensation of those kisses from his mouth. He still didn't know what to do. He knew that he had to do the best for his children, but spending the storm together with Joe's family was going to be disturbing. He had no doubt of that.

Nadine stood by his side. "My mom said that if you want we can take the kids with us to her cousin's house in Vineland."

He heard her, and turned around. "Thanks, Nadine. Please tell your mother that I appreciate her thinking of us."

"But you can't stay here. Look at that ocean, and the storm is still hundreds of miles away." She sounded really concerned. Travis looked at his kids, who were running around as if nothing was coming, and made up his mind.

"I won't stay here. I will be spending the storm in Galloway."

"Galloway? Who do you know over there?"

He knew that sooner or later he would have to tell her; he picked later. "I have some new friends—business associates, really, who own a farm and have plenty of space for us to stay. Come on, help me pack."

She followed him inside. "I've never been to Galloway, but I've heard it's like living in the woods."

"Well, the shore isn't safe right now, is it?"

"No, I guess the woods will do."

A couple of hours later, she stood by him, observing the many suitcases they had packed. "It looks more like moving home than a simple evacuation, Travis."

"Most of this will stay in my car, because there's a chance we'll have to find a place to stay while the house gets fixed."

"Really? Well, keep in touch, won't you?"

"Sure, I will. If I forget I'm sure you won't."

She hugged the kids. "Yep. Well, if we're done, I'm calling Mom to pick me up."

Travis nodded. “Nadine, when Ella starts school, would you like to work at the bank with me?”

“Sure. It would be great. But I don’t know anything about banks.”

“We’ll train you—clerical work is not that hard. What’s hard is to find a loyal employee like you.”

She left almost crying, and Travis wondered why. He hoped she wasn’t falling in love with him, as he’d suspected in the past, because after the kisses he’d endured the day before, he knew he might not date a man, but he was sure that he would never marry another woman.

It had been one of the busiest days Joe remembered in his whole life, and he was grateful for it. Otherwise, the times he’d peeked at the road hoping to see Travis would have increased tenfold. He tested that all the batteries were topped, before he took down the solar panels and boarded up the windows at the farm. He’d forgotten that the property had so many windows, and that it was so big. All the while, his mom gave orders left and right, like a sergeant, and his father gave counter-orders. In the end, he’d assumed the role of leader—a role he didn’t like, but nothing would get done otherwise.

All the guests had arrived already, except for Travis. And as the daylight ended, Joe feared the man wasn’t coming. His mom was waiting for everyone to arrive before she gave the little discourse she’d prepared about how things were going to be during and after the storm. That part Joe couldn’t take away, because she managed the kitchen.

It was a real relief when he saw Mary walking in with Travis and the kids by her side. Joe went to greet them, but Mary reached their parents first and made the introductions. Apparently, she had told them about Travis’s dead wife earlier, so they wouldn’t ask about it.

Times like that, Joe felt very proud of his little sister.

“It’s Joe, Daddy.” One of the kids saw him walking toward them—Joe wasn’t sure if it was Richard or Edward, but he felt glad they were happy to see him.

“Hey. Welcome aboard.” He truly didn’t know what to say, but he found himself between the children, answering questions about the farm. No, there were no horses or any other animals, only some chickens; within seconds, he needed Mary’s rescuing. His mom was also greeting the kids, and after a few

minutes, she ordered everybody to sit down, and gave her little welcome speech.

Basically, during the storm, which was due to hit in five hours, everybody would stay in the main house, because it was the safest place. The center room where they were, which was a huge living room, didn't have any windows and it was closer to the kitchen, and there were a couple of bathrooms.

She even assigned bathrooms for ladies and gentlemen. No doubt, she was having fun.

One of Lucia's kids asked where children were supposed to go, and everybody laughed. Joe found himself staring at Travis, fascinated by how the man's face lit up when he laughed. He should do it more often. Joe walked over to him. "Come on, let me show you where you will be staying after the storm."

Travis was holding Ella, who had been struggling to get down, and Mary offered. "Let her down. I'll keep an eye on her and the boys."

Joe noticed how Travis observed the whole room before putting the girl on the floor. There were four more children of different ages running around too. Ella joined them. There was a part of the main room that had been designated for the children, but at the present time, they were all over.

Chapter 6

Travis followed Joe out of the main house, along a pathway leading to one of the smaller houses. The place was bigger than he expected, and it was really nice; not a farm in the woods, but a modern set of housing units. Travis had picked up only what they would need for a couple of days, leaving the rest of their stuff in his car, which was parked in a garage that could accommodate eight vehicles.

“Who lives here? I mean, are these guest houses, or does anybody live in them?” He asked only for small talk; he felt awkward after the way he’d acted during their first encounter, and he’d been playing with the idea of offering Joe an honest apology.

After a brief hesitation, Joe answered his question. “My parents live in the main house, Mary lives in the other small house, and I live in this one.”

It took Travis a few seconds to process his words. “What? Are you telling me that we will be staying with you?”

“No. I mean, yes. I only use the room upstairs. The rest of the house will be for you and the children.”

All the thoughts of apologies were gone. Indeed, by the time Travis finished with him, there would be more offenses to count.

“You bastard. You planned everything, didn’t you?” Travis couldn’t believe it; but it was in front of his eyes. Joe had set him up.

“Lower you voice, please... I don’t know what you’re talking about. Come on, get in.”

Before he could react, Joe pushed him into his house and closed the door. Travis breathed and controlled the rage he felt as he observed Joe pacing around the living room, before he finally looked across at him.

“I didn’t plan anything. Mary assumed your wife was still alive when she invited you to stay with us.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. I knew, because Nadine told me, but I forgot to tell Mary, so she thought your family included your wife when she planned this whole accommodation distribution.”

“Set up, I’d call it,” Travis accused him, even if he did find it hard to believe that someone like Mary would have colluded with her brother.

“Please keep my family out of it. They are simply offering a shelter for you and your family, like they’ve done with our friends.”

“And you?”

“Me?”

“Isn’t this too convenient for you?”

“Travis—or should I keep calling you Mr. Anderson?”

He ignored the question and snapped at him, “You planned this from the beginning. What’s next? Are you going to rape me, or do you think I will be grateful enough to give myself to you?”

Joe stilled, his dark eyes wide open in shock; for a few seconds he only stared at Travis. When Joe finally spoke he sounded deeply offended. “Listen, Travis, and listen very well. I don’t have any intention of taking advantage of you. I will never do anything to you, unless you ask me first. Indeed, at this point, you would have to beg me.”

Travis perceived the disappointment in Joe’s expression, but ignored it. “Beg? Who, me? Well, if that’s the case, I’m safe. Nothing will ever happen between us. I’m totally immune to your charm.”

“Poor me, my ego just died. Travis finds me sexless.”

It upset Travis to hear Joe making fun of him. “You’re such a liar.”

“Stop it, Travis. Don’t begin again. I promised myself I would leave you alone.”

“Do whatever you want. There’s no point, Joe. I don’t like men.” Who was being the liar? Travis thought, dismayed.

Joe scowled at him. “Yes, I know. You feel nothing for me, nothing at all.” He stared suspiciously. “When I kissed you yesterday... what did you feel?”

Travis sighed and avoided Joe’s eyes. “A little embarrassment. Nothing more. If you stop insinuating there could be something between us, maybe we can be friends.”

“So nothing at all?” Joe repeated studying Travis’s face.

“Nothing. Listen, Joe, we can sleep together, I mean, we can share the same bed, and nothing will ever happen, unless you forced yourself on me.” Travis

stepped closer, but stopped at a safe distance. "And if you do so, I will defend myself. You've been warned."

Joe closed the gap between them. "So let's share the bed. It's a challenge."

"Never. It was just a way of making my point clear." Travis resisted the impulse to step back as much as he could. But Joe's muscular body pressed to his was more than Travis could handle, and after a few seconds, he started to walk backward.

Joe asked devilishly, "If you feel nothing, why do you run when I get close to you?"

Travis stepped back again, but this time he had nowhere to go. He could feel the couch behind his calves. Joe raised a hand and chuckled while the tip of his index finger wandered up and down Travis's face.

"What do you think I'll do to you?" Joe whispered, while the finger traced the contour of Travis's mouth. For a second, Travis was lost in the simple caress and the raw desire in Joe's eyes. Will he kiss me again? He glared at Joe's full lips, only the disturbing finger on his own preventing him from being the one to steal a kiss. He had gone mad for sure, because he also felt the unexpected impulse to dart out his tongue and lick that finger. Instead, he moved his face to the side and dropped his gaze.

"Joe, I must admit. I'm scared of you."

"Why? I already told you that I would never do anything against your will." Joe moved one step away.

"I'm not sure," Travis answered honestly. He was confused and more scared of his own reactions to Joe, than of the man himself.

Joe sighed and said, "I'm making a supreme effort trying to understand you. Let's go. We need to settle down in the main room before the storm hits."

Travis rushed to the door and opened it, and Joe started to follow him, saying, "Listen, Travis, I still would like us to take the challenge."

"So, this is Travis." Matt stood by the door and blocking Travis's exit, after giving him the once-over.

"What are you doing here, Matt?" Joe asked his former lover, outraged.

Standing between both men, Travis inquired, "How do you know my name? Who are you?"

Matt examined Travis from head to toe. Ignoring his question and addressing Joe, Matt said, "I was looking for you. Your sister said that you were showing the place to a guest. And I remembered a tour you gave me once of this building. So many memories, huh?"

Joe could've died right there. Travis turned around and looked at him with a silent accusation in his eyes. When Joe didn't say anything, Travis confronted Matt again and repeated the question. "Who are you, and how do you know my name?"

"Joe told me all about you." Joe hastened to them when he heard the lie; knowing Matt, this was going to be ugly. But Travis was already facing Matt.

"What did he tell you about me?"

"Enough to know you are a cheap substitute for me," Matt sneered.

"And what are you exactly to Joe?" Travis asked, looking Matt up and down.

"We've been lovers for many years," Matt seemed pleased to inform.

"Enough, Matt," Joe interrupted. "We broke up ten months ago. Don't listen to him, Travis, and just go, please."

Travis nodded at him and went for the door, but Matt intercepted him.

"Before you go, there is one thing you must know. Joe belongs to me. I was the one who taught him everything he knows—about sex, at least. If he is good in bed, it is because of me. When we met, poor Joe didn't even know how to kiss. I tutored him. So, let's make this very clear. Every time he does anything to you—every kiss, every caress—he will be using a skill he learned from me." He paused, apparently delighted by the effect of his words on Travis's face, before adding, "I was his first lover, the one he will never forget."

Travis couldn't speak; he opened his mouth, and nothing came out.

"Travis, are you okay?" Joe ventured to ask.

Travis jumped backward. "Don't touch me. Don't come anywhere near me."

Matt laughed. "You Jersey guys are so hypocritical."

Joe gave him a killer glare. "Look who's talking."

"So you were the one who corrupted him," Travis accused Matt. "How could you dare to brag about it? You should be deeply ashamed of yourself."

This time, the one without voice was Matt. He quickly changed his sights from Joe to Travis, and back to Joe.

“What is this, Joe? Where did you find this creature?”

“He is not what you think.”

“Then why did you last night—”

“Please, Matt, stop.” The expression in Joe eyes was imploring.

“Fine, but it will cost you,” Matt agreed.

“I’m out of here.” Travis headed for the door once more, but Matt stood in front of him again.

“No so fast. I’m not done with you yet!”

“Let him go, Matt. I told you, Travis is not what you think. He isn’t gay.” Joe could think whatever he wanted, but if Travis didn’t feel gay, well, he wasn’t. He was willing to respect that.

Matt strongly disagreed. “No? You lost your senses in these months away from me? He thinks he can steal you. Well, I have news for you, pretty boy. Joe is mine. If you’re craving a man, go and get one for yourself...”

“You don’t know what a man is,” Travis snarled. “But I’ll gladly show you!”

Everything happened so fast Joe couldn’t do anything. Travis punched Matt in the mouth, and with such force he sent him to the floor. Joe grabbed Travis barely in time to stop him from jumping on Matt and continuing the beating.

Still on the floor, Matt pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, to clean the blood from his nose and mouth, and said with rage, “You broke my nose! Okay, you can kill me if you wish, but the truth is, if Joe feels attracted to you, it’s because you have a little resemblance to me. Yes, you look like a counterfeit copy of me. But like the fake you are, you’ll never be for him what I am.”

Travis was so upset, he ignored that Joe was holding him, and shouted, “You know what? I don’t like men, but if I ever sleep with Joe, you will become only a sad memory.”

Joe was amazed by what he heard. But knowing Matt, he’d better finish this fast.

“Matt, be mature please. Stop this nonsense.” He let Travis free, but stayed alert in case of another attack. “I’m sorry, Travis, you can go now.”

For a moment, he thought Travis was going to spit in his face or something. Their eyes met and Joe was shocked by what he saw. Travis felt pity for him.

“Joe, I’m sorry if I judged you wrongly. You’ve been a victim of this depraved person. It is so sad how you were corrupted at such a young age. But there is hope, if you want to change your ways, that is.”

Matt’s laugh resonated around the room, which was very unusual for him. “Wow! Joe, this is more than I can take. He really is something amazing. Pretty boy, be careful with our dear Joe. He might surprise you.”

“I’m not talking to you,” Travis said, and turned back to Joe. “We’ll talk another day, when this person isn’t around.”

“Then you will never talk,” Matt retorted. “I’ve no intention of leaving him alone with you ever.”

Joe watched as Travis left. “That was so cruel of you, Matt. Who knows what he is thinking about us.”

Matt accepted the help Joe provided to stand up and replied, “He’s thinking what he should think. You are mine. Ouch! That monster broke my nose.”

Joe checked his injury. “No, Matt, your precious nose is fine. I can’t believe that just happened.”

“You love him, don’t you?”

The question took Joe by surprise. It was too soon to speak of love, and it wasn’t Matt’s business.

“What are you doing here, Matt? I thought we agreed to never see each other again.”

“Your mother invited me to spend the storm here.”

“In that case, you must join everybody else in the main room. Let’s go.”

When they arrived at the main house, Joe searched the room and found Travis holding Ella while speaking with Lucia.

Mary was astonished by Matt’s bruise, and looked at Joe in silent inquiry. He raised his hands in the air. “I’ve nothing to do with it.”

“No, he didn’t,” Matt confirmed. “It was that monster, so primitive... Travis.”

“You provoked him first. Mary, can you please get some ice for him?”

The three of them moved to the kitchen area.

Mary gave Matt some ice. “Here. Take these pills too.”

“Thanks.”

While Matt was busy trying to apply the ice, Mary got next to Joe and whispered, “Travis is my hero!”

Joe snickered.

Travis got to where the others were, and busied himself finding a place to sit with his kids and wait out the storm—on the outside, because the one inside him? That one might be endless.

So what if Joe had a lover? Who cares? It wasn't his problem. But it was getting harder and harder to stop thinking about Joe. He had lost his temper again, and that worried him. But the idea of that man touching Joe in the intimate ways Matt implied made Travis's blood boil. He looked across the room and saw the culprit talking with Joe and Mary, and the rage burned inside him again.

Travis breathed deeply and leaned back on the couch, where he sat next to his children. Ella had fallen asleep, but Richard and Edward were playing games on their tablets. He checked that Ella was comfortable, and closed his eyes, but the memory of Joe's finger touching his lips kept him awake.

One hour before the storm made land, the electric power was gone. According to some of the guests, it had been shut down by the electric company as a precaution. The darkness lasted only a few seconds: Joe had harvested solar energy in a battery bank and they were using that to power the lights, the TV and a charging station for all the electronic devices the guests had brought with them.

Travis could hear an electric generator too. He asked Mary about it the next time she walked by him. “Oh, that's Dad's generator. He's using it for the freezers and the refrigerator—he doesn't want to take a chance with the food, because this is the first time we'll be relying on Joe's solar power setup.”

In the next hours, Travis saw very little of Joe. He was busy making sure the electricity was stable, and helping the other guests with different things. Seeing him like that, Travis had to admit, he was not a bum. Not at all.

When Joe finally sat down he almost fell asleep, in spite of the violent winds of the storm raging outside. He found a quiet corner next to the unlit fireplace, and lay there on his old camping gear. When Matt sat next to him, he couldn't find a polite way to reject him in front of everyone. At least there would be no touching. But Matt was upset.

"I can't believe I'm to share Mary's place with all those kids."

"Everybody is sharing with kids."

"You could let me share your room, you know."

"Forget it, Matt. I'm not sharing a room with you ever again." Joe turned around and noticed that Travis, who was on one of the couches with Ella, was watching them. Just what he needed; he could imagine what the man must be thinking.

The best option was to close his eyes, and amazingly as the storm increased, the conversation diminished around him. It was as if everybody was worried the house would not hold on.

Joe knew it would, but at one point they heard a big bang, and he also knew one of the centennial trees had succumbed to the winds, probably taking part of the roof with it on the other side of the main house. He looked to his father, who was silent, like everyone else. His old man simply shook his head, worried.

Joe made a mental note to tell him that he had been right about removing the solar panels during the storm. The cable TV service went out too, as well as all the cellular and Internet signals.

His mother's old AM radio was the only way to know what was going on. And only one radio station was transmitting. Hard to believe they were in the modern era.

Chapter 7

The next morning the daylight showed all the damage the storm had caused. A couple of old trees had fallen and there was debris all over the property. But they fared well enough, because according to the news—which they were listening to on the radio, since the cable TV was still out—the shore and other communities had a truly bad experience.

The governor had forbidden the return to the South Jersey barrier islands until the authorities checked everything. Some of the guests were upset by this; they wanted to go and check on their properties.

A mobile cellular tower had also fallen down, which explained why the smartphone's didn't have a signal. Once again, Joe's father was right—the phone landline he insisted on keeping still worked, and it didn't need any electricity. The problem was, very few people had landline phones at home. Most of his employees, including Daniel, relied on cell phones.

Joe had another long day ahead of him. He felt grateful and surprised when Travis offered his help with anything he needed. Joe could use another pair of hands; while he stood on the top of a ladder, having someone handing him tools, it was helpful and saved time. Amazingly, during those times, they worked in silence; no arguing, or anything.

He felt very pleased with himself when Travis showed interest in the solar power and how it worked, and Joe explained it to him while he started to set up the panels over the roof again. Travis was full of questions, and fascinated about the process of converting solar energy into DC power and later into AC power. Like many people, Travis didn't know that the panels themselves didn't store any energy—that what the panels captured from the sun had to be stored in batteries.

All of a sudden, Travis said, "I'm sorry, Joe."

They were taking a break for lunch, seated on the fallen trees, and Joe had no idea why Travis was apologizing.

"A few weeks ago, one of the branches of the bank I work for was robbed. It was a bad experience, but nobody was hurt and the robbers were caught."

For a moment, Joe thought maybe Nadine was right. Travis was going insane—what does all that have to do with me? But then something in Travis's

eyes allowed him to figure it out. "Let me guess—the bank robbers had tattoos and drove a dirty van?"

Travis nodded. "I shouldn't have judged you simply by the way you look."

Joe smiled. "In that case, I should also apologize for kissing you without permission." His smile banished and he leaned over to whisper, "Your mouth is hard to resist." When he noticed that Travis seemed frozen, Joe quickly asked, "And how did the robbery end?"

Travis wasn't frozen anymore, but by his troubled expression, Joe kind of knew the ending. "No! You didn't!"

"I'm not proud of my temper. You know I lose it easily, but that was one of those times it wasn't such a bad thing."

"You could have been killed, and for what? For other people's money?"

"It wasn't the money I was concerned about. It was the people in the bank at the time. Besides, when I took the initiative, two of the customers, who are veterans, helped. By the time the police arrived, everything was under control."

"Oh, God. Listen, I barely know you, but regardless of our bad start, I think we could be—that there is a future for us." Suddenly, Joe realized that pure friendship would never be in that future; he wanted much more. Travis was staring back at him, as if he'd grown a new head, so Joe just added, "Please, don't you ever risk your life in that way again. You must think of your children."

"I know. I'll never do such a thing again. I'm still affected by it."

Joe had the feeling that it was the first time Travis had admitted that, and somehow he felt honored. And deeply concerned too. He was falling in love with this man, and there was nothing stopping it. Even if he chose to walk away from him and never see him again, it was already too late.

Right then, he wanted to embrace Travis and comfort him, but he couldn't. Too many eyes were on them, and Travis might not even welcome the support. Joe looked at the blue sky above them and the beauty of the day. It was hard to believe that a storm had simply passed through, yet it had caused so much damage.

"We better check the battery bank again. Come on."

He knew that soon it was going to be all the power at their fingertips—a theory that would be tested over the next week. In the aftermath of the storm,

many gas stations were closed and people lined up for hours to get gasoline. The combustible fuel started to be rationed out, and their neighbors that depended on electric generators powered by gasoline were growing anxious about being without a power source.

The only thing Joe could do for them was to set up a charging station in front of the farm—at least they could charge gadgets that had rechargeable batteries—while in the farm the electric generator could barely keep the main refrigerator running as it was.

It took more than a week for anyone to be allowed on to the South Jersey barrier islands again, of which Brigantine was one, and Joe had gone with Travis when he went to see the state of his house.

Even Joe was stunned by how destroyed the house was; it wasn't even fixable, as it had collapsed among the battered boats and scattered debris.

Travis observed the destruction in deep silence and didn't move for a few minutes. Joe stood next to him and, not knowing what else to say, he asked, "Do you have insurance?" Travis nodded but didn't speak.

Joe followed an impulse and held Travis's hand between his. At first, Joe feared he would be rejected, but Travis grabbed his hand and they stayed like that for a few minutes, side by side observing the devastation. Joe didn't want to name the moment, because it simply felt right.

Eventually Travis cleared his throat and breathed. "Thanks for taking us in during the storm, Joe."

"The credit goes to Mary. It was her idea. And of course, Mom and Dad who agreed with her," Joe replied.

Slowly, Travis released his hand and paced in front of what had been his driveway. "I don't want to imagine what could have happened to us, if we'd stayed here."

Joe shrugged. "Then don't. Listen, you and the kids are okay." Joe indicated with his hand at the house's ruins. "All of this can be rebuilt."

"Yes. But at this point, it would be a question of rebuilding or not. I heard on the radio that there would be a new law making it mandatory that houses are raised five feet up on pilings."

"I heard that too, but you know how things are around here. It will take months before anything is settled. Anyway, after you get reimbursed by the

insurance, I suggest you meet with Daniel and Mary to discuss the best rebuild possibilities.”

“What about you?”

“I’m currently doing construction, because we are extra busy with work due to the storm. But also, due to the storm, my alternative energy company has customers even before I’ve started it. Isn’t that great?”

Joe almost regretted his comment, when he saw Travis’s expression. So he quickly added, “You and the kids are welcome to stay with me as long as you like.”

“Are you sure?” Travis sounded surprised.

The distress in the blue eyes touched Joe deeply, and he resisted the impulse to tell him that he was more than sure. He truly wanted to get to know him better, because in the almost two weeks they were sort of living together, it had been a crowded house, but finally, all the other guests were returning to their homes, which had been less damaged than Travis’s.

“In that case, you’d have to charge me some rent.”

That was the banker talking, Joe thought, but if that is what it takes for him to stay with me, so be it.

“Sure, you’d need to talk that through with Mom.” Joe wasn’t sure that she would charge Travis anything; she seemed very happy to have the children around, and his father spent hours telling Edward and Richard all those stories Joe never had the patience to hear. The kids seemed genuinely interested in what the old man had to say. The children’s presence had become therapeutic.

Chapter 8

Having the support of the family had been more valuable than Travis ever imagined. After the storm, he had to spend far too many hours at the different branches of the bank, making sure everything was getting back to normal. The process seemed never-ending at times. He would get Nadine in the mornings and bring her to the farm, but sometimes she had to leave and he would still be busy. So, having Christine and Mary—Joe's mom and sister—to look after the kids for a couple of hours was priceless.

Nadine had been surprised to find Travis living with Joe's family, but after a brief recounting of the facts, she didn't ask anything else, though she did tell Travis she thought having a family again was great for his mental health. The girl apparently didn't get the part about the arrangement being temporary.

And just like that, a whole month went by, and Travis was wondering if he should continue sharing the house with Joe, or accept Mary's offer to move in with her. He almost accepted her offer, because she had looked at him with a suspicious expression when she made it, but he was already settled in Joe's house; even if the kids spent more time at the main house, at night they slept in the small house.

Joe only came there to sleep too, because after the storm they had so much work, his days were longer than Travis's.

One of the rare days Joe came home early, Travis followed him to his room. He had never been in there before, and he was curious. The room took the whole second floor of the house, and included a bathroom and a small office.

"Welcome to my sanctuary." Joe moved an arm in a circular manner so Travis could see the room. It was amazing. The whole house was beautiful, but this room was awesome. Travis walked across to look out of the panoramic windows; they were half of the whole place, and the view was astonishing. Now he understood why New Jersey was called the Garden State.

The storm had knocked down many trees, but the majority still stood proud. Being at the end of fall, the trees were dressed in multicolored leaves, and from there he could see an ocean of trees, and blue sky. The side of the room where the windows were located was circular; on the opposite side was an unlit fireplace, where Joe stood, realigning figures over the mantelpiece.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"It's really nice."

"Do you want to share it with me?"

Travis didn't look at him, but he knew Joe was making him a serious offer.

"Mary offered first," Travis said, turning around.

"Anything Mary offers you is provisional. She's getting married in a few months, remember?"

"I know, and I don't think we will have a place of our own before her wedding."

"So?" Joe took a step toward him.

It had been weeks since he'd looked at him that way. Travis confessed to himself that he'd missed that naughty spark in Joe's dark eyes. "If we stay with you, I'll continue to use the same room I'm using now."

"I'm hungry," Joe said, looking him up and down. "Unless you can offer me something better than food, I'm out of here."

"You see? You are doing it again. You just ruined it. I was trying to be your friend, Joe."

"Travis," Joe stared at him. "I'm glad you're here with your kids, and that my family likes you so much. I will do anything to help you in anyway. But I will never be your friend."

"Why not? This is ridiculous, we should be friends, we can share our families."

"No."

"Yes, we can."

"I said no. I hate being your friend."

"Why?"

"Damn it, because of this."

Joe pushed him and Travis fell back onto the bed. In one swift move, Joe was on top of him, one leg over Travis's legs, and one hand holding his chin so he had to face him.

"Because this is the way I want you... aren't you afraid?"

Travis shook his head and thought to himself, how can I tell you that the one I'm scared of the most, is myself?

He was doing his best to ignore the heat that Joe's body lit in his own. "No, I'm not afraid of you anymore, Joe," he said.

Joe let himself fall onto the big comfy bed next to Travis and changed the subject. "See? It is big enough. We can sleep together. I challenge you to sleep with me for a whole month, if you dare."

"There is no use, I told you. I won't change my feelings for you, even if we... share this bed."

"Then it's a deal. All you have to do is come here after everybody else is sleeping."

"Sounds like I will be sneaking in." Travis lay on his side, his head propped on one hand.

"Are you taking the challenge?"

"First, tell me the rules."

"Which rules?"

"This challenge is like a game, isn't it? Every game has rules."

Joe thought for a second. "Okay, we can't touch each other."

"Each other? You can't touch me. I have no interest in touching you."

Joe turned on his side, so he could look Travis in the eyes. "Travis, please be honest with me?"

"About what?"

"Are you sexually attracted to men?"

Travis moved his eyes from one side to the other, as if refusing to meet Joe's. After a few seconds, he asked, "And you—what about your relationship with Matt?"

"I asked you first, Travis."

"If you answer my question honestly, I might answer yours."

"Okay. Matt and I met at college, lived together for six years and broke up ten months ago. His fault, he was unfaithful to me more than once. I can't forget or forgive that. Your turn."

"That's it? No more details?"

"There is nothing else worth telling." Joe leaned closer. "Travis," he prompted, "do you like men?"

After deeply sighing, Travis said, "Yes. I feel attracted to men, but control it, because it's wrong."

Regardless of what he had thought when he first met him, that answer surprised Joe. "It's worse to repress your desire and out it as rage against the world. Think about it—people concluding you're nuts, when you're really in need of some sexual release of the right kind." He paused before asking, "When was the last time you had sex?"

"Come on, Dr. Freud, are you serious?" Travis was playing cool, but his voice gave away his nerves.

"Travis, answer the question, please."

"Before Sophia got sick," he muttered.

The honesty he was getting from Travis was great, but Joe didn't want to dwell on anything for too long, afraid Travis would leave the room before they got a deal. "There is no reason to be ashamed of that. I've been kind of celibate for many months, because the idea of intimacy brought memories of Matt and his infidelity. It was as if he had killed the pleasure of the act for me." Joe silently added, "Until I met you, and then, it was madness. For having you, no matter what."

"Have you been with anybody else besides Matt?"

"Yes."

Travis sat on his ankles with an indignant expression. "Were you unfaithful to him too?"

"No. I spent months without sex after Matt and I were done."

"And?"

"Aren't you being too nosy?"

Travis laughed. "Ah! You don't like your own medicine, Dr. Freud."

Joe briefly laughed too, and with a serious expression said, "The sexual dynamic between men is different."

"Different? How?"

"There is no dating the usual way, one takes what's offered. The romance might come later or never come."

“Hold it right there. So you got the chance of having sex with some random guy and took it?”

“Didn't you ever hear of a one night stand?”

“Yep.”

“There wasn't any need to spend any more time with another man than necessary for a mutual safe and quick release.”

“Mutual safe and quick release,” Travis repeated thoughtfully. “It sounds very therapeutic.”

“Trust me, it is.” Joe's grin turned wicked. “Would you like to give it a try?”

“No, thanks.”

“But we're doing the challenge at least.”

“Wait a second. What about my children? I don't want to imagine them finding us sleeping together.”

Joe sat up and buried his face into his hands. “Yeah, that would be terrible. Not to mention Mom, or Mary.”

“Well, it was an interesting project while it lasted.” Travis's relief was obvious.

Then Joe remembered something. Rising to his feet he opened a closet and found a gadget that he dropped on the bed saying, “It's solved. I'll tell my family that you're going to use my office to do the work you bring home, and this monitor will let us know if any of the children wake up in the middle of the night.”

Travis looked at what Joe showed him. It was a surveillance set of some kind. It included a camera, with a small monitor screen, similar to a baby monitor. “Are you sure? I mean, will this detect noise too?”

“Yes. It's noise activated, it will turn on if anybody passes by it. We can set it at the bottom of the stairs.”

“Why do you have this?”

Joe wasn't ready to share with Travis the real motivation for his interest in surveillance systems, so he told him the other true reason. “We were being robbed at The Handyman, and I got a few of these to catch the thieves, and we

did. I brought this one home for Mom to use with Dad when she was in a different room. He refused to be monitored like a baby.”

“Only you could suggest such a thing to your father.”

Joe shrugged. “You haven’t seen how it is when he’s not feeling well. We can use it, and if any of the children come looking for you, you will have enough time to get into the office, or go downstairs, before they get here.”

Travis looked from the gadget to Joe and back again. “Okay, let’s give it a try,” he said and quickly added, “And you, Joe—what is your part of the deal? If you can’t touch me, how are you going to change my mind?”

“I don’t know yet. Even if I knew, I wouldn’t say. It would be like showing my cards, don’t you think?”

“Agreed, but I don’t get what’s in it for you yet?”

Joe couldn’t tell him that just seeing him made him happy. And the idea of sharing his bed with him was very exciting. He ignored Travis’s question and instead said, “The challenge is that we will share the bed for a whole month, beginning tonight, and I can’t touch you. If I touch you in an intimate manner, I lose. And if at the end of that month, nothing has happened between us, I must accept defeat, and become your friend with no teasing ever again.” He pointed at him. “Your rule is that you have to be honest. If you ever feel anything, you can’t hide it. You must act on it, Travis. And that’s my gain, if you will.”

“What exactly do you mean?”

“If you ever feel like touching me or kissing me, since I can’t do it, you are the one who must take the lead.”

“And if I do—emphasis on if—what would you do?”

Joe raised his eyebrows in a speculative manner and grinned before he lay on the bed again. “If you take the initiative, it means I’ve won.” He eased Travis down onto the bed and positioned himself so that each had a thigh pressed against the other’s genitals. At first Travis remained serene, as if it took him a few seconds to realize what the new position would do to his cock, then he gasped but said nothing.

“Don’t worry,” Joe murmured against his mouth, “I’m not doing anything now, simply answering your question.”

They stared at each other for a few seconds Joe steadied himself on his elbows and made a couple of brief movements; enough to send the right

message. He leaned forward and whispered in Travis's ear, "If you ever kiss me, or touch me in an intimate way, I wouldn't stop until I heard you yelling—Ahh, Joe, that's it, Oh! Joe, Ahh!" He basically finished the comment by faking an orgasm, tremors and all.

"You pervert. The deal is off." Travis pushed him off him and, standing, fixed his still impeccable clothes.

"What? Don't tell me you haven't yelled like that making love? Come on. Maybe in not the same way, but... You haven't. How did you conceive the kids then?"

"If you don't want to talk about your relationship with Matt, I don't want to talk about my marriage either. But one thing I can assure you, my marriage was consummated."

"Yeah. I believe you." Joe raised his hand and started counting with his fingers until he reached three.

"I'm a man, Joe." Travis didn't get the joke, he seemed offended.

"I'm a man too, Travis. Let's make this very clear. I'm a man who prefers to have sexual relations with another man. I like men. However, I don't want to become a woman. I'm happy to be a man. Clear enough?"

"Yes."

"Travis... I'll be waiting for you tonight. The door will be unlocked. And if I'm not home, like those times when I travel, or stay late at the office, please feel free to come and sleep in our bed."

"I'm not sure, Joe."

"About what? Are you still afraid of me?"

"No. I just showed you I trust you."

"So forget your doubts. We have a deal." Joe extended his hand, but pulled it back. "Sorry, I forgot I can't touch you."

"You can't touch me in bed. A handshake is fine."

They shook hands, and then Joe said, "Let's go raid the kitchen, I'm starving."

"You're always hungry."

Joe displayed his wicked grin. "You have no idea how much or how often."

Travis didn't wait for him and headed for the main house. Joe's laughter followed him.

Chapter 9

One night, Joe came home very late, and found Mary waiting for him in the kitchen. She was working on her wedding invitations at the kitchen table. Joe finished eating, surprised that she didn't speak at all. Someone had snatched his little sister, or she was getting old. It was only when he said good night and was heading to his home that she stopped him.

"We need to talk."

Joe knew what was coming. "I'm tired, maybe another day..." When he saw her wary expression, he added, "Okay, tell me."

"Not in here. Let's go to my room."

Once there, she sat on the bed and he on a couch in front of her. She was really concerned about something.

"Changed hair color again? I prefer you blonde," he tried to joke.

"I feel like a redhead right now," she replied.

"You're a beauty anyway. Why are you so mad at me?"

"It was very smart of you, telling Mom that Travis was going to be using the computer inside your room. If she ever sees him going in or out of there, she will assume he's working, right?"

"Well, it's true he brings work home. And I'm not using my desk in that office anyway. Did you know that being a general manager means he supervises four managers at different branches of the bank?"

She did that thing with her nose to show she didn't believe him. "Have I lost your trust or something?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I know you and Travis are sleeping together. And you haven't said a word to me." She rose to her feet and pointed at him. "I told you when I started to sleep with Daniel. Not even Lucia knew before you."

Joe was going to reply, but she raised her hand stopping him.

"And the even more amazing thing is, Travis is acting like nothing is happening. Like you and he have been sleeping together all your lives.

He raised both arms. "May I say something?"

“Go ahead. I’m waiting.”

“Mary, the day, I—well, I’m going to say it as politely as I can—the day I get to know Travis in the biblical sense, everybody will know. He probably won’t be able to sit or walk normally for a week.”

She climbed up on him and hit him with her little fists, and they continued to struggle until they started laughing like little kids. After a while, they sat together, very close, Joe holding her in his arms. He talked against her hair.

“I’m sorry. I was kidding. I should have listened to you. It is so hard to lie next to him every night, without being able to touch him.”

“I still don’t understand that part about sharing the bed.”

“It’s exactly how it sounds. My bed is big, so he has his side, and I have mine. I usually go to bed after him—most of the time he’s already sleeping, or pretends to be. I wake up before him and that’s it.”

“Do you really expect me to believe that you haven’t tried any tricks?”

“Well, I left a window open once, and when he felt the cold in the middle of the night, he sheltered in the heat of my body. That is the best experience so far. It was wonderful feeling him bound to me, and infuriating when I realized I could do nothing else. And my blissful moment was short-lived.”

“Why? Did he know about the window?”

“No. His paternal instincts took over. He woke up and went to check to see if his kids were cold too. I stayed in bed, faking sleep and when he came back to bed, he had a sweater on. He even threw a blanket over me.”

She giggled. “Travis is a great person, Joe. If you feel you can’t control yourself, just stop this, eh?”

“Don’t worry, I’m taking precautions. No, you won’t be getting any details of my method.”

“About the open window trick. Don’t keep doing that. Soon, it will be winter and it’s dangerous.”

“Before winter gets here, our month of sharing the bed will be over...”

“And his house will be done. Joe, I can’t make more excuses in order to give you time. I reassigned the crew twice, I ordered the wrong materials, and I’m simply running out of excuses. If Daniel finds out, I could lose him.”

“I won’t ask any more from you.”

“So, what have you concluded? Is he really straight or not?”

“I’m not sure, Mary. He is an enigma. Sometimes, I catch him looking at me in a way I want to believe is something else, but then he acts like I’m just a friend. So far, the only fact clear to me is that Travis likes to share the bed with me.”

“Maybe it’s the bed,” she teased.

“If that’s so, he can have it. I’ll buy another.”

“I told you he’s straight. Listen, Joe, I will help you. But don’t come crying when he breaks your heart and your soul. Because this time, it will be worse than with Matt.”

“Thank you, you are the best, Mary. But why do you think it will be worse?”

“Because with Matt it was all about sex. With Travis, I can feel your heart and soul are deeply involved. You’ve stolen his kiss, but he took your heart.”

They shared the hug for a few seconds longer, and when they separated, Mary smiled and Joe smiled back, but once again, the smile didn’t reach his eyes. He returned to his room.

Travis was still awake, reading a book and sitting on the bed. Joe began to take off his shirt and noticed Travis observing his nipples. For a moment, Joe felt some hope. He finally finds something interesting.

“Do you like what you see?”

Travis raised his head with an expression like he finished inspecting a crack in the wall.

“You don’t have any holes.”

“Holes? What do you mean... Oh. No, I’m not into piercing.”

“The little holes in there...”

“Oh My God. Are you serious?”

Travis held his gaze. “Yes.”

“Travis, we are men. We don’t have holes in our nipples—not that you can see anyway. Well, maybe some might have, but I’ve never met anybody who does.”

“Oh. I never thought about it. I assumed all humans did.”

“How many men have you seen naked?”

“Forget it. I’m so dumb.” Travis put the book he was reading on the bedside table.

“I guess none besides yourself?” Joe said. “What about school? Didn’t you play sports and have showers afterward?”

“I avoided looking at anybody naked back then, but I’m looking at you right now.”

“And you—do you have any holes?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never checked. It’s a little hard to see for myself, besides...”

“Don’t say it, I know. It’s a sin.”

Joe studied his expression. Travis was really embarrassed, but he couldn’t let this opportunity go to waste.

“Can I see?” Joe asked. “Please open your shirt? Maybe you do have them.”

Travis opened his shirt like a child would, and Joe took a good look; although those pinkish nipples were begging for a lick, Joe controlled himself and only said, “No, you don’t have them either.”

“Well, we learn something new every day. My wife’s is the only chest I’ve seen before.”

“Travis.” When Joe felt he had his complete attention, he asked, “Please tell me a little bit about yourself.”

Travis thought for a few seconds, not sure where to start. Apparently, the beginning was the right place. “I’m adopted, but not in the sense of having loving parents cherishing me all my life. I was one of those babies that someone abandoned at the Atlantic City hospital, and I’d never known who were my parents. They could have been from anywhere. With so much traffic as AC got.”

“Did your adopted parents abuse you in any way?”

“No. They were good people, fostering children was part of their Christian ministry.” Travis smile was twisted in irony. “Their way to serve God, and gain access to Heaven.”

“Are you a religious person?”

“No, I was brought up that way, but I can think by myself. I don't believe everything I was ever told. But some of the things I heard about homosexuality while I was growing up, those things still call home in my brain.”

“You seem to have issues enjoying your sexuality. Why do you think that is?”

Again, Travis thought for a few seconds before answering. “I didn't grow up in Brigantine or Ocean City with the rich people I deal with now. I grew up in the worse part of AC, among whores, drug dealers and addicts.”

“Well, that's a surprise.”

“I grew up seeing people using sex to get what they wanted, and somehow, I rejected the physical aspect of it.”

“Wait a second, how were you exposed to that?”

“My adopted parents were Christians who managed a homeless shelter in AC, I grew up between those poor souls and the preaching of what sex and drugs do to people. We were living among those people until my adopted parents retired. That was when we moved to Brigantine.”

“Did you get your house from them?”

“Yes, I inherited it. I had no idea how bad its foundation really was.”

“It takes an expert eye, like Daniel's, to see certain things. What about your foster brothers and sisters? You don't keep in touch?”

“I did with some of them, but as they were growing up they moved to others states. In the end, I was the only one who stayed around here. The truth is we don't have much in common.” Breathing deeply, Travis muttered, “I know so little about life, that I have little in common with you.”

“Don't worry, I totally understand you. If you stay next to me long enough, you'll learn a few things.”

Travis froze. “Are you going to do the same things with me as Matt did with you?”

Joe's eyes got darker for a moment. Damn Matt and his poison, which continued to work long after the sting.

“No. I've other plans for us, Travis.”

“What are you planning?”

“You will only know, if—emphasis on if—we ever make love.”

“I understood what he said. And somehow he’s right. The kisses, the caresses, will always be the same.”

“Since when are you so interested in the subject? Besides, don’t talk of what you don’t know.”

“It will be the same, right?”

“Damn it. No. I know how I will make it unique, at least for me.”

“Tell me about it.”

Joe’s eyes widened, then reduced with suspicion. He had to be careful; Travis was playing one of his little innocent games. “Did I win the challenge?”

“No.”

“Then what is this conversation about? Why do you want to know, if you are not going to do anything.”

“I’m trying to understand how you think and feel. I’m very curious about it.”

Joe studied his quiet, relaxed expression and sat on the most distant corner of the bed. He remembered the selling tips he learned in business school. Curiosity means interest. It was a point in his favor. “If we ever make love, I will do with you something I’ve never done with anyone, including Matt.”

This time, Travis was the one who moved closer; either he was trying to listen better or to understand. “How will I know you really have done it only with me?” he asked.

Joe smiled and for a moment they shared a deep look into each other’s eyes. Joe broke away before he lost control; it was so hard to resist kissing him right there.

“I can’t give you any details without scaring the hell out of you, but believe me, you will know. There will be no doubts. Matt is wrong. Not everything I know I learned from him.”

“So there have been others?”

Joe perceived a hint of jealousy in his tone. “I’m not discussing those details, Travis. All I’ll say to you is that I’ll volunteer to help you explore your body any time.”

“Were you with someone tonight?”

Joe was shocked by the question. What was the name of the game now? “Why do you ask?”

“You smell different. Since you got in the room I can smell a perfume. And your shirt is full of red hair.

“Listen, you first must give yourself to me, before the jealousy scene.”

“I’m not jealous. It’s just curiosity.”

“Curiosity killed the cat.” Joe picked at his shirt; apparently Mary had got a new perfume, along with the new hair color. It had a few of Mary’s hairs—Travis clearly had very good sight. Joe held one of the hairs up against the light.

“Yes, I was struggling with a redhead. Hottie girl.”

“Could be a guy. Some dudes grow hair as long as that.”

“Oh dear. And you are not jealous? If you were, I guess I would have to sleep on the couch.”

“If you don’t take a shower, you will. Only God know what germs a person might carry.”

Joe took a deep breath and weighed his choices. If he got a hold of Travis in that moment, he probably would try to seduce him without thinking, so he chose to go into the shower saying, “Matt’s right. You have more in common with him than you want to admit.”

That would have to be enough retaliation. Travis turned over, turned off his lamp and went to sleep without another word. When Joe came out of the bathroom, he went to the next room, and somehow stacked himself on the small couch in the home office, only to be awakened by Travis a few minutes later.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. Please come back to the bed.”

“I’m okay here.”

Joe turned away. He was really upset. He might have somehow fallen in love with him, but Travis was getting on his nerves.

“Joe, in four more nights, the bet will be over. We won’t be sharing the bed anymore.”

“So what? Four nights or days, who cares? It will be the same, because apparently you’ve won. As a bonus you can take the bed with you. I’m getting a new one.”

“Thanks, but I’d rather not. Please let’s go to bed. If you sleep on this couch, everything will ache in the morning. Besides, we will be wasting one of the four remaining nights.”

Joe didn’t say anything, but he got up and climbed in on his side of the bed. Waste... what the hell is Travis talking about?

With that thought he fell asleep.

Chapter 10

The next night, Travis was on the computer finishing some work, still feeling embarrassed by having discovered that morning Mary's new hair color and perfume. She was probably the redhead Joe had struggled with the night before. He had witnessed how the siblings played like children a couple of times, something he found funny, but didn't understand because he didn't have brothers or sisters himself.

There was so much he didn't understand about Joe yet. The only thing he knew for sure was that he liked to be next to Joe, and he missed him when they were apart, even for a few hours.

Then he saw Joe came home with some bags.

"Howdy." The naughty way Joe smiled told him that he was up to something. But what?

"Hi." Travis looked at him. "What's all that?" He followed Joe into the bedroom.

"I went shopping. I needed a couple of things." Joe put the big bags with clothes over the dresser, took another small plastic bag, and put it inside his side table drawer, on his side of the bed.

"What's that?"

"A little something."

Travis walked the distance between them. "What are you hiding from me?"

"Nothing. Come on, let's join the family, Mom cooked lasagna." Joe closed the drawer and walked to the door.

Travis opened the drawer and drew the contents out of the little bag, reading in disbelief. "Personal lubricant? Condoms? What are these for? Why are you buying this stuff?"

Joe turned from the door. "It is what it says it is. Even you have enough imagination to know what it's for." He stood in front of Travis. "We're going to need it, sooner or later."

"No way. We don't need any of this."

Joe recovered the rectangular boxes from his hand, and put them back in the drawer. "So you're no longer afraid of getting one of my STDs?"

“Are you sick?”

“No. After I left Matt, I had myself checked for everything, and last week I got my last re-check. I’m clean. Can you say the same, Mr. Anderson?”

“Of course, I’m clean. Why are we having this conversation? Ironies aside, I already apologized for the way I treated you that first day.”

“Whatever. Simply forget what’s inside the drawer.”

Travis passed by him saying, “Finally, we agree about something. I’m going to check on the children. They are already in bed. Why don’t you go and eat some dinner?”

Joe grabbed his hand. “I’m a natural born sinner, Travis. If you stay next to me, you will become one too.”

“It’s not going to happen. So far, we’re handling ourselves well.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Travis rescued his hand and left the room.

Later, much later...

“Travis... Travis...”

He could hear Joe’s voice in his sleep, and woke to find himself alone in the bed. The room was semi-dark, only the tiny lights from the garden providing some brightness, but he could see Joe wasn’t there. He moved over to Joe’s side of the bed, waited and listened. He heard it again. It was Joe calling him; it was his voice, very low, like a moan.

Travis got out of the bed, fearing the worst; maybe he got suddenly sick or something. He checked the monitor: according to the image on the little screen, everything was calm downstairs. He walked to the office and it was empty. Then he went to the bathroom, the door was closed, but he could see the lights were off. Travis heard Joe’s voice again, so he went in and put the lights on.

It took a few seconds for him to realize what was going on. Joe was sitting on the side of the tub, completely nude and with one leg bent over the border of it. Travis could see Joe’s erect cock.

Joe was breathing heavily, his eyes closed, his lips quivering. When he realized the interruption, he opened his eyes and looked at Travis in surprise, but recovered very fast. The look in his eyes changed to pure lust. Travis stared

in awestricken silence. Nobody had looked at him like that before. It was like asking silently to join him.

Travis tried to look into Joe's dark eyes only, but he couldn't help his eyes roaming over his tanned and muscular body. There were parts where his skin was lighter due to the lack of sun exposure and others were darker, like his nipples and his balls were coppery, while his cock was slightly darker still. Travis could clearly see the dilated veins across its silky surface and the cock head gleamed with pre-cum.

In all, Travis had to admit that there was something beautiful and wild about him.

"I'm sorry," he said still in awe by what he interrupted.

"Come here, Travis."

"Never."

Joe simply continued pumping his cock.

"Joe, you can't... You shouldn't be doing..."

"Why? Haven't you done this?"

"No, because I know..."

"Don't say it. If you're not going to help me, get the fuck out here. And close the damn door."

Travis did just that. He went back to the bed and covered himself with the blankets. Joe didn't hold his squall this time. Travis heard very clearly when he climaxed, saying his name. No faking this time and no joke. For Joe, this pleasure issue was very real.

Travis was feeling too many emotions together, but the one which bothered him the most was this thing between his legs, which all of a sudden had a mind of its own. He closed his legs as tightly as he could and tried to think about other things, but the image of Joe naked, pleasuring himself, was too vivid.

Seeing what he'd only imagined before touched him deeply. He'd tried to ignore Joe's body since the night they agreed to the challenge, when he had sensed Joe growing hard above him and his own body reacting to it. He'd panicked and responded in the only way he knew. Now, he felt sorry for talking to Joe in that manner, after he had been so generous with him, and kind to his children.

Although, it was one thing to know Joe was attracted to him, and another to see with his own eyes the effect he had on Joe, to hear him uttering his name with such passion.

And, he could not erase from his mind the image of Joe's body, nor the feelings that the contact with that body aroused in him, and the curiosity. His own penis looked different, and, truth to be told, he'd never seen another one up close before, never mind one that was also erect.

He heard the water running and later, when Joe got out the bathroom to get dressed, he watched how unlike other times, Joe paraded around naked, gathering the clothes he was going to wear for the day. It was a vision of sensuality. At one point, Travis could see Joe's figure against the light of the sunrise. When Joe felt his eyes on him, he turned around and Travis could have sworn Joe's eyes were lit up with fire.

"I know you're awake." Joe finished getting dressed and sat on the bed, Travis moved away instinctively. "Were you ever found touching yourself?"

Travis nodded, but didn't say anything else. Joe breathed deeply before he continued, "If you were told that doing such a thing is a dirty sin, it's about time you scratch that from your mind, or you'll never be happy."

Travis rose to Joe's level, and without looking him in the eyes said, "That's easy to say."

"Travis, you pride yourself on being a man. Well, this is part of what being a man is."

"If you're a pervert, yes, it is."

"No, there is nothing wrong in doing it, Travis. And stop calling me pervert, you don't know what a real pervert is." He shook his head in frustration. "There is so much you need to learn."

"I forbid you from saying my name while you do that. Why do you have to say my name? Can't you just do it, in silence?"

"Do you know why I'm saying your name while doing it? Because I'm imagining making love to you."

"Please stop doing that," Travis mumbled.

"I can't. It's the only way I'm able to sleep next to you, without losing control."

"So that's what you're doing before getting into bed?"

“Exactly.”

“Do you have to do it in the morning too?”

“Not always. Sometimes the urge in the morning is more intense than any other time of the day.”

“Are all men like you? Why am I different? I don't have those needs.”

Joe thought for a moment. “You need to be honest with yourself. You can hide your desires from me or anybody else. The fact they are hidden, doesn't mean they cease to exist.”

“Is there something wrong with me?”

“I'm not a doctor, Travis. But one thing I can tell, from something I've read. If your problem were biological, you would look very different than you do. I think your body is fine, the problem is up here.” Joe traced a path with his index finger from Travis's forehead to his heart. “...continues here... to down here.” He quickly ended with the lightest brush over Travis's semi-hard penis covered by the pajama pants.

Travis withdrew as fast as he could. Joe smirked as if he knew Travis would do that. He shrugged and walked to the door saying, “I better go, I'm already late. Have a great day.”

Travis suddenly said, “Joe, I won the challenge.”

Joe let his hand drop from the doorknob and turned around slowly. Travis raised a hand and mimicked the pathway of Joe's touching. “See? You touched me intimately while we were in bed.”

“Fuck!” Joe shook his head in uncertainty. “So much for controlling myself night after night, to lose for something so silly.”

“You were the one who made up the challenge and made up the rules too.”

“Yes, I accept my defeat, you won. We'll talk about it, tonight. Now I must go.”

Travis spent the whole day thinking about the incident over and over again.

Chapter 11

That night, after a long working day, Joe didn't want to go to his room, knowing Travis would not be there. But sooner or later he would have to face the fact. When he got to the door which separated his side of the house from the rest, he heard voices. Travis, Mary and Mom? Joe thought the worst. If his mom found Travis sleeping in his bed...

Joe thought back to the day, years ago when he'd made a confession to his father about his sexuality, and the old man had been disappointed and told him to be discreet and never to shame their family. And so far, Joe had complied, which had been easy, because he'd never met a guy whose hand he felt like holding while walking down the street. Not even Matt, who preferred being closeted, anyway.

Until Travis, who inspired him to shout his feelings from the rooftops.

"What's going on here?"

He ran into the little hall and found they were all inside the room in front of his sanctuary, the so-called home office only Travis used occasionally. He felt relief when he saw his mother smiling at him. Whatever it was, it was not the worst.

"Joe. Speaking of the devil, I'm glad you are here. Listen, we would like your opinion about something."

"My opinion?"

"Forget it, Mom. He doesn't have a say in this."

"What are you talking about, Mary?" Knowing his sister, whenever she said that it meant the opposite.

"Since I'm getting married next month, we've been reorganizing the compound, and we're taking over the part of the house you're not using. Now it belongs to Travis and the kids."

"What? And I don't have a say?"

"No. You keep your sanctuary; the rest will be Travis's." Mary's tone was final. She really meant it.

"So he's getting the seventy-five percent of my side?"

"A side you have never used."

Travis suddenly found his voice. "It will only be until my home is ready, Joe."

Mary moved her head in denial. "As a matter of fact, your house is ready."

"Why you didn't say so before, Mary? Why are we still here?" Travis looked at her surprised.

"Travis, that other place is your house, but this is your home. Mom and I decided you should stay with us, as long as you want, of course. Your whole family had been adopted by ours."

Joe wasn't happy. He knew Mary was pushing them to make up their minds, especially Travis.

"Nothing would make me happier, than staying here with you guys," Travis said. "But I don't want to take advantage of your family. Especially because you don't want to take any money from me."

"Travis, if you want to do something that will benefit our big new family, use your cash to invest in Joe's alternative energy company. There is a future in that, something to tell our grandchildren about."

By Travis's understanding smile, Joe knew that he bought every single word Mary said—pity his sister could not help in the bed issues. He quickly scratched that idea before she could read his mind and start suggesting in that area too.

"That is a great idea, Mary. Joe and I will talk about it."

Mary hugged Travis and he embraced her, expressing genuine affection. It was a sight Joe couldn't bear. Travis had never been like that with him.

"Do as you please," he said. "As long as my sanctuary isn't part of it. Good night, everyone."

He kissed his mom and was leaving when Mary ran to him.

"Hey. Big brother, where's my kiss?"

He stopped and turned to face her. She pulled his head down to kiss him, while whispering in his ear, "Don't worry, I'm still your secret weapon."

He kissed her back, grinned and went for a walk, and didn't come back until he was so tired he could barely walk.

So Travis won. Damn it. He would have to be his friend, sharing brotherly love indefinitely.

When he entered his room, he found Travis sat on his side of the bed, like all the previous nights, holding his pillow. In moments like that he really looked more childish than usual.

“What are you doing here? The contest is over. You won.”

“I forgot my pillow.”

“Did you hear me? You won.”

“In my opinion, the score is tied.”

“A tie?” Joe sat on the bed, astonished. “What are you talking about, Travis? The rules were very clear. If you have any feelings for me, I won.”

“It depends.”

“Explain yourself, please. And this time, no more games. What exactly is on your mind and... in your heart? I deserve to know.”

Travis held the pillow even tighter, closed his eyes, like in a silent and small prayer, and said, “It is not easy for me...”

“You can have the bed, if you wish. I’ll have it moved to your side of the house tomorrow,” Joe said.

Travis looked hurt. “This bed without you is like any other.”

“Travis, I can’t take it anymore. Be honest or get out of here.”

“I can’t put it into words, but I’ll try. Since I moved over here, I think I’m learning... what love is. I’ve never had more unconditional love in my life. Sophia loved me, but she was just like me. She died without telling me she cared about me, though I knew she did. But for the first time I feel loved. This is what I feel for this whole family.”

When Joe didn’t say anything, Travis sighed deeply before adding, “Now, about you... for you... I just feel lost when you aren’t nearby. I like to sleep, knowing you are there, next to me. I enjoy when we talk, when we play with the kids, when we are all together. This will be the best holidays ever. Mary and I...”

Joe interrupted him, “Yes, Mary and you. If you need a friend, you have her.”

“Are you jealous?”

“No, Travis. I’m envious. My little sister has a bond with you I’ll never have. You don’t mind hugging her—I guess you feel safe, because she doesn’t have a penis.”

“I want us to be friends too.”

“Listen, you won the challenge. We will be friends, whether I like it or not.”

“Can I continue sleeping with you?”

“Damn it, Travis. Why do you pretend?”

“When I said it was a tie, it’s because I’m willing to have some kind of relationship with you.”

“Some kind of what? Are you proposing a platonic love? If that can be called love.”

Travis nodded; by then, Joe knew that it was because he couldn’t express his feelings. And Joe needed to know if there were any real feelings at all.

“No. I can’t have that type of relationship with anybody.”

“Why not? We’ve been fine so far.”

“You’ve been fine. I’ve been going through hell and back... Let me see if I can find a good an example... yeah. Do you like pizza?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Imagine for a moment, you’ve never tasted pizza in your life. And you see a picture of a piece of pizza. Since you’ve never tasted it, will you crave it?”

“I guess... no, probably not.” Travis shook his head as if he didn’t consider that a good example.

“Sex is like pizza for me. And you are the tastiest piece of pizza. I know how it tastes, how it smells, and I crave it beyond sanity. I knew as soon as I saw you that I wanted you.” Joe started to pace in the hope of cooling himself off. “You, on the other hand, never even smelled it. So it’s easy for you. No, I can’t tie myself to a sexless relationship. I want you to be with me—the whole me.”

Travis’s expression was so depressing that Joe sat down next to him and suddenly added, “I will give you all the time and patience you need to grow bonded to me, but you have to let me touch you, and you have to be a willing participant.”

Travis shook his head and got out of the bed. He began to walk toward the door, and a part of Joe left with him. Then unexpectedly, Travis retraced his steps and stood in front of Joe, who was still sitting on the bed. Then he sat next to him. It was the closest they had been since the day they started the challenge.

Joe lowered his head, like a defeated warrior. Travis put his arm around Joe shoulders, and rested his head against Joe's. His voice was one Joe had never heard, it sounded raw, and it took a few seconds to understand why—Travis wasn't hiding his real feelings anymore.

"I'm sorry, Joe. I don't know how I dared to even ask that of you."

"Are you gay or not?"

Travis held Joe harder as he answered. "I'm a man who likes another man—you. Does that mean I'm gay? If so, I guess I am."

"Travis, what do you want to do?"

"I've never wanted to be next to anyone as much as you. Can we give it a try?"

"With pizza or without pizza?" Joe might have been using a funny example, but he was deadly serious.

"Do you need to ask? You know it's not easy for me. I can't promise anything. Even therapy failed with me."

"Did you seek help?" Joe was surprised.

"Yes. Sophia and I were having issues, you know, couple's issues. Someone suggested that we see a marriage counselor and this person recommended a sex therapist to us."

"Did it work? I mean, were you able to enjoy making love to Sophia regularly?"

"I guess we got our money's worth. We got Ella shortly after that."

"What? Did you guys use in vitro fertilization to get Ella? I agree, that was a great investment."

"If that was a joke, it was a very tacky one."

"I'm sorry. Let's try a different way. Are you willing to be educated by me?"

"Sexually speaking? The pizza way?"

"Travis, no more games. I think I can help you—I can do things a therapist can't. Your feelings for me are a good start, but you need to do your part.

"Can I stay?"

"Do you mean in—"

“Our bed.”

“You may be asexual, but you’re good at teasing like no other. Fine, we’ll try it.”

Travis smiled and was looking at him with a new light on those blue eyes.

“What is it?” Joe made a face.

Travis didn’t talk. He moved closer, observing Joe’s features—his eyes, his nose, his mouth. He raised a hand and with a tender caress, he cleared the hair falling on Joe’s forehead. He was so close. Joe watched, thinking how it was going to be painful, this new phase in their relationship. Therefore, he was surprised when Travis closed his eyes, lowered his head and kissed him.

It was the most innocent kiss anybody had ever given him. He simply pressed his lips against him softly, like a wet butterfly. Joe kissed him back in the same way, only using his lips, alternating sucking his upper and lower lips in a tender manner. Travis replicated the movement, and soon, they were kissing with passion. When Joe’s tongue thrust past Travis’s lips and into his mouth, he stopped the kiss.

“I think that is enough for today,” Travis said.

“Tease. I’m going to take a shower.”

“If you’re doing that, I’m going to see if everything is okay with the children.”

“I’m not doing what you think. I’m too tired.”

“I’ll be right back. I’m just going to check on them.”

As Travis passed him, Joe held out his arm and let his hand slowly skim over Travis’s muscular forearm until he grabbed his fingers. “I know I can make you happy. I understand your concern, but I want a new life with you. I want to give myself to you in ways that I’ve never given to anyone.”

Travis nodded and left in a rush, but Joe could swear his touch affected him somehow.

Chapter 12

Travis kept going and entered the kids' room. They were sleeping like little angels; he gently put a blanket over Richard, who always kicked his covers off. Edward was quieter.

He carefully walked into Ella's room next. She was deeply asleep, and so quiet, that he recalled those days he would kept checking to be sure she was breathing.

He sat on a chair, observing her with a meditative expression. It was amazing how fast children grew; he could still remember how tiny they had been, especially Ella, who had been born prematurely. He smiled, but silent tears fell while he recalled the past two years. He had dedicated all those years to raising them without thinking about himself. The only person who had been there for him, after Sophia's death, was Nadine.

"I'm sorry, Nadine," he said, as if she could hear him. "I can't tell you. You would never understand how I feel. I can't go to church after what I've been doing. Last time I was there, I felt they would hate the person I've become."

He thought back, remembering how mad she was with him, because he had stopped going to church—especially, when he couldn't come up with a good explanation. She even offered to watch the children for free, if he attended at least one service a week.

He stopped going to church the same day he began sharing the bed with Joe. It was hard to make a choice, but he couldn't continue being the same person anymore. He wasn't the same. He'd changed so much, since he saw Joe for the first time. Now the word "sin" had a new meaning. He could see that a sinner could be a person who followed God's commandments, but failed to love his fellow human beings, discriminating against them for simply loving one another.

Like in his case—he had done nothing wrong—only fallen in love for the first time, with another man. If being Christian meant condemning such a thing, he preferred not to be one anymore.

"Now, Lord, my relationship with you won't change. And as always, I will continue serving you, helping others through my job. Thanks for allowing the Holy Spirit to protect my children. Under your Grace."

When he left Ella's room, he found Mary pacing in the living room. Surprised he asked, "What's the matter?"

"Have you been crying?" She stared at him with wide-open eyes.

"Yes, a little bit, but don't worry. I was praying."

"If you ever need to talk, I'm here for you," she offered, then asked, "Do you know where Joe is?"

"I think he's taking a shower. Why?"

"I knocked at his door, and I got no answer. Evil Matt is here."

"What's he doing here at this hour?"

"I have no idea, but I'm sure he's up to no good. Let's go. He's after Joe."

Travis followed her with determination. "This time I'll break his nose for sure."

In the hall to Joe's room, Travis paused. "Please wait here... in case he is not dressed."

Travis entered the room looking for Joe, who was coming out of the bathroom with only a towel around his hips.

"Matt is here. Mary is outside, waiting for you to get dressed."

"Matt? What's he doing here?"

Mary knocked on the door, and entered without waiting.

"He's still—" Travis began.

"It's fine, Travis. I've seen him like this before. Joe, you'd better settle this once and for all. He can't keep popping up like this. He'll be here any moment."

"I will settle it, Mary. Entertain him while I get dressed. Travis, please stay in here. I don't want Matt to see you."

"Why not. Are you ashamed of me, or—"

Joe pulled him close, kissing him quickly on the lips and keeping him at his side, while he told Mary, "Little sister, Travis and me, we are together."

"I'm so happy. Congratulations."

Travis was all red. He simply looked at Mary and smiled. She left to keep Matt at bay; they could hear hers and Matt's voices outside.

“Why are you so afraid of him?” Travis asked, while Joe finished dressing in shorts and a T-shirt.

“It’s not about me, but you. You have no idea how cruel Matt can be. Please stay inside. It doesn’t matter what you hear. I’ll be talking with him in your living room.”

“Mine?”

“It’s in the part of the house Mary just gave you.”

With that, Joe left, closing the door behind him. Travis stayed in bed, trying to concentrate on the book he was reading, but after a few minutes, went to see if he could hear or see anything.

Joe confronted Matt, “Why are you here at this hour, Matt?”

Mary excused herself and left.

“There is something I need to tell you. It can’t wait until tomorrow.”

“It’s almost midnight. Go ahead,” Joe prompted. “What is it?”

“I’m leaving tomorrow morning. I came to say goodbye.”

“I’m glad that you finally understand that there is no chance I’ll ever be with you again.”

“Please don’t say that. I tried to get close to you, you know that, but you keep avoiding me. Give me one more night, and I’ll show you what you’re missing. If you still want me gone, I’ll leave in the morning.”

He was as charming as usual, but his bright blue eyes made Joe remember another person—the person whom he loved now.

“Stop wasting your time and mine. And stop showing up unexpectedly.”

Matt hugged him saying, “Please forgive me. I know I was selfish, even cruel. But these months without you have been hell.”

Joe opened his mouth to reply and Matt kissed him. It was the kiss of an expert lover. Joe forgot how those kisses could drive him nuts. He found himself kissing back, and in his mind he thought it will be the last kiss we share. But Matt took full advantage of the chance; he knew where he had to touch Joe to make him react, how to move against him.

When Joe realized he’d fallen into a trap, he pushed him away, but it was too late. He heard the door, as Travis closed it with a loud bang. He probably

saw the whole thing; Joe could only imagine how that kiss and fondle would look from a distance.

“Oops. Do you have company, Joe?” Matt’s smile was from hell.

“Get out of my life, Matt. Yes, I’m with someone, and I’m glad we kissed, because you showed me the difference between both of you.”

“I’m glad too. I don’t care if you’re having fun with someone. You proved how you feel for me. Give me one night and that person will be history tomorrow.”

“No way. If I have to choose between an innocent kiss from him and a night with you, I choose Travis’s kiss.”

“Travis? Don’t tell me that Mr. Straight is my rival.”

“Not so straight anymore. And no, he is not your rival—he is my partner. What was between you and me is over. You took me by surprise, but the truth is, I don’t feel anything for you. The magic is gone, Matt.”

Matt eyes turned dark blue, and Joe knew what that meant. The next second he was racing him upstairs and down the hall. Matt stormed into his bedroom, finding Travis reading on the bed. When he saw Matt, his pained expression changed to hatred.

“You little whore. I knew you were going to take him away from me.”

Joe grabbed Matt before he got to Travis. “Travis, please stay calm. Matt is leaving right now.”

Matt struggled in Joe’s grip. “Let me go. This time I will beat the hell out him. He won’t take me by surprise.”

Travis got to his feet. “Let him free, Joe. This time I will break more than his nose for sure.”

Joe had to stand between both of them, like a referee. “Nobody is beating anyone. Matt, please go.”

Joe tried to talk with Travis. He could see the pain so deep in his eyes that he was feeling it too. He knew how it felt being betrayed. Even if it had been only a kiss, he could understand Travis’s outrage. He knew it was better to wait until Matt was gone, but he couldn’t allow Travis to believe that he had been unfaithful any longer.

“I’m sorry, Travis. He took me by surprise.”

“Don’t say anything. I understand your needs, and I know my limits. You can go and do whatever you feel like doing with him.” Travis paused to breathe deeply before adding, “I saw you both together. I doubt I could ever behave that way.”

Matt asked, “May I say something?”

“Why bother asking? You’re going to say it anyway,” Joe accused him.

“Listen, Travis, don’t take it personally, but Joe is too much for you to handle. I think it would be better if you give him up now.”

Travis looked at Joe furiously and in pain. “Did you tell him?”

Joe cried out, “No.” Then, more calmly, he advised Travis, “He’s using his poison again. Don’t listen.”

Matt smiled, satisfied. “No, Travis, he didn’t say a thing. Let’s say I’ve have an expert eye to see certain details. Besides, I lived with him for six years of my life, I know him very well. When I got here, you were reading in bed, dressed in ugly pajamas... big mistake. If you want to keep this man, you need to satisfy him at least twice a day, and he’ll still wake you up in the middle of the night. You’ll never be able to fulfill his needs. When I kissed him I felt his hunger.”

Travis listened and then replied, “If he was so satisfied with you, why did he leave you?”

“I made a mistake. We all do.”

“Matt, you should leave now,” Joe said calmly. “I’m being nice, but if you keep trying to break my relationship with Travis, you will not be able to visit this house anymore, even if I have to tell my mother about us.”

“She knows. So don’t try and blackmail with it.”

“What?”

“I told her. When you left me, I came to New Jersey looking for you. You were traveling, promoting your business. I was devastated. So I told her everything about us.”

“Everything? I doubt it. Mom would have never accepted that.”

“I told her the good part. She knows how much we love each other. She knows how much I suffered all these months without you—how much I still love you. Indeed, without Christine’s friendship, I don’t know how I survived

losing you. She was the one who suggested I move closer and try again to win your forgiveness.”

Joe was frozen. He would never have expected that from his mother. Of course, only God knew what version Matt had told her of their story.

Reacting, Joe dragged Matt to the door saying, “Enough. You’d better get out of here, before I lose the little control I still have. All those years together, I thought I knew you. Oh My God, you are—”

“Vicious,” Travis, interrupted him walking toward them. “You know, Matt, the word poisonous was invented for people like you. And the worst part is that being gay, you trash every decent, honest, loving gay person out there. You make us all look bad.”

“Us? Ooh. So we are out of the closet already. Good for you. But it takes much more than that to keep Joe interested. I’m sure that I won’t have to wait much longer. He’s already showing signs of desperation, and he’ll soon be bored with you.”

“Damn it, come on...” Joe opened the door to see Matt out, and turned back to Travis. “I’ll be right back, I want to be sure he leaves without speaking to the rest of the family.”

On their way out, Joe stopped at his home office and pushed Matt into a chair. “I want to be sure, that you will leave us alone forever.”

“And give up on you?”

Joe opened a drawer in his desk and put the computer on. He pulled out a disc. “This is only a copy of many files I have, the originals are in a safe in a Manhattan bank.”

“A copy of what?”

Joe played the DVD and soon Matt was looking at the screen with wide-open eyes.

“When I suspected that you were taking guys back to our place and you denied it, I installed a surveillance system.”

“You recorded my encounters?”

“How do you think I was able to walk in and catch you in the middle of the act?” The video showed Matt going down on a young man and it would soon be more explicit.

Joe didn't look at the images, they were still painful to watch—not because he cared about Matt, but for the betrayal. “You mentioned that I might try to blackmail you with my own mother. That's nothing compared to this. This is blackmail.” He leaned over and held Matt's chin in a harsh manner. “If you ever get close to me or my family, and that includes Travis, I will mail a copy of this and the other files I have to your own family. We know that both your grandfather and your father would disown you for less than this.”

Matt shook the hand from his face. “You wouldn't...”

“Try me, and people will finally learn who you truly are.” Joe stopped the player and jerked Matt out of the chair to his feet. “And before you leave my town forever, you will put that house for sale. That way, you will never need to come back. Are we clear?”

“Yes,” Matt muttered.

“Let's go.” Joe didn't free him until he was sure the man was off the farm, and hopefully out of his life.

Chapter 13

Travis watched as Joe took Matt with him, then walked to the windows, looking at the darkness outside; almost the same as his soul. It was only when Joe returned and tried to put his arm around his shoulders that Travis moved. He shrugged Joe's arm away.

"Don't touch me. And if you want to sleep next to me, go and take another shower. And remember to brush your teeth and your tongue very well."

In a surprising response, Joe said, "I feel that I need it too."

By the time Joe opened the bathroom door, Travis had made up his mind and started talking straight away.

"I'm not giving up either, Joe. Do you want to go with me to the town hall tomorrow?"

"Town hall? For what?" Joe asked in awe.

"Do you want to continue sleeping with me?" Travis asked with a determined expression.

"What a question! I just gave up a night of lust for you. Of course I want to sleep with you. I can't live without your snoring."

"I don't snore. You do."

"Why are we going to the town hall?" Joe asked, his expectancy obvious.

"To file a domestic partnership. I hope you know what that is." Travis wondered if this was the moment he would confirm how much Joe truly cared about him, or not.

"Travis, of course, I know. Do you? We will be getting out of the closet. And in your case, I'm not sure if you even know where the closet is." Joe smiled and stared at him.

Travis sighed with relief, because Joe didn't refuse. "I know. A domestic partnership is the nearest to a marriage we can get in the state of New Jersey."

"Aren't you supposed to get on your knee and give me a ring?" When Travis didn't get the joke, he asked, "Will I get any pizza?"

If that charming smile was an answer, Travis couldn't ask for more. With a shy smile of his own he replied, "All you want, day and night. In the middle of the night too. You can use your beloved personal lubricant as needed."

“Really?” The simple question expressed the amazement Joe experienced with this unexpected change of heart on Travis’s part.

Joe noticed a side of Travis he’d never witnessed before; a determination he hadn’t perceived. It was interesting, in the middle of this situation he had let his barrier down, and Joe could now see a passionate person for the first time.

He was sure, if he tried, that Travis probably would give himself to him that same night. But his love for him was too much to simply take advantage of his rage. Besides, it was like Matt delivering him into his arms, and he hated the idea of Matt doing anything for him.

“Travis, are you serious? Or are you doing this because you are upset with Matt?” Joe placed both hands on Travis’s shoulders, expecting a rejection, but this time Travis didn’t push him away. On the contrary, he got closer.

“He helped me make up my mind when I saw how you reacted to him. At first, I felt I would never be able to replace him. But then I realized I can do better than him.” He looked him straight in the eyes. “I will fight for my man. I love you, Joe.”

Possession never sounded as tender before. “I love you too, Travis.” Joe hugged him tight. “Feeling better?”

“Hmm.” Travis nodded against his shoulder.

“Do you still want to sign that contract?” Joe needed to be sure Travis wasn’t acting in the heat of rage.

“Do you?”

“Of course. But there are too many appointments pending, I’ll ask Mary to reschedule the ones from the day after tomorrow, and I will go anywhere you want and sign any papers you need me to.”

“Then we are going the day after tomorrow. Joe, I’ve never felt what I’m feeling now.”

Joe hugged him even closer and later that night, they slept in each other’s arms. Matt had no idea what he had awakened.

The next afternoon, Travis came home furious. He sent a text to Mary asking her to please look after the children for another hour, and went for a walk into the woods. Mary called Joe and he came home immediately.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. He didn’t enter the main house, he went to yours, and changed clothes and has been gone ever since.”

Joe took one of his mother’s fabric shopping bags, because getting his backpack was wasting time, and put water bottles, a flashlight and some snack bars in it. Being late November it was getting darker sooner, and Travis didn’t know the area. Galloway might look modern in some areas, while in others, it was like a jungle; Joe had known this all his life.

“He could get lost, Joe. Take the rifle with you, just in case,” his father suggested. Of course, Travis didn’t know there were bears and wildcats in the area, or maybe he simply forgot about it.

Joe also put on his winter jacket and put a sweater, extra gloves and hats in the bag. His mother followed him and handed over an emergency kit. “Joe, do you think he has mental issues? He’s so nice most of the time, but he has these episodes where he reacts like this.”

“I’m not sure, Mom. But I don’t think he’s crazy. Something must have happened.”

Joe took off in the direction Mary told him Travis had taken, and he asked a few neighbors if they had seen anyone like him. Thank God they had. It was unusual for people to take walks at the end of the day into the woods. Apparently, Travis had kept himself walking along the inhabited area of the township. It took nearly an hour for Joe to catch up with him, and by then it was almost dark.

Travis was following one of the side roads, but by the way he moved, he didn’t know where he was going. Joe knew the feeling; he and Mary had got lost in the same area years ago, and he had been scared, especially for her. There were houses nearby, but one didn’t know how someone would react to an unexpected guest, so they had kept walking until Joe found the main road again and a gas station from where he called their father.

“Travis?”

He turned around and the surprised expression was replaced by one of relief.

“Joe, thank God. I didn’t know this area was so large.”

“It is. Let’s go home.”

“Do you know the way?”

“Yes. It will be slow to find in the dark, and there are no sidewalks, so be careful to not get run over by the few cars passing by.”

“Sure.”

Joe pulled the flashlight out and started walking back.

“Here, drink some water and eat one of these.” Joe handed Travis a snack bar.

“Thanks.” Travis was wearing a thin jacket and when his hand touched Joe's, he felt how cold he was getting. The temperature was dropping fast.

“I brought these because I thought you might need them.” Joe handed Travis the sweater, a pair of gloves and a hat. He put them on with trembling hands.

“Please hold the flashlight, I need to send a text to inform everyone I found you and we're on our way back.”

They walked in silence for a long time, and after getting to an area where walking was easier, Joe asked, “Why did you take off like that?”

“I needed to be alone, and in the past I used to take walks by the beach.”

“Well, the woods and the beach aren't the same. I hope by now you know better.” Joe was glad he'd found him, but concerned about Travis's behavior.

“Yes. I soon realized that. I'm sorry. I couldn't believe that I was getting lost in the middle of a town.”

He sounded so regretful that Joe decided not to claim anything. “Don't worry, it happened to me. It's a big place and the properties are built irregularly. This part of the town is rural.”

“Yeah, I learned it firsthand. I found a few streets with dead ends, all ending in the woods.”

“You haven't answered me. Why did you need to be alone?”

“I needed to think, because I have an important choice to make.”

Turning the flashlight off, Joe said, “May I know what it is? We can stop here—we're about ten minutes from home.”

“You know the position I have at the bank.”

“Yes—kind of important for someone so young.”

“Yes. I earned it. I worked the extra mile since the first day I joined the bank, right out of college.”

“And?” Joe was worried that Travis had lost his temper with a customer or something like that.

“The owner called me this afternoon to his home. You know it’s a local family bank, very old and traditional.”

He paused and Joe didn’t say anything, but he could see the anguish in Travis’s face as he continued. “One of the customers—a very rich one—complained about the general manager having a double life. Essentially living with another man.”

“That’s you. You’re the general manager.”

“Yes. The owner asked me if it was true and told me to give him an answer tomorrow morning, he suggested that I consider well my answer, because he can’t have someone who is in a homosexual relationship running his bank.”

“How did he know?”

“Does the last name McAlester tell you anything?”

Joe uttered a curse and nodded. “Matt is behind this. I’m sorry, Travis, I’d never expected him to go to those extremes. I’m going to have to talk to him.”

“I tried to talk with him myself, but he’s gone. The house even has a ‘For Sale’ sign,” Travis said, and Joe hoped it was the last they ever heard about his dastardly ex. Travis continued to explain. “Matt has been spreading rumors and the manager he told about us is someone older than me, who has always resented getting orders from someone younger, and couldn’t wait to inform the bank owner about it.”

As they were speaking, they had moved closer to one another and now were leaning on each other. Joe hugged Travis and didn’t give a damn if anybody who drove by saw them embrace.

“Travis, whatever you decide to do, you can count on me, okay?”

“I know. And I made up my mind already. I don’t want to work in a hostile environment like that.”

“Hostile? I think it’s discriminating, but hostile?”

“I felt like that a few hours ago. It was as if I’d never known that person, the owner, who in the past praised me so much and seemed to appreciate my work.”

“Well, homophobic people can be rude, but he gave you a way out.”

“Yes. I could lie, I could walk in tomorrow and make any excuse and he would believe it, or make me think he does.” Travis stepped away a few inches and tried to look Joe in the face regardless of the semi-darkness around them. “But I don’t want to lie. I’ve changed. I’m no longer the man he hired, and I do share my life with another man. Above all, I’m not ashamed of it.”

“Thanks for making the right choice.” Joe met his brief kiss halfway. “Are you going to quit?”

“Yes. Effective immediately. He will be mad as hell, and I will not get references, but I’m pretty sure that either way I’m finished as a banker in this area.”

“That’s unfair, you know.”

“I know, although times are changing for gay employees, and hopefully will continue to do so. I could legally fight discrimination, but I don’t want to work with people who despise me.” He paused and with shyness, he asked, “Joe, do you think I can work with you, in that solar energy venture of yours?”

Joe smiled, the idea of suggesting such a thing would have never crossed his mind. “Sure, but the income and the conditions will be very different from what you have at the bank.”

“I know and I don’t care.”

“Travis, you used the correct word, venture, is what I’m starting. It will be a lot of work and...”

“As long as we are together, I don’t mind the conditions,” Travis interrupted him, resolute.

“I’m texting Mary to put the children to bed, because we need to talk with my parents.”

Travis tensed and asked, “Don’t you think it’s too soon? I mean, what if they don’t agree?”

Joe pushed the send key and looked up. “Then we move out.”

“Are you serious? That would kill your dad.”

“I hope it doesn’t come to that, but I think they already suspect something is going on. We have to come clean, regardless of the consequences.”

A gloved hand touched his arm. “Joe, I’ve never felt this way. For the first time in my life, everything I say, do or feel is in harmony. All I want is to start a new life with you.”

“Are we having pizza in that new life?” Joe couldn’t help it.

“After last night, I’m craving it too.” Joe couldn’t care less if anybody was looking. He leaned forward and kissed Travis, and for the first time, Travis’s lips parted to welcome him.

Joe stopped the kiss. “What about the kids? How will they take that we’re more than friends?”

“Believe it or not, that’s the easiest part of our new lives. They know a few families at their school with same-sex parents. I will have to listen to a chorus of ‘I told you so, Dad’, because I was the one preaching against two-daddy and two-mommy families. I’m ready to take more of my own medicine. I guess I deserve it after all.”

They headed toward the house holding hands, and Joe said, “Travis, let me talk to my parents alone. This might be a difficult conversation.”

“I understand. I hope they will understand us too. I’ll be waiting for you at home.”

Chapter 14

When Travis got home, he found Mary trying to get the children into bed. They had all been worried about him. He apologized and promised to never do such a thing again.

Sometimes it was hard to know who was more father-like, Richard or Edward. After Mary left, Travis had to hear their team speech about his behavior and how much the family was concerned because of him.

"It's not only us, Dad. We now have more people to take into consideration. They truly care about us, you know?" Edward said.

Travis breathed and thought it was a good moment to tell them about Joe and him.

"Guys, I know our family has increased. As a matter of fact, I want to tell you about—" Travis paused and looked at them. He couldn't tell them; somehow it was so hard to talk about Joe and their relationship.

"Why did you stop?" Edward asked. They were seated on the couch, in the living room, one boy on each of side of their dad.

"It's not easy to tell you about this, but Joe and I will be—" Travis stopped again. Then he felt Edward patting his shoulder.

"I think we know, Dad. Are we going to be like the Browns?"

Travis nodded. The Browns were a same-sex couple, whose kids attended the same school as his boys. And the kids always cited them as an example of a happy family. Not because they were same sex-couple, but because they were "happy" and the boys liked the idea of having a family like them.

"You see, Dad? I told you, it doesn't matter if they have two daddies. They are a happy family."

"Yes, Richard. Now I understand."

"If that means we will be living here forever, I'm happy already. We like it here, Dad," Edward said.

After that, they had a bunch of questions, and for a moment Travis was concerned they knew he had been sharing the bed with Joe, but in spite their maturity when it came to dealing with him, his kids still had an innocence to them that was touching.

After they went to bed, while he waited for Joe, Travis decided to take a shower and do some research about domestic partnerships. He tied the robe around his waist, sitting in front of the computer.

“Oh. No. Those politicians... why do they have to be so wicked?” he said, reading the screen.

“Who’s been wicked?” Joe was standing right next to him.

“Joe. How did it go?” Travis asked.

He shook his head, saying, “Well, I just had a very interesting conversation with my parents and sister... and couldn’t wait to tell you.”

Travis held his breath.

Joe winked at him and smiled. “Mom is planning a little reception for us.”

“Wow. How did she take the news?”

“She said a couple of things—wouldn’t be her if she didn’t—but she accepted it very well. She likes you a lot. I think you owe to Richard and Edward, big time. She has grown very attached to the kids.”

“And your father?”

“His position was surprising and touching at the same time.” He breathed and cleared his throat. “Making a long story short, he knows that there is not much time for him to spend with us. He basically doesn’t care, if you’re a man or a woman. He is glad of any time he can spend with our family, and also that I have found someone to love and who loves me.” Joe looked at Travis, and he was teary eyed.

Not having anything better to say, Travis murmured, “Thank God. I mean, I’m glad he took it like that.”

Joe nodded. “Me too. The one taking it harder is Mary.”

“Mary? Why?”

“She’s happy I’m making an honest man of you, and that’s a quote. However, she’s a little upset, because getting married herself next month, she fears we’ll be stealing the spotlight from her.”

Travis smiled, he could see Mary’s tantrum. “Well, the domestic partnership isn’t as easy as getting married.”

“How so?”

Travis explained with a troubled expression. "Being a banker, I should have been familiar with all of this, but this is legislation I didn't agree with until recently. I did some research, and the requirements are more than I thought, see?"

Joe read the information in front of him. "Yeah. I guess they want to be sure only committed couples sign this agreement. But we meet all the requirements. We've been living together for a few months now. You do have proof of address, right?"

Nodding, Travis asked him about the troublesome part. "Did you read the part about proof of joint financial responsibility?"

"Yep."

"Do you understand how serious that is?"

"No, but I'm sure you will explain it."

"New Jersey is one the states where marriage is a very serious business. This domestic partnership law was written in a way that, without being a marriage, it still has the same legal consequences—in some cases, more. A normal marriage doesn't require upfront disclosure of retirement pensions, or finances. So basically, we will be getting half of each other's assets."

"So what? I kind of knew that already. It's fine with me."

"I have so little to offer. I'm basically unemployed, even if I have some savings. You on the other hand—"

"Travis, do you remember what you said, when I told you, you could keep our bed?"

"Yes."

"Well, all the money and properties in this world mean very little if I'm alone, like I was before meeting you."

"I was the one who proposed to you. I don't want it to look like I'm taking advantage of you. I want to add you to the deeds of my house. We can use that as proof of the joint financial requirement."

Joe disagreed. "No, that would take a couple of weeks. I don't want you to change your mind."

"I won't change my mind."

Joe patted his head, saying, "I'll just add you to one of my checking accounts. That would do."

Travis grinned. "You make everything sound so simple. Hey, look here. The affidavit we're going to sign states that 'both persons have chosen to share each other's lives in a committed relationship of mutual caring'. Isn't that romantic?"

Joe laughed. "Only you could find any part of a law romantic. This is romantic for me. Here." He handed a rose bud to him, and Travis received it in awe.

"It's so beautiful. So delicate."

The baby rose had a light pinkish color; very unique. Joe shifted his eyes from the bud to Travis's face. "I was talking with Mom while she was taking care of the garden. When I saw this, I had to steal it." Joe's sigh gave away the longing he felt. "When I saw this tiny rose, I thought of you. It has the same color as some parts of your body."

"Oh." That was all Travis could utter. He instinctively closed his robe even more. "Joe, what I said last night... I would... I will do, but you have to give me more time."

Joe helped him to stand, bringing him close to his own body. "I'm only thinking of your first lesson. It won't take long."

"Why tonight? Aren't you tired?"

"Because I'm naughty."

"Ah." After all, he was going to use Joe's Oh and Ah vocabulary. He couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Travis, listen. I know you have many barriers, and I don't expect you to discard them overnight. But if we are going to succeed, you must be flexible. I need your complete trust and honesty. The phrase 'give yourself to me' literally means that."

Joe pulled him to the nearby couch, and sat him next to him, taking hold of one of Travis's arms with his hand, turning it over, so both could see the forearm.

"In order to experience pleasure, you need to learn how to feel. I'm usually very quick, and my touch is rough, so, if we want to wake your sensitivity, we need to slow down, and rise from there. For me to know what you like or don't

like, I need you to tell me. Don't adopt the cold, silent attitude, because I really need to know how you truly feel. It's part of the whole process."

"Like moaning and such?" Travis made a face.

"Well, you can just say it. You can use words if you want. As long as you express your feelings. I need to know if you're enjoying it, or if it's painful to you."

"Painful? I thought we were talking about pleasure here. Don't tell me you are really naughty."

"No. Wait, don't freak out. Oh my God. How can I explain this? Listen, we won't get there today. But, there will be a moment in our lovemaking, when it can be painful. I won't lie to you."

"Even if we use that thing you bought?"

"The lubricant will help, but still... yes, it will be very uncomfortable. But that is only at the beginning. Don't be scared, you must trust me. Maybe I said too much."

"No, I'm glad you're telling me. It'd be worse if I went into the whole thing without knowing."

"Good. Hey, I've got an idea. Let's have a score system depending of what you feel, a scale from one to ten. For example, more than seven is pleasure, two is discomfort but bearable, one is pain, which should disappear once you get to three, got it?"

"Sort of."

"Touching the skin of the other person should give that person pleasure, but the trick is that one becomes better at pleasing the other if one is able to feel pleasure oneself, while giving it."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand." Travis appeared uneasy.

"Let me show you."

Using the tip of his index finger, Joe slowly traced a caress on Travis's forearm, down to his wrist. "Close your eyes, please." Travis complied and Joe continued the caress a few more seconds, before he said, "Score it."

"A four."

"Okay. Now it's your turn." Joe offered his arm and Travis repeated the caress without problem.

“Score it,” he said.

Joe shook his head. “But you’re the one receiving it. Remember, this is not about me. I need to know how you feel, while giving me pleasure. You score it.”

“I need to try again... I didn’t know...” Travis admitted, now visibly restless.

“Fine, let’s repeat it, but with a twist. I’ll go first.”

Joe took Travis’s arm and raised it to his mouth, and did the same caress with the tip of his tongue. “Score it.”

His voice surprised Travis, who, still lost in the sensation of Joe’s tongue over his skin, answered, “That’s a five.”

“Now it’s my turn.” Joe offered his arm.

Travis hesitated. “I don’t have the same skills as you.”

“Well, you are learning, you need to practice, so please do it. And it doesn’t have to be exactly the same. You can create your own caresses.”

Travis tried, but ended up licking Joe’s arm with his whole tongue—sensual, and wet, but not very erotic.

Joe laughed. “That was a five, and I’m being generous.”

“I told you so,” Travis muttered.

Joe showed his tongue, and pointed to the tip. “This is what you’re going to use. For now, just the tip. Do it again, please.”

Travis closed his eyes, and began to caress Joe’s forearm with the tip of his tongue, slowly tracing the muscular structure of it, surprised by the firmness of the skin under his tongue and the fact he liked how Joe’s skin tasted.

“Score it,” Joe said.

This time Travis answered without thinking. “Seven.”

“Did you feel it?”

“What?”

“The difference between giving and receiving.”

“Yes.”

They continued the game for a while, and when Joe moved up from Travis's arm to his neck, the score rose too. At one point, when Travis was taking a turn at Joe's neck, Joe said something he didn't understand. Travis raised his head, with his tongue still in a licking position, and Joe caught it, caressing it with his own, sending a wave of sensations through his entire body. He withdrew and looked Travis in the eye.

"Score?"

"Ten."

They were both smiling.

"You see, Travis? You can do it. Well, that will be all for now."

Travis looked disappointed. "So this was the first lesson?"

Joe nodded, and turned around, heading for the bedroom door. Travis remained sitting on the couch, thinking—well it wasn't that bad. Before opening the door, Joe glanced back at him, and all of a sudden he retraced his steps.

"We can have the second lesson completed tonight."

"Fine. What's next?"

"This time, I will only teach you and then I'll give you a break. You don't have to score it, or practice. Just enjoy, and try to remember, because later, I want you to try to repeat it. It will be your first test."

When Joe pulled him off of the couch, Travis wasn't expecting it, but it didn't surprise him as much as Joe taking him in his arms, bridal style and carrying him to the bedroom.

"Wait! Aren't we supposed to sign those papers first?"

"For this we don't need any papers, trust me."

Joe pushed him gently onto the bed, lying down next to him, and began to kiss his neck, alternating soft kisses with the light trace of the tip of his tongue.

Travis kept his eyes closed. He was drunk on all of these new feelings. It felt so good, so intoxicating—Joe's mouth and hands all over his body. All of a sudden, he didn't care anymore if it was embarrassing or not. If this was a sin, he was a willing sinner. His heart was pounding in his chest, his blood was boiling, he was thirsty for Joe's lips, and hungry for experiencing their tongues tangled together. He sucked Joe's tongue, surprising him.

Chapter 15

Joe opened Travis's robe all the way down to his waist, admiring the defined muscles of his chest, perfect skin and the pinkish nipples. Joe was making an effort to be gentle. He didn't want to scare Travis after gaining so much. Tracing the outside of his areola with the tip of his tongue, he completed full circles, then licked around Travis's nipples, zeroing in on each tip, flicking his tongue back and forth, finishing up with a gentle bite.

Once Travis's robe was discarded Joe could see the half erection hidden by the underwear, and he couldn't wait any longer. He had to see him. In a fast move, he removed the piece of fabric and watched all of Travis's body. Yes, the rest of him was pinkish. His balls, tight and high due to the arousal and his uncut dick and the head leaking pre-cum made his mouth thirsty.

"You know what, Travis?" he said in a voice that was almost unintelligible. "We're jumping to lesson three."

"What?"

Travis barely had time to understand what he said. Even if he had, he could have never guess what lesson number three was. He watched through half-open eyes as Joe went down and pushed his foreskin back, then used his tongue to lick the moisture in there before taking his cock into his mouth.

He'd heard about what Joe was doing to him, but he'd never experienced it before. The curiosity was only surpassed by the pleasure. He felt Joe's hand caressing his backside as he continued to bob up and down, taking his cock nearly whole into his mouth to let it go out and then sucking it in again. At one point, Travis started lifting his hips and pushing forward. Joe's hand helped by holding his ass, and Travis found surprising the satisfaction he experienced at the touch. He never imagined that part of his body was so sensitive.

Then Joe touched his anus. Travis froze, alarmed, but let him continue, because Joe kept sucking him faster, while using the tip of one finger to gently caress the outside of his entrance. Joe's finger slid into him, and Travis moaned. Then the finger thrust in and out of him, and Travis couldn't take it any longer. As he came, he tried to push Joe, but Joe held on to Travis's hips until he drank him dry.

A few seconds later, Travis was still trembling, and trying to catch his breath from the most intense orgasm ever. Joe hugged him tenderly.

“Oh. Joe, there was a moment I thought I was going to die.”

“Indeed, the French call it ‘the little death’.”

“Now I understand why... yes, I understand. I’ve never thought it could be like this. Thanks, Joe, thank you so much.” Travis felt so tired, so sleepy. He closed his eyes for a second.

“Thank you? Don’t worry, those were lessons two and three. Tomorrow you’ll have your first test. I’ll be expecting you to show me what you learned.”

“Tomorrow?”

Travis opened his eyes. “What about you? You didn’t have too much satisfaction, that I know.”

“I had my mind on pleasing you. I can control myself quite well. Don’t worry, I’m fine. But you owe me, so Tomorrow you’ll pay me back. Maybe we’ll have lesson four then.”

Joe pecked him, and Travis’s whole body shivered, anticipating the pleasure of the next time. Wait a minute. If that was lesson three, what in the world could be lesson four?

Can I try, Joe?”

“Do you mean, lesson three?”

“Yep.” Travis nodded and licked his lips. Joe didn’t want to push him, but his erection was too painful to reason with and even if Travis probably had never done that with anybody, he wanted to be the first man Travis would taste, and, if it depended on him, the only one ever.

“Are you sure?”

Travis nodded and asked, “Isn’t it better if you remove all those clothes.”

“Don’t you want me to take a shower first?”

To his surprise, Travis inhaled and said, “No, I like how you smell.”

Never in his life had Joe felt shy under any man’s eyes, but while removing his clothes, he was conscious of his body like never before, and for a moment the idea crossed his mind to run to the bathroom and take a delaying shower

anyway. But Travis's hand pushing his underwear down erased all rational thoughts.

Travis placed himself between Joe's legs, and hesitated, but then, staring at Joe, mimicked step by step each caress Joe had given him before. He gagged when he tried to take him too deep.

"Slow down. This takes time. You don't need to go too deep, I'm enjoying it like that," Joe said, panting, while Travis tried again the up and down. Joe nudged him and whispered, "Travis, let go of me, I'm coming."

"Why? You're not done."

"I'm nearly there. You don't have to swallow." A memory of how much he wanted Travis to do that when they first met, almost pushed Joe over the limit. But one thing was fantasy, and another taking the risk of Travis refusing to repeat lesson three ever.

"But I want to. I mean, I'm not sure if I'll be able to do it as good as you, but can I try?"

"Sure." If he insisted. When Travis took him into his mouth again and performed a nearly perfect bobbing, Joe didn't reason anymore. He convulsed while holding Travis's head and coming down his throat.

Next Joe felt Travis lying down next to him. "How was it? Did you like it?"

Still heaving, Joe answered, "It was awesome! What about you? Don't you regret swallowing?"

Travis hesitated for a moment, and Joe held his breath. Then as if he had made up his mind, Travis looked him in the eyes and explained. "Now, I totally understand what you meant by feeling pleasure by pleasuring another. It tasted a little bitter, but I can handle it."

Joe breathed and hugged him. There was a good possibility that one day the pupil could surpass the teacher. Nothing wrong with that; he already loved the way Travis behaved when passion instead of fury ruled him.

Chapter 16

The next morning, they walked into the main house kitchen, holding hands. Mary was there, finishing her breakfast, and as soon as she saw them exclaimed, "Congratulations! But you know what? This is not fair. You're stealing my spotlight. My wedding's supposed to be the event of the year."

Travis muttered a thank you, and shyly busied himself serving coffee for both of them, while Joe laughed at her little girl expression. "You can keep your spotlight. We're not going to make any big party or official announcement. Mary, just between us, I think Travis got scared when he saw Matt kissing me."

When Travis stared at him, Joe winked so he realized it was a joke. Will Travis ever catch on to my sense of humor?

"And you?" Mary wasn't kidding; now he would have to explain himself. Cocky, Travis raised his brows behind his cup and sipped his coffee.

Joe thought if anybody deserved an acknowledgment of the truth, it was Mary. "You know I would do anything to keep him next to me. I've never thought I could love anyone that much. You have no idea, how patient I've been with him. So, don't worry. We're only going to sign and file an affidavit. In that room will only be Travis, the notary and me. The real wedding will be yours. About Mom—do you really think, she will be okay with us?"

"From what you've told me, she'll probably take it fine. Dad, thank God, accepted you like you are ages ago."

"Still, I feel a little awkward about it."

"Don't worry. You deserve to be happy. I'll do all I can to help you. I promise. Come on—let me show you something which will light up your day." She grimaced while dialing the combination to open the briefcase on the kitchen table. "Because Daniel is too busy, and his schedule never allows him to go to the jewelry store, they sent me these for him to choose from, and I thought you guys might want to pick yours too."

She opened the briefcase and turned it around. It was full of wedding rings, neatly arranged by models and sizes; all very exquisite and expensive.

"Mary, you really think about everything."

“Well, I can’t take credit for this. It was the jeweler’s idea. When you mentioned the getting legally bonded part, I remembered this. Come on, please choose.”

Travis was the first to talk. “It won’t be a ceremony. We’re only going to sign the affidavit. There won’t be a judge asking for rings.”

Joe looked at him, and held his hand. “Even though you were the one who proposed, I want to ask, would you wear a ring as a symbol of our union?” Travis was visibly touched, and could only nod. Joe pushed him gently toward the briefcase. “Please choose for the two of us.”

Travis chose two platinum rings with an interlaced fine line of gold, and Joe said, with a tender voice, “Well, since we are not having a ceremony, I suggest we do our own. Let’s exchanged rings, here, in front of the person who has done more than anyone else for our happiness. Thank you, Mary.”

It was a very simple rite; Joe silently put the ring on Travis’s finger, and Travis did the same with Joe’s ring. Next, he angled his mouth until it met Joe’s, kissing him with fervor. Slowly, using both hands, Travis followed a path from the back of Joe’s neck, to his head, caressing his hair, softly massaging his scalp, while kissing him. It was an amazingly sensual touch, which had the effect of moving Joe’s innermost feelings. With the same calm, Travis initiated the kiss, he ended it.

Silent tears were dripping from Mary’s face. She smiled and put her hands together like a child.

“I’m so happy for you two. You’re all set. Mom is putting together a little party, and I just made a reservation for a honeymoon on the Poconos.”

Travis was worried. “The Poconos? That’s too far. And I can’t go. What about the children? We’ve never been apart.”

“That’s covered too,” Mary said. “Mom and I will take care of them over the weekend.”

Travis awaited help from Joe, who seemed to like the idea of going away. Travis was desperate to find a good excuse. All of a sudden, he said, “Joe, please... if lesson number four is about what I think it is, I prefer being in our bed.”

For the first time in her life, Mary saw how her brother blushed up to his ears. He glared at Travis and then turned to his sister.

“Thanks, Mary, but we will be staying at home. Please cancel those reservations. Maybe in the future.” He shrugged.

Before Mary could inquire about lesson number four, Travis, who was blushing too, got Joe out of the door.

“Let’s go. I found a notary who will do the signing for us this afternoon, and we still have to go to your bank.”

Joe allowed him to pull him out of the kitchen and called back, “See you later little sister. Thanks for everything.”

Joe opened the door of the car for Travis, and helped him inside. Travis was about to say something, but realizing there were a few people looking at them, he simply sat down. When Joe got behind the wheel, Travis said calmly, but firmly, “Stop treating me like I’m your girl. I’m a man.”

Joe was surprised. “What are you saying?”

“Listen, Joe. I don’t know much about this kind of relationship, but I heard there is somebody who is supposed to be the feminine partner, right?”

Joe thought for a moment. “Well, I don’t have any gay couples friends in here. But my friends in New York... yeah. Now that you mention it, there is some kind of pattern. In our case—”

“It won’t be me.”

“Well, Travis, do I look feminine to you? I don’t look the part.”

“I guess not. In that case, it will be like you told me—you are a man who doesn’t want to be a woman, and I think and feel the same. We will be a two-man couple.”

Joe laughed like it was the funniest thing ever. “And I thought the hard part was getting you into my bed. Fine, you are my man.”

“No more opening doors for me, or holding my hand like I’m going to fall if you don’t support me.”

“Agreed. Anything else?”

Travis, changed his tone to a more affectionate one. “Promise you will always be there for me.”

Joe looked straight into those blue eyes. “I promise. As long as I live, you’ll always have someone to trust. I will take you on a journey of unlimited passion. We will be two souls, merged into one, for all eternity.”

“Oh.” Before he started the monosyllabic torrent of words, Travis forced himself to say, “That’s romantic.”

Chapter 17

Later that day, Travis had stopped at the bank to simply hand over his resignation letter. He didn't care anymore what anyone over there thought of him. The envious manager who gossiped about him would probably be promoted to his former position. So be it. He had more important things to do.

Like going to the town hall, signing and filing an affidavit of domestic partnership with Joe. It was more like registering a business than a marriage, but Travis felt very glad of having a legal bond to Joe.

Who seemed pleased too.

"I'm starving, I can't wait to get home. Maybe we should have stopped to get something before."

Travis disagreed. "No, we're almost there, and I want to see the kids. I'm hungry too."

Joe kept turning the wheel with one hand, while with the other one he held Travis's. "Fine. I just can't believe it's finally over. What a long day. There was a moment I thought we weren't going to make it in time."

"But we did it." Travis smiled, holding in his free hand a folder which contained, among other things, their certificate of domestic partnership.

"Oh. Nooo. I thought it was a small party." Joe stopped in front of the portal on the road, which led to their home. There were so many cars parked, he barely found space for his. "We're going to have to walk from here."

Travis followed him, a little concerned. Joe wasn't happy, but when he saw Mary walking toward them, that's when he became really worried.

"Hi, guys, I was waiting for you two. Why did it take you so long?"

"I'll tell you later. Right now I'm really hungry. What's all this?"

Mary rolled her eyes. "The whole family is here."

"What? I thought only the closest ones were coming."

"I'm sorry, Joe, but everybody is so happy for you. At least the ones from the Tri-state area are here."

"Is there a way we can get in without being seen?"

Mary walked in front of them with her childish disposition. "That's why I'm here. The kitchen is clear—they're all on the deck."

"The kitchen. Just the place I need."

They went inside, and Joe grabbed the first food he saw, which happened to be a piece of pizza. Travis observed him eating.

"You really like pizza."

Joe smiled, and grabbed his third piece. "Come on, help yourself. I better get the real thing now, just in case I can't get any pizza later."

Mary didn't know what they were talking about, so she said, "Don't worry. There's more pizza than you can eat. With so little time, Mom and I decided to order your favorite food, and Travis's favorite dessert, so there's all kinds of pizza toppings and all varieties of cheesecake."

Joe made her a sign, which she didn't understand. "I need something to drink, please."

She smiled and served him some ice tea. "This one is in Travis's honor too."

"Thanks." Joe drank while Travis recalled the first time he had watched him drinking ice tea. Yes, he had truly changed, there was no doubt about it. As if Joe could read his thoughts, he gave him one of those naughty smiles of his, and Travis was happy to return it.

Joe saw as Travis stood, looking for a glass for himself. Mary followed him, making an effort to raise herself to his height. She whispered something in his ear. Joe shrugged, and kept eating, until he noticed that Mary and Travis were drinking from a separate container she had taken from the fridge. He noticed Travis's new expression when he drank, but assumed it was another kind of ice tea. Joe stood and glared at the backyard, beyond the deck to all the people. "Travis, don't worry, my family is pretty cool. Today is a very special day, because most of those folks stood by me back in the day, when Mom didn't accept the fact I was gay. Thank God she changed her mind."

"Yes, Mary told me about it."

Joe continued watching the group, checking who was there. A tall, skinny person caught his attention. His relaxed expression changed. "Mary. Come over here."

“What’s wrong?” She joined him by the window.

“What is Matt doing here?”

“Matt? Who invited Matt?” Travis stopped eating, and drank from his glass, suddenly anxious.

“Mom did.”

“Mom? Who is she? My mother, or my worst enemy?” Joe asked, abandoning his last piece of pizza.

“Please calm down. I was with her when she invited him. Surprisingly, he declined. Anyway, Mom insisted that he should come, because according to her, seeing you and Travis together would bring closure to both of you, but especially to him. Besides, he came with someone.”

“Closure? I’m not so sure. The last time was horrible.”

Travis was starting to get really worried and Mary noticed.

“Well, Travis, don’t worry. Joe and I won’t leave you alone with him.”

Travis smiled and showed his empty glass. “Can I have another, please?” Mary rushed to the fridge and Joe’s eyes narrowed.

“Can I have some of that, please?”

Mary froze, and put the container back. “I’ll get you something better.”

“No, Mary, I want the same thing you’re drinking.” Mary lowered her sight, while Joe walked over and stopped next to her. “What is it? What are you feeding Travis?”

She finally looked him in the eyes. Her expression was like a little girl caught feeding the pet at the wrong time.

“I just wanted to help.”

“I’m waiting, what is it? Fine, let me see for myself.”

Joe took the glass from Travis’s hand, took a sip, then put it back on the table, yelling, “Russmex! You’re feeding him Russmex? Are you out of your mind? He’s probably never even had a beer.”

Travis intervened. “It’s fine. I think she is correct. I need this.”

Joe looked at him, even more upset. “Really, do you know what you’ve been drinking?”

Travis shook his head. "I trust Mary. It's just a cocktail, she said... she said..."

Joe wasn't listening. "It is a cocktail. She invented it many years ago—ten years ago, to be exact. The main ingredients are tequila and vodka, mixed with any sweet drink. Do you have any idea what that can do to you?"

"I'm sorry, Joe," Mary said. "I'm really sorry, I was thinking about tonight... in my case it helped a lot."

Joe was frantic remembering how much it helped her. "Yes, how can I forget? I was the one looking for you guys all night, and part of the next day. Motel after motel."

Travis didn't know what they were talking about, but said, "Joe, please calm down. You're getting mad about everything today."

"I'm upset for two reasons. One, if you keep drinking that, you will be useless to me tonight. And two, this lady just brought back an incident I'd prefer to forget."

Travis looked at Mary wondering. She sat next to him. "Travis, do you remember what I told you, about drinking this, so your first time won't hurt?"

Travis nodded. Joe couldn't believe it. She was going to tell him all about it.

"Mary stop being so concerned about Travis's well-being, please."

She ignored him and kept talking. "When I was eighteen, on my prom night, I prepared the same cocktail for Daniel and me. We did it for the first time. It worked. I didn't feel any pain. But Joe..."

Joe couldn't take it anymore. "I spent the whole night looking for you two, thinking you ran away together or something. And guess what? It was because of the Russmex. They both passed out. I didn't find them until the next day—almost noon. It was the worst experience I've lived."

Mary shrugged. "Nothing happened to us. We just fell asleep. And you beat the hell out of Daniel."

"He deserved it, that punk. I still feel like kicking him when I remember." Joe spoke to Travis now. "The only thing that saved him, was that she admitted to being the one who seduced him."

"What? How old was Daniel?"

"Nineteen," Mary said. "But he was so slow, I had to take matters into my own hands." As Mary answered, she winked at Travis.

“And you guys have been together ever since. How romantic,” Travis said with his most tender voice. Joe rolled his eyes.

“She keeps dodging the marriage, almost in the same way she had avoided finishing college.”

“Not anymore. I’ll be his wife next month. It’s about time I made him an honorable man. Travis, this really works. It will relax you. And you know what, Joe? It was one of the best nights of my life.”

As she finished saying the last sentence, she ran out of the kitchen. Joe raced after her, and watched her join their family. He came back to sit next to Travis.

“I’d prefer if you don’t drink it. I’ll do my best to make it good for you. Besides, I’m not drinking anything, and it will be my first time too.”

Travis glared at him like he had never seen him before. He didn’t understand. Joe moved the chair closer.

“Do you remember, what I told you, about making our union unique? I said, I’ll do something with you I haven’t done, with anybody else.”

Travis nodded. Joe held his hand, seeking his eyes.

“What you said to me today made my decision final. Since you insist on being the man, I will give you the opportunity to prove yourself.”

Travis was overwhelmed. He rescued his hand to indicated between the two of them. “Do you mean... do you want me to...”

Joe helped him, finishing the sentence for him. “Like you would say, I will let you put your thing inside of me. It is the only unique memory I can give you, that I’ve never done with anyone else.”

Travis moved his head in denial. “I don’t know if I can. Indeed, I don’t think I can, Joe.”

Joe stood. “You’d better take this chance, because I will allow you to go first. But I will still put mine inside of you.”

“You said I would be the man.” Travis stood, too.

“And you said this is a two-man couple. So, this is the deal. I will give myself to you first, not only because I want you to know how much you mean to me, but because in that way, you will understand better when your turn comes to give yourself to me.”

“What about if we just do lesson number three for a while? I think I can learn to do that well.”

Joe smiled like a real pervert. Tracing Travis's face slowly, he pulled him close, speaking next to his lips. “Sure, you will have plenty of time to practice lesson number three, all you want. But, there is something I forgot to tell you. Lesson number three isn't enough for me. Last night I was sexually starving, but normally, it would take you hours to get me off with it. It is a great appetizer, but for me to be totally satisfied, only one thing will do, and that is lesson number four... mine inside of you.”

Chapter 18

Travis was speechless, and Joe suspected that he'd never being so grateful of seeing Mary. She came to take them to meet the guests. During the next hour, they went from group to group, meeting everyone; Joe simply introduced him as Travis. But everybody knew that he was his partner—even Nadine was happy for them.

The children got their own version of the events. When they overheard Mary speaking with Christine about the legal signing Travis and Joe were doing, Richard and Edward were happy, thinking their dad just adopted Joe. Travis couldn't tell them otherwise. One day he would explain everything to them. But not today.

A few times, Joe and Matt looked at each other from a distance. Matt stood by the back of the house, like he didn't want to see anymore. Christine suggested Travis and Joe go and greet him, as they did with everyone else.

"No, Mom," Joe said. "It's too much to ask."

Travis disagreed. He had been thinking about it, and it was better to put an end to this uncomfortable situation. "Let's do it, Joe. Sooner or later, we'll have to face him."

Joe followed, a little reluctantly, to the part of the garden where Matt stood with the guy he'd brought with him—someone Joe knew was an ex-boyfriend. Matt really had issues leaving the past behind.

A few steps before getting to them, Travis turned back and said, meeting Joe's eyes, "This time I'll do the talking. If he is civil, I'm willing to forget his past behavior, but if he tries to hurt us in any way, I'll have no mercy."

There was Travis, the warrior, once again in front of him.

"I would prefer to avoid him, but since it can't be helped..." Joe started to say.

Travis got closer saying with dark eyes, "I need your permission to speak in your name."

Joe laughed. "What? Do I have to sign a power of attorney?"

"No, but I'm asking your permission, because I might say things which will damage any image Matt has of you. After this he might hate you."

Joe thought for a moment and shrugged. "Please do whatever it takes to get him out of our lives. I stopped caring what he thought of me a long time ago."

After all that, the first one to speak was Joe. He held Travis by his side in a very possessive manner. "I guess we don't need any introductions. I just want to thank you for attending our little celebration."

Alfonso, Matt's boyfriend, seemed honest when he congratulated them with a friendly smile, and said, "I'm really glad for you two. This is wonderful, you have such a nice family, Joe."

"Thanks, Alfonso, I hope you enjoy your stay here."

Matt was watching them in silence. Joe glared at his eyes for a moment, and saw an emotion he'd never seen before; it was sorrow. Matt eyes were painfully examining the wedding bands on both of their hands. He finally spoke.

"Congratulations, Joe. Your dream finally came true." The smile didn't reach his eyes. He addressed Travis with an ironic tone. "And you, pretty boy, congratulations too. Can I have a private word with you?"

"No, you can't," Joe informed him. "Whatever you're going to say to him, it must be in front of me."

Matt ignored Joe, and clarified to Alfonso, with a "poor me" expression, "We will be only a few feet away, and the one who punches first and asks questions later, it's him."

Joe could sense the tautness embracing Travis, who was getting madder by the second. "Let's go then, if you want to speak in private. It's fine, Joe, I can handle it."

He walked to a corner of the garden; Matt followed him, and they stood in front of each other, like duelists. From a distance, Joe and Alfonso observed them carefully. They couldn't hear what was being said, though. Watching them together, Joe could see how different they really were; Travis was very masculine in his way of walking and standing, while Matt was as feminine as any girl, Despite the fact that he was wearing male clothes, he managed to look delicate, graceful, almost fragile, like a ballerina.

"Fine, go ahead. I'm waiting." Travis was expecting the first punch.

"I want you to remember that you are just a cheap substitute of me. If he is with you, it's because he wants to hurt me."

Travis could hardly believe it. He was asking for it, and he was going to get it. Travis felt Mary's cocktail having an effect on him. All of a sudden, he could lower himself to Matt's level, without any hesitation.

"Really? I'm sorry, but you're wrong. If Joe is with me, it's because he loves me."

"Love? Don't be naïve. Joe thinks from his waist downwards."

Travis grimaced at the expression. "We agree about that. Still, what we have is very different from what you guys ever had."

"Don't forget I was his first lover. And everything he ever does—"

"Wait a minute. The lovemaking between Joe and me is very different. And yes, you might have been his first lover. However, in one way or another, this is an honor we both share."

Matt's eyes were dark as the night. He moved closer to Travis. "What do you mean?"

Travis responded with a devilish grin. "In this couple, I'm the man, Matt. I guess you know what I mean."

Matt shook his head in disbelief. "What do you mean, you're the man? Joe would never allow you to do that. You're lying."

Matt turned around, looking at Joe, like he needed to see him to verify he was still the man he once knew.

Travis stood behind Matt, speaking with a low voice, predatory and sensual. "There is no tactful way to say this. If you have any doubts, I'll translate it for you. I'm the one who is fucking his ass."

Matt held his breath, like someone who has been injured. However, Travis didn't stop there, he got close enough to him that Matt could feel his body, sense his masculinity.

"Matt, I have enough experience to know that I was his first. I have no doubts that I was the one who took his virginity from him."

From a distance, Joe witnessed Matt's painful expression. Joe frowned, looking back at him. What was going on? Matt, looked really upset.

For a moment, it looked like Travis thrust a dagger into his back, and was twisting it inside the wound. Joe felt he had to intervene.

“I’ll be right back, Alfonso. Please wait here.”

“But if Matt—”

“Please wait here. I’ll bring him back to you.”

Joe got to them, and Travis welcomed him with a grin.

“Joe, can you please tell Matt who is the man in our couple? He doesn’t believe me.”

Joe saw Matt’s perplexed expression, and Travis’s determined one. “Matt, this is none of your business, but Travis is right. He is my man.”

Matt staggered back, still in shock. “How could you, Joe? How can you change this much?”

Joe answered with an honesty that Matt could not question. “Because I love him, Matt. I really do. Let’s go. Alfonso is waiting for you.”

He held Matt by the arm, helping him walk over to where Alfonso was standing. Travis followed them silently.

Alfonso rushed to meet him. “Are you okay, Matt?”

Matt looked at him, answering with a drama queen voice, “No, I think the champagne went to my head. Please get me out of here.”

Joe literally delivered him into Alfonso’s arms, and then watched them leave, at the same time thinking how ironic life could be. A few years ago he would have never imagined himself putting Matt into another man’s arms.

Travis hugged Joe. “Do you still have feelings for him? Don’t look at me like I’m crazy, I saw the pain in your eyes.”

Joe hugged him back. “For many years I wished this day to come, when I could see him suffering for me, because he would always act like nothing happened. Even when I was in deep pain because of his betrayal, he would dismiss my feelings, thinking sex would make me forget. I was so sure he was unable to feel anything other than lust. Today, I discovered he can suffer like us. I didn’t enjoy it though. Maybe because he means nothing to me. What you saw in my eyes, it’s pity. I feel sorry for him. You crushed his ego.”

“Maybe I exceeded myself. But he really deserved it.”

“I’m not sure what you told him, but whatever it was, probably it is true, right?”

Travis faced him and smiled. “No, not yet. But it will become true before the night is over. And now, I need another Russmex.”

Chapter 19

Travis woke up alone in the bed. When he tried to sit, the heavy burden inside his head made him rest again. He slowly opened his eyes. What happened? Joe? Where is Joe?

He looked around the room. The bathroom door was half open and he could see Joe wasn't there. The room was semi-dark; only the dancing lights of the fireplace provide some illumination.

“Ay. Oh.”

He tried to stand, but his head hurt so much. In that moment, he saw a movement in the corner of the room, next to the windows. He almost jumped at the tall dark figure. It took some seconds for him to realize it was Joe. They looked at each other for a while, Travis studying his almost eerie appearance. Joe was wearing some kind of black robe, and with the light of the moon at his back, and the light of the fireplace, he seemed like a handsome demon.

Walking toward the bed with a slow motion, without saying a word, it would have appeared to an onlooker like a devil was visiting an angel. Joe wasn't smiling, and his face was as cool as Travis had ever seen him before.

Oh. He is upset, Travis thought, hiding between the sheets. Joe didn't talk until he sat on the bed. Travis was sure he was controlling himself.

“So you have finally awoken.”

“What... what happened?”

Joe raised an eyebrow, still without smiling. “Have you forgotten?”

Travis closed his eyes. He remembered feeling dizzy at some point in the middle of the party, and almost falling, Joe holding him, and after that, he couldn't remember... wait, the shower, yes he remembered being in the shower with Joe. He looked at his naked body under the sheets.

“What happened between us, Joe... please tell me?”

Joe smiled; it was a diabolical one. “Do you really want to know?”

Travis thought for a moment. Joe was satisfied. He was really enjoying torturing him with the countless possibilities of what might had happened.

“Please, tell me. I'm not some stranger. I'm your... your lover?”

This time Joe couldn't play with him anymore, he laughed at Travis naïveté.

“You silly. You got drunk. I told you not to drink the damn Russmex. Next time, you’d better listen.”

“Yes, I’m so sorry. I just remember you holding me, and the shower. What were we doing in there together?”

Joe grinned again. “What do you think?”

“Please stop teasing me.”

“All right. I was going to save you the humiliation, but I’ll tell you, so the next time you want to drink, you’ll think twice. I hardly had time to take you to the bathroom before you vomited.”

“Oh. I’m so sorry.”

“I had to get you under the shower to clean you up. I always imagined us sharing a shower for another reason. Now, go back to sleep.”

“I’m not sleepy anymore. What about you? Did you get any sleep?”

“Yes. I woke up about an hour ago. It’s nearly four in the morning. Try to rest some more.”

Joe tried to walk away, and Travis grabbed his hand. Joe gently freed it.

“What is it? Are you still upset? I will never drink again. I promise. Please, lie here with me.”

Joe walked away, simply saying, “I can’t, Travis. Here, drink this. It will help with your headache, and don’t deny it, I can see it in your eyes. I brought some fruit, thinking you couldn’t take the medicine with an empty stomach.”

He walked around the bed, getting a glass of water and two pills. When Travis went to grab the pills, he hesitated, signaled to him to wait, went back to the table and brought a mandarin, and began to peel it. Travis observed, fascinated by how agile his hands were peeling the fruit. Joe placed a piece in his mouth and then looked away when he saw Travis opening his lips to accept the fruit. With the second piece, Travis grabbed Joe’s fingers between his lips, licking them sensually. Joe pulled his hand away and gave him back the pills. Travis swallowed them, pulling a face like a little kid.

“Don’t you want to be with me anymore?”

“It isn’t that. I’d prefer if you recover first.”

“I’m totally recovered.”

Joe walked to the windows and stayed there. Travis followed him, badly wrapping a sheet around himself. He stood behind Joe, who was looking at the darkness outside.

“Joe, please...”

“Go back to the bed.”

“Is it because of him? Are you thinking about Matt? Do you regret...”

Joe turned around as fast as he could and grabbed Travis's hand, pulling him with so much force that Travis lost his breath when he impacted against his body. Joe's eyes were as flaming as the fire next to them.

“I was trying to be a gentleman with you. Do you remember when I said I'm quick and rough? Well, that is how I am. This is the last time you doubt what I feel for you. This is the last damn time you mention him.”

He was holding Travis with force, but Travis didn't let him know that his grip hurt. He caressed his hair, with his free hand. “I'm sorry, Joe. It won't happen again.”

“Yes, I'm sure it won't. After today you won't have any more doubts.”

He lowered his head and claimed Travis's mouth like it belonged to him. The kiss was rude, but when Travis opened his mouth and used his tongue to find Joe's, the kiss became more tender, with a passion neither of them anticipated.

Joe relaxed his grip, pushing his body against Travis. The sheet fell from Travis's naked body, showing the beauty of his shape and his skin, which looked golden, lit by the fire. Joe moved his hips forward and at the same time, he raised Travis to the level of their crotches, moving his hands down to Travis's buttocks with a simple movement so he could hold him even closer. Travis helped, opening his legs and embracing Joe's hips with them. They continued to kiss for a while, until Travis realized they were in the bed. He'd lost track of time; maybe the Russmex was still in his system.

“Now it's my turn, Joe,” Travis said, gently pushing Joe back onto the bed. He pulled the robe Joe was wearing to one side and placed himself on top of him. Joe opened his legs to accommodate him. Travis could feel his own hard-on, and Joe's erection, but he could not get himself to watch. He tried to gain time, concentrating on Joe's neck. Closing his eyes, he began to caress his chest with his hands, finding his nipples. Unlike his own, Joe's were light brown, and a little bigger. It was the first time he dared to look so closely at them. He blushed remembering the time they looked to see if they had holes.

Joe didn't keep his hands idle. He was slowly caressing Travis's whole back, from the nape of his neck right down to his buttocks, keeping his hands there a little longer, cupping each side with both hands, and pulling him closer. To Joe's delight, Travis began to moan. Joe whispered in his ear, while kissing his neck, "I want you so much Travis... you have no idea how much."

"Yes, I do... believe it or not. I do. I'm feeling a longing inside of me, which I don't know how to calm. The only thing clear is... I need your body. I need you, Joe."

Travis kissed Joe's chest, licking his nipples, sucking them. He paused, knowing what was next, but still unsure if he could. Another little touch of Joe's hands on his buttocks made him move forward. With a torturingly slow motion, Travis lowered himself until he met Joe's crotch. He gasped when he saw Joe's erect member. He had seen it before, even tasted it, but knowing that he was supposed to take it inside him, that was a different issue.

He was kind of fascinated and scared. It was bigger and longer than he recalled. Travis remembered what Joe did during lesson three, and opened his mouth, embracing his shaft. He looked up to see Joe's reaction; at first, he simply looked back at him with affection, but soon that look changed to lust. When Travis began moving his head up and down, Joe began to moan, with tiny tremors shaking his body.

At one point, Joe exclaimed, "Be careful with your teeth."

Travis was busy, but heard him and pulled his mouth away. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine, you learn pretty fast. Just a little more... Let me show you again..."

Joe sat and lowered his head, until he had Travis's member inside his mouth, and began to move his head with that expert motion Travis remembered so well. When Travis's moaning was almost climactic, Joe withdrew, sitting in front of him. Travis was disappointed.

"Why did you stop?"

"Time for lesson number four."

Joe rolled over and opened the side table drawer, pulling the lubricant out of its box. Travis was trembling; he wanted to run away, but with much effort, he held himself back.

"Like we agreed, you go first."

"I don't know if I can."

Joe glared at him. "You will do fine. Just in case, I'll be ready too. Come on, let me put this on you."

The expression in Joe's eyes was a clear warning—that he would take control of the situation if Travis couldn't handle it.

Travis observed, fascinated by how Joe lowered his hand, applying the lube over his member, all around the head, after pulling back the foreskin, and after that, crosswise along the length. For Travis, every touch was a delight, and when their eyes met, he experienced shudders all the way to his innermost being.

"Give me the hand you use best," Joe said.

Travis offered him his right hand. Joe checked and picked three fingers, applying lubricant to them too. Travis didn't want to ask, but Joe saw his expression.

"We will try with the fingers first."

"Ah."

Joe applied the lubricant to himself in the same way, finally looking at Travis. "Please open your legs."

"But you said that I—"

"You are still going first. I just want to apply some of this down there."

Travis obeyed, feeling Joe's expert hand applying the cold jelly substance around his anus, and when he felt Joe was going further he asked, "Are you sure of me going first?"

Joe nodded. "Copy me. Please apply some of this to my asshole."

Travis was going to take the tube from his hand, but when he grabbed it, it just slipped, and without thinking Travis threw himself after it. Joe barely had time to grab him before he hit the floor.

"Forget it, we have enough all over. Don't move. I will pull you back."

While bringing him back to the bed, Joe observed the position Travis was in, with his back to him, and upside down. He could see his buttocks and the shadow to his entrance.

Joe finished returning him to the bed and tried to keep his tone neutral, but when he looked back at Travis's spread buttocks, and the tight entrance, he really needed it all in his control. He caressed the border first with a circular

motion, moaning when he felt Travis doing the same thing to him, then he slowly put one of his fingers inside of him, feeling Travis hesitate.

“I’m waiting, it’s fine.”

When he did, Joe felt his whole body shudder with pleasure. He continued with the next two fingers, moving his hand to help the fingers open the path. He could hear the sounds of Travis’s groaning, but he knew they couldn’t stop now. He paused and pulled his fingers out slowly. Travis did the same.

“Well, this is it, Travis. Ready?”

“Ready.”

“What are you waiting for? I can’t feel anything.”

Joe felt Travis moving his hips, but not penetration.

“Travis, what is it?”

“It doesn’t stay put... I can’t control it. It’s too tight.”

“Damn it. Hold it with your hand, and put it inside of me.”

When Travis realized that he could do that, Joe almost regretted the advice. He was expecting some soreness, but it took him by surprise. The pain was very real. Joe bit his lower lip and kept going.

“Go ahead, Travis. Move.”

In seconds, Joe recalled all those times he was the one doing the penetration. He had no idea it could be that way. Travis’s movement increased, and the pain became aching pleasure. Joe started pulling his cock and matching Travis’s rhythm, thinking that this time it was more for him, that there were other times when he could enjoy bottoming.

“Joe, I don’t know how long I’ll be able to hold it.”

“Don’t. I won’t. Give me a moment and I’ll get there, then you follow.”

He moved his hand faster and in seconds he was coming all over himself. Travis followed shortly after. They embraced and fell into each other’s arms.

About half an hour later, Travis said, “It was great, Joe. Thanks.”

“No problem. For you, any time.”

“I guess now it’s your turn, right?” Travis’s voice gave away how concerned he was.

“It’s fine. When you feel like it, let me know.” After experiencing how painful it could be, Joe preferred to wait until Travis craved it too.

“Now.” It was an unexpected reply.

“What did you say?” Joe sat up.

“I feel like it now?” Travis sounded more secure.

Joe almost didn’t hear him. Travis got on his knees and whispered in his ear, “Let’s do it, now.”

Maybe it was better to do it now. It would take some time for them to get used to it anyway. Joe turned him over and kissed him, slowly, deeply and slid his fingers into him, continuing kissing him. Then when he thought that Travis was ready to take him, he warned him, “Here we go—your turn.”

Joe took his cock and put the head to Travis’s entrance, and with a deep breath, he thrust ahead.

Travis shouted, “It hurts, pull it out...”

Joe tried to calm him down with his words. “Remember the scoring system? More than seven is pleasure, less is discomfort, but tolerable, one is pain, which should disappear once you get to seven or eight.”

“Joe. Let’s take a break please, I can’t... this is overwhelming. I need a break.”

“No. And don’t dare to pull away now. If you do, when we try to get it in again, the pain will be more. Once it’s inside, you hold it there. Just keep thrusting. Can you grab my hand? That’s better... now we have to move.”

“Move? No way.”

“I’ll move for the two of us. Your job is to keep it inside, not matter how I move, and to feel pleasure.” Joe slowly increased the motion, and said, “Give me your score.”

Travis was heavy breathing. “One. It’s still one.”

“Try to think of the pleasure in front of you. Forget the pain, don’t tell me it doesn’t feel good. Seek pleasure.”

The pleasure Travis thought of was when he had been inside Joe. He allowed himself to savor the memory of what Joe’s body had felt like. It had

been too much pressure at first, a sensation like being sucked in. He'd felt his member too tired, almost numb, but when Joe had begun to move, and he tried to keep his pace, he understood why Joe liked this more. It was way better than his mouth.

And now, that Travis was the one filled, the sensation was like being stuffed. Soon, the pain became pressure and when Joe kept moving, he found there was pleasure in it too.

"Travis, where are you?"

"Seven," he answered without thinking, but yes, he was enjoying this.

Joe heard a deep moan and all of a sudden, Travis began to chant, "One... one... one..."

He got concerned and decided to pull out; he didn't want to hurt him.

"Travis, it can't be. How can you go back from seven to one again? One is pain."

"One... one... one... hundreddd. Joe... Joe, I love you... Joe!"

By the time he said those words, Joe had felt Travis shivering deep inside. He knew what that meant, so he rushed his own climax. Soon he was screaming Travis's name. It was the most complete pleasure of all time, something he had never expected.

When they both stop moving, Travis said, "Did you feel that? It was a one hundred."

Joe moved, bringing him to his chest. "No, Travis for me it was a one thousand."

"Did you hear me saying your name? It's true, you were right. I felt like saying your name. So that was what you wanted so much. Now I understand."

"Yeah. But next time I want to see your face."

"And I thought you were more interested in my buttocks."

"Travis. You are becoming a pervert. I want to be able to kiss you while we make love."

"Me too."

They kissed, this time tenderly.

“When can we repeat?” Travis asked.

“Are you kidding me? I guess, you aren't... Please. Give me some time. I'm dead.”

“I want to feel it again.”

“Wow. Travis, you really are becoming horny.”

“Do you think so?”

“I never knew somebody so happy to be like that.”

“It's because I'm yours, and you're mine.”

Chapter 20

One year later, on the evening of their first anniversary.

The two couples were sat in front of each other. Mary had her little feet on top of Daniel's lap; he was giving her a massage. Joe and Travis were sharing the opposite couch.

Mary tried to sit up from her resting position. "This pregnancy business is harder than I thought." After a few attempts and her husband's help, she succeeded in sitting up straight. "Happy anniversary, guys. I'm so happy to see you two together. You see, Joe? I have a future as a matchmaker."

Joe grinned at her with fun. "The only future I can see for you right now is in a delivery room. You certainly look like a balloon, little sister."

Travis pushed Joe gently with his elbow. "Stop bothering her. She looks so beautiful." He observed her with real affection.

"And you stop saying how beautiful she looks. She is my wife now," Daniel grumbled. He would never stop being extremely possessive when it came to Mary. Travis stood and pulled Joe to his feet.

"Whatever you say, Daniel. She's still beautiful to me—married, pregnant—I don't care."

"Thanks, darling." Mary blew him a kiss.

Travis returned the kiss, and hurried Joe along. "Let's go, Joe."

"Where's the fire? Take it easy. I'm coming," Joe said while standing up.

"I'm craving pizza," was all Travis had to say.

Mary was surprised. "But we just had dinner."

"It doesn't matter, I want some pizza tonight." Joe got to his side, and together they began to walk toward their house.

"Hey, you guys. The exit is the other way. Are you going to buy that pizza or not? If you do, please bring me some ice cream."

Travis and Joe said simultaneously, "We're not going out."

Once in their room Joe finished the comment, "However, we're still having pizza."

He kissed Travis, who didn't hold anything back. Later—much later—lying down and embracing each other on their bed, Joe was smiling while remembering something.

“May I know what you are thinking?” Travis asked.

“Wow. You sound like Daniel. I was thinking about you. The day we met...”

“Oh, no. Please don't. I feel so ashamed, I was such a dork back then. I guess you hated me.”

“No, for me, it was love at first attack. When I held you in my arms that first day, all I could dream was of holding you like I'm doing now. And you, Travis, when did you realize you had feelings for me... Travis? I'm talking to you.”

Travis hid his face in Joe's chest. Joe could feel how hot he was and lifted his head, holding his chin, so Travis could see him, face-to-face.

“Why are you blushing. What is it? I'm just curious to know when you first felt I could be someone important in your life.”

“When I found you in the bathroom, that morning. Do you remember? I went back to the bed, but I could still hear you. I got a hard-on. It was so confusing for me. All I knew was that I liked what I saw, and the craving I was feeling only you could satisfy. I'm sorry, if instead of being honest, I got mad with you, and forbid you from saying my name.”

Joe held him much closer to his heart. “No problem. And you were the one who didn't want to hear me yell. Now I have to cover your mouth, so you don't wake up everybody else.”

“Look! The dawn. Oh, Joe, we did it again. We spent the whole night making love.” Travis pointed to the sunrise showing up in the windows.

“Don't worry, it's Sunday. But, it's your fault. I told you we should flip a coin instead of debating who should be on top.”

“Actually, it's simple. The one on top should be me. Let me show you why. My skills to improvise and my creativity are so great, I'll give you a full demonstration. It's my turn now.”

“Fine with me, Travis, as long as I get my turn to prove why my experience qualifies me to be on top. I deserve a chance to give a full demonstration too...”

The sun was high in the sky, and they were still proving to each other who was more suited to be in charge, definitely two-man couples are busy ones.

The End

Author Bio

I live somewhere in the Northeastern United States and write gay fiction, because there are passions that don't fit in any closet. Please visit my blog to learn more about me or my current work.

Contact & Media Info

[Blog](#)