



MICHAEL CHAVEZ

ACLARACIÓN

A NOVEL

Michael Chavez
Aclaración





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*you took away my worth, my privacy, my energy,
my time, my safety, my intimacy, my confidence,
my own voice, until today.*

-Chanel Miller

To Mark

Chapter One

The smell of minced garlic and various aromatic spices sizzling in olive oil on the stove is intense. Em's already torn the basil and zested the lemon. The quartered tomatoes are roasting in the oven. I'm busy putting a salad together.

Em and I have known one another about three years. Her full name's Emerie, but she goes by Em. We met at a creative writing class put on by the university. It was after our fourth session as we were walking out of class one evening that she'd caught up to me and asked if I was published.

"What'd make you think I'm published?"

"Because your writing's so good. It's really clear and expressive. Sometimes when you're reading, I can imagine the movie version."

I chuckled and furrowed my forehead. "Really?"

"Yeah, really."

I'm gay, Em is straight. We knew that from the writings we shared in class. I hadn't known exactly what she was looking for and given her a long stare. Before I'd said anything more, she'd suggested going out for coffee. There was a moment of thought before I answered. "Sure."

After that, we become friends. So close, in fact, that we hold nothing back. She's always curious about gay relationships, and particularly gay sex. The first few times we talked about it, I got red-faced. After that, it was like talking to one of the guys. Who would have guessed that soon after we became friends, my life would start collapsing and Em would be there to help me pull some semblance of it back together?

She stirs in the chicken and it sears in the pan. After a few minutes,

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she takes the tomatoes from the oven and stirs them into her spaghetti sauce. The smell is enticing. So far, our conversation has been casual. As I mix the avocado into the salad, I mention that even though Neho was Irish, his favorite food was Italian.

“An Irishman with a yen for Italian food,” she mutters.

“Actually, his biological dad was Irish, but he died when Neho was still young. His mom then married a Russian.”

“I didn’t know that. Neho never mentioned it to me. Did you know Neho’s stepdad? How did they get along?”

My body stiffens and my stomach tightens. I want to answer her question, but my voice falters.

She turns and apparently sees my discomfort. “Sorry, Marty.”

“It’s all right.”

Neho, my husband, died sixteen weeks ago. His passing wasn’t a surprise. He’d been diagnosed with laryngeal cancer. The doctor had given him five years. Neho managed three. The irony is that, unlike me, Neho never smoked.

We finish cooking and take our plates out to the patio. I hurry back for the wine. I glance at the clock and see it’s just past five-thirty on a beautiful Saturday afternoon.

“If I ever moved in with you, I would spend all my days on this perch,” Em says to me as she gazes out at the striking panorama.

My house is built high on a hill in Northwest Albuquerque. It overlooks the city and has a broad view of the Sandia Mountains.

“Are you waiting for an invitation?” I ask.

“I am. But not until I retire.”

Em is a veterinarian and I know she loves her job too much to retire anytime in the foreseeable future. I grimace. “And when’s that going to happen?”

“When work starts feeling like work.”

“I wish you luck with that.” I pour the wine and we toast. As I lay my glass down, I give her a serious look. “Do you really want to know about Neho and his stepdad?”

She smiles as she picks up the fork and starts twirling the spaghetti around her spoon. Then she looks up at me with her soft eyes full of understanding. “I’d love to hear about how Neho got on with his stepdad, but you decide.”

“It’s a long story, Em, and starts when Neho and I first met. It’s not pretty. Actually, it’s shocking and heartrending. I’ve never told anyone before.”

She raises her eyebrows as her voice lowers. “I’m all ears.”

I take a deep breath and catch myself recollecting. After another sip of wine, I begin.

I was attending the university in Albuquerque at the time, studying business administration and accounting. I remember admiring him the first time he sauntered into class, oblivious to anything or anyone around him. He sat close to the front of the large lecture room. His name was Neil, but everybody called him Neho. We had a philosophy class together. From that first day, I lusted after Neho’s handsome features: shoulder-length dark hair, Sal Mineo eyes, and wet-sand skin pallor. What would he think, I wondered, if he knew I was smitten with him? He didn’t have a clue that I found him attractive. I was sure he never even noticed me since I sat toward the back of the room.

When he ambled into the classroom in his white gauze shirt, tight denims with flared legs, and Converse tennis shoes, my eyes followed him to the same seat he had taken since the beginning of the semester. It was by the window that looked out to the grassy square where students congregated before, between, and after classes. Neho had the same ritual every Tuesday and Thursday where he unzipped his blue backpack, the shade that reminded me of the ocean, took out his notebook then stored the backpack under his desk. He opened the notebook to the right page and clicked his pen to the ready. He sat at his desk quietly and talked to few others. Mostly he just looked straight ahead and waited.

I tried to keep my focus on the front where the lecture was about to begin, but involuntarily it shifted to the eye candy by the window. My best friend, Greg, who was also studying business administration, sat next to me in class. We had a lot in common, Greg and me. In addition to being best friends, he was my roommate. We also worked at the same restaurant as waiters and drove there together most evenings. It was a part-time job to supplement the army stipend that helped pay for college.

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“Hey, you want to go to a party Friday after work?” Greg asked.

“Where?”

“This girl I met, Zaria. I have her in English. She’s a bomb.”

He exaggerated that line with a rising inflection in his voice, like I’m supposed to care. He continued. “Her parents are out of town so she’s throwing herself a birthday party.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I replied unenthusiastically, as I opened my notebook.

My eyes traipsed back to Neho, the mysterious hottie I longed to know but was much too shy to meet. The lecture began.

Greg didn’t know I was gay. In fact, nobody knew I was gay. Sometimes I wondered if I really *was* gay. I was discharged from the Army in 1972. I had enlisted instead of getting drafted. I thought I might dodge Viet Nam, which turned out to be a good plan because I ended up in Europe for my entire tour, except for basic training in California and advanced training in Indiana. At that time, the military was not the place to explore gay sex and risk a dishonorable discharge.

I had never had sex with another guy. Well, that’s not exactly true. I did get a blowjob one time from a way older guy. It happened when I went to one of the ritzy houses on South Capital to collect on my paper route. This was in Santa Fe where I grew up.

It was a hot summer day and I parked my bike on the driveway, wandered through an old wooden gate leading into the portal and up to the front door. I rang the doorbell and the owner, a guy about my dad’s age, answered the door. He eyed me up and down. I was used to that. I’m Hispanic and Anglos are always suspicious of us. He smiled and invited me inside so he could get his wallet. That was unusual, because Anglos never invite us inside unless they know us. I stood in their foyer, my eyes exploring the huge living room with a cherry wood bookcase hedging one wall and two couches positioned on opposite sides, separated by a large fancy coffee table in the middle. In the other direction was the dining room with a long dark table surrounded by eight comfy chairs. The carpet underneath the table was multicolored and woven in a tribal design. It was gorgeous. I had never been inside such a fine house. Ours was an old house on Colon Street that was built in the fifties. I lived with my parents and two sisters then.

This man’s house was quiet, which led me to think he was home

alone. He called out to me. "Come on in here." His voice was loud, but friendly.

I paced through slowly, following his voice into the kitchen. He was standing beside one of the counters with his wallet in hand, eyeing me up and down again. The kitchen was huge, red tiled floors, arched walls, red oak cabinets and a gas stove with at least eight burners. There were French doors leading out to a courtyard. The kitchen was probably as large as half our house. I was awed by the extravagance. The man never said another word. He opened his wallet, took out some bills and laid them on the countertop. The way he was eyeing me gave me the creeps at first. His eyes kept homing in on my crotch. I was wearing cutoffs and a Rolling Stones T-shirt. It didn't take but a few seconds to know what he wanted. I guess he was waiting to see how I would react. When I didn't move, he plodded up to me and laid his right hand on my junk. Who was I to stop a rich guy from giving a poor brown kid a blowjob? Afterward, I pulled up my cutoffs, took his money and bolted out of his house with a smile on my face and the biggest tip I had ever gotten. It never happened again because his wife always answered the door. I did see him on television a few times. He owned a car dealership.

My mind reverted back to the lecture and the professor's tedious drone that kept me counting the minutes on my watch for it to be over. After class, as I stood, Neho glanced my way. For a second, his eyes breached my space as if he knew me. I think I saw the tips of his mouth begin to swell like the start of a smile. I looked away, gathered my things and marched out.

Chapter Two

That Friday after work, I was exhausted. I got into Greg's car and my intention was to hit the bed as soon as we got home. Twice during the week I had driven into Santa Fe, a fifty-mile trip, to help Dad fix the toilet and install a few sheets of siding on the carport wall. Dad always tapped me to help him with any projects he had going. I think he just missed me after I returned from the army and moved away to start college.

"Dude, you ready to party?" Greg asked.

"Huh?"

"Zaria's house, remember?"

"Take me home. I'm tired."

"No way, you got to come with me."

"You can go alone. You don't need me to hold your dick." That was a slip of the tongue that I swore wouldn't happen again.

He took a joint from his cigarette pack and passed it to me. "Light it up. I guarantee you'll feel better after a few hits."

I took it from him, put it between my lips and struck a lighter to it. "Okay, but I don't want to stay there all night. I'm pretty wiped out."

He started the car. "I'm going to get me a fine lady tonight."

"Good luck with that."

He chuckled as he took the joint from me. "She's hot for me, man."

"Yeah, I'll bet she is." We drove off as the radio bellowed out "Truckin'", a Grateful Dead song.

Zaria lived in the foothills of the city. It was an exclusive location with large brick homes, double and triple garages and extensive front lawns. Parking was tight so Greg parked down the street at the first

empty spot he found. When we got to her house and meandered inside, the party was going strong. The music was loud and the crowd, noisy. I recognized a few faces from school and greeted them as we passed them up in search of Zaria. We found her in the kitchen surrounded by friends.

“That’s her,” Greg said as he pointed his chin.

With wavy, caramel hair and tight, curvy body, Zaria was wearing a mini that showed off her attractive follow-me legs. As soon as she saw us, she beamed a wide smile, excused herself and strutted over to us. “You made it!”

Greg returned the smile and gave her an awkward half hug. “Happy birthday. You think I’d miss your party?”

“You’d be on my shit list if you did!” She glanced at me. “Who’s your friend?”

“This is Marty.”

“Hey!” I said. “Happy birthday.”

“Thanks. I’ve seen you around campus. Don’t we have a class together?”

“Nah, I don’t think so.”

“You look familiar,” Zaria said.

“Lots of people say that about us,” I said. “You know, we all look alike.”

She laughed. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

“I didn’t take it that way.”

Zaria gestured over her shoulder. “Let’s get you guys something to drink.”

We followed her to the backyard where a table with hard liquor and two coolers filled with beer was set up on the covered patio. The backyard was enormous. The music was streaming loudly. People were dancing and couples were nuzzling. Everybody else mingling around, laughing and having a good time. The scent of pot was in the air. Greg grabbed two beers from the cooler and handed me one. Zaria stayed close to us. It was obvious she had a definite interest in Greg.

“I’m going to walk around,” I said, to give them some space.

“What?” Greg asked above the music.

I waved my hand and wandered off.

There was no doubt Zaria came from privileged comfort. The backyard was laid out like a resort. The steps leading down the patio

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traveled along a lighted garden path to a section with a ramada housing a barbeque grill. The entire yard was laced with pine and ash trees that complimented the myriad of perfectly manicured shrubs, vines and plantings.

As I wandered on, I stopped to talk to a couple of classmates. They were arguing about their muscle cars. One of them was boasting about his 1970 sports car with a 383, and the other gloating about his GTO. I didn't have much in common with either of them, as I drove an old clunker with seventy-eight thousand miles. But just to be sociable, I decided to hang with them for a while when my eyes darted beyond them and, like a mirage, I saw my heartthrob, Neho. He had just strolled out to the patio and was pouring himself a drink. The minute Zaria caught sight of Neho, she left Greg and approached him. They exchanged some words for a few seconds, and he walked away while she went back to Greg. I saw him walk down the patio steps, cut through a small crowd and head to a corner of the grounds, a part that wasn't lit. I slowly backed away from the conversation with the gearheads and made my way to where I had seen Neho retreat. As I got closer, I could just barely make out his form. He was sitting on what looked like a wooden storage bin with his back against the brick wall and his knees propped up.

"You lost?" he asked. "The party's on the other side."

"I got bored." I thought that was a stupid thing to say, so I corrected myself. "Actually, I don't know anybody here. I mean, except for a few cranks from school."

There was a long pause, and I was just about to walk away when he spoke again. "I know you."

"You do?"

"Yeah, we have a class together."

"Do we?"

"You're Martín."

My eyes flinched. My heart quaked. "Yeah." I inched closer.

"So you know my sister?"

"Zaria's your sister?"

"Stepsister."

"No, I don't know her. I mean, I just met her. She invited Greg, my roommate. We got off work and I just tagged along." My feet kept shifting and my hand kept rubbing the back of my neck. "You want to

do a joint?”

“Nah, I’m good.” He took a drink from his cup.

I wanted to keep our conversation going but didn’t know how to do that. “You’re Neho.”

“Yeah.” He laughed. “You’re not good at lying, Martín.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. I changed my mind. Light up your joint.”

“It’s just half of one.” I took it out of my shirt pocket and put a lighter to it. After taking a hit, I offered it to him.

He took it, inhaled deeply, then handed it back.

My mouth went dry. I cleared my throat. “Nice house you have.”

“Lev’s a lawyer. He’s pretty connected.”

“Lev?”

“My stepdad.”

“You going to be a lawyer, too?”

“Fuck no. I’d never do that.”

It was obvious he hated lawyers. “So what’s your plan after college?” I asked.

“I want to be a drifter. Travel and get work along the way.”

“Any place in particular?”

“Yep. Spain, Portugal, Morocco.”

“Why there?”

Neho lifted his hand with his palm up, gesturing for me to be quiet. “You hear that?” he asked.

“Yeah. That’s Stevie Wonder. I like his music.”

“Exactly. You ever heard Lydia Pense sing that song?”

“I’ve never even heard of Lydia Pense.”

“Dude, she sings with Cold Blood. They’re totally hip.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

He got up and chugged the rest of his drink. “Follow me.”

I put out what was left of the joint and followed Neho as we made our way through the crowd, up the steps to the patio.

He poured a cup of straight liquor while I reached for another beer. Once inside the house, we weaved our way to a set of stairs that led down to the basement. There was a single door which he opened. I stepped inside.

It was clear he liked music because the first thing beyond his bed was

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the impressive stereo cabinet set up just below a narrow half-window that looked out to the backyard. The cabinet held a turntable, a reel-to-reel tape deck, and other electronic appliances. There were speakers at both ends. A multi-tiered bookcase at one corner was filled with albums and cassette tapes. The bookcase in the other corner was loaded with books.

“Wow, quite a set up.”

He looked at me and smiled.

If I would have known it was this easy to befriend Neho, I would have done so sooner. Here I was in the bedroom of the guy I lusted over, but I knew I had to keep my emotions in check. I couldn't blow my shot at hitting it off with him.

“Sit down. Let me find the album.” Neho put his cup on top of his desk, strutted to the bookcase and leafed through his collection. I pulled the chair out from under the desk and sat down. His familiar ocean blue backpack sat on the tabletop.

“What do you listen to?” Neho asked.

I took a swig of my beer as my mind fielded the question. “It depends. I like some soul like The Temptations or Commodores. But I can get into the Eagles or the Doobie Brothers.”

His head bobbed up and down. “Groovy. Good music to get stoned to.”

I nervously rubbed my hand on my pants. “You know all these people at the party?”

“A few, but they're all her friends.”

“What about your friends?”

Neho's eyes narrowed and his voice turned cold. “What about my friends?”

My hand froze. His mood change was eerie. I didn't know what I had said to set him off. “Just making conversation.” I tipped my can, took another sip and remained quiet.

He found the album, took it out of the cover and placed it on the turntable. He glanced back at me and smiled. The music began. It was a soft, jazzy rhythm and a mellow velvety voice singing “You Are the Sunshine of My Life”. Neho sat on the edge of his bed facing me. Our knees were almost touching. His eyes were challenging me to a staring game, but my gaze shifted away. He reached for his cup, brushing my

arm as he did so. It was an intentional nudge. He put his hand on my knee. His voice took on a playful tone. “You like it?” It was clear the question had a double meaning.

My chest tightened. I cleared my throat. “Yeah, I like it a lot.” I couldn’t hold his gaze.

After the song was done, he rose to change the music.

By this time, I was convinced that Neho was interested in me in a way I had never experienced before with another guy. The entire evening had overwhelmed me and I needed time to sort it all out. I didn’t think I was ready for anything to happen between us; not yet anyway. I rose. “Thanks for the music, but I need to find Greg and get home. I’m really wacked tonight.” After I said that, the thought that I was going to regret leaving raced through my mind.

His eyes went dull and darted around the room. “Okay, Cool. So I’ll see you in class on Tuesday.” His flat tone made it obvious he was disappointed.

“It’s just that I had a rough day today. I’d really like it if we could do this... I mean, get together again when I’m not so tired.” My voice was faltering and I didn’t want to give him the wrong message.

As I moved to the door, Neho came toward me and placed his cup on the desk. He put his hand on the jamb and stepped into me. Our eyes met and searched for meaning in what was to come. His face slowly inched closer to mine. I didn’t move. The wait to feel his lips on mine seemed eternal. When they finally met, I felt the stubble on his face like the points of a hundred needles. My heart was racing. My adrenaline shot up like the weight hitting the bell on a Test Your Strength circus attraction. I didn’t want that kiss to end. Neho slowly backed away giving me the space to open the door and leave. I gave him a long stare.

“Wait,” he said. He moved to his bookcase, removed a book, came back and handed it to me. “You might like this.” I glanced down at the cover. It was a novel, a tome called *The Drifters* by James Mitchner. I was tempted to stay and allow whatever happened to happen, but I didn’t. I took the book and left.

I slept soundly that night, and when I woke up in the morning, the apartment was quiet. Greg was still asleep. I strolled out to the balcony and lit a cigarette. My emotions were clamoring over the epiphany I was feeling. For all the years I could remember, the question of whether I

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was queer had danced in my head. How fiercely I struggled to change the music with the different facades I had created: the high school lover, the cocky straight friend, the compliant son, the army warrior. But when I woke up every morning, it was the same dance to the same song.

No one can beat you, bully you or punish you as cruelly as you do to yourself. I learned that from the guilt and shame I embodied. While outwardly I appeared to have it all together, but inside, my soul was dead. Suddenly, with a single kiss, my life had transformed. Since when does a kiss awaken the senses to an explosive human experience? Since when does a kiss reveal a truth so unmistakably?

The excitement stirring in my chest was greater than anything I had ever felt before. I was on the cusp of a new direction. I looked up at the sky and my spirit reveled at the notion that I was gay and that my life had been changed forever.

Chapter Three

The entire weekend, I was fixated on what had happened in Neho's room. My mind wouldn't stop thinking about his kiss. I wondered if it was brought on by all the liquor and smoke he had taken. Would he even remember what had happened between us? To add to my apprehension, Greg brought Zaria to the apartment Sunday afternoon. I don't believe she was aware that Neho and I had met. It crossed my mind to ask about her stepbrother, but I wondered if she knew Neho was gay. If so, would she assume I was as well and tell Greg? I wasn't ready to come out to Greg or anyone just yet. My grandfather's wisdom came to mind: never overlook the signs that guide us, and know they will appear at the right time. For now I would just follow his sage words.

We sat in the living room for a time, chatting, listening to music and smoking a joint. I made a run for a pizza when we got hungry. After we ate, Greg and Zaria retreated to his bedroom where they remained the rest of the evening.

Over the next few days, my mind was stirring with anticipation at seeing Neho again. On Tuesday I went to class, as usual, and sat in the same place as always.

Greg came in a short time later. "Hey, can you drive yourself to work today? I'm picking up Zaria and we're going to hang out for a while. Maybe she'll come and spend the night."

I sniveled jokingly then smiled. "Yeah, no worries."

"Thanks, man."

Class was ready to start and Neho had not arrived yet. I was tapping my foot on the floor and twirling my pen around my fingers wondering

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where he was. Neho was never late for class. Just as the lecture got underway, he sneaked in. My eyes followed him as he reached his desk and mimicked the same routine as always. He never glanced my way. I don't know what I was expecting, but my heart sank. It was difficult to concentrate on the lecture. My stomach fluttered every time I glanced his way. The thought hit me that our kiss was a freak occurrence and likely meant nothing to him. He probably didn't even remember it. When class ended, I took my time gathering up my things.

"I'll catch you later," Greg said as he left.

"Yeah, see you."

I glanced at Neho as he also left. He stared straight ahead with no sign of acknowledgement. My throat constricted. How could something so meaningful to me fall so flat? I threw my backpack over my shoulder and headed out of the classroom. As soon as I got outside, I lit a cigarette and slowly slogged to my next class. As hard as I tried to put Neho and his kiss out of my mind, quitting my smoking habit would have been easier.

After my last class I went to the library to study, but the thought of Neho's indifference wouldn't leave my mind. As hard as I tried concentrating on my studies, an overwhelming sadness overcame me. I wanted so badly to be alone, but that wouldn't be possible until after work that night.

I arrived to work at the usual time and began my shift. Tuesday nights were usually slow, but there must have been a convention in town because the restaurant was packed. They had me working five tables and running like I was in a marathon.

Sal, the maître d', approached me. "You need to take table fourteen, Marty. It's just a threesome."

"Sal, I'm really clocked-up."

"You got to do it, my friend. I got nobody else."

I sighed. "Yeah, okay."

"Oh, and here you go." He handed me a note. "Somebody called for you. They said to call 'em back."

I took the note that had a phone number scribbled on it. "Who was it?"

"How should I know? They didn't give me a name."

I was too busy to wonder whose number it was, and I pocketed the note.

“You need to tell your friends not to call you at work, Marty.”

“I’ll do that, Sal.” I went back to the loud party at table five.

Business finally slowed sometime after nine o’clock. I grabbed a glass of juice, went into the break room and sat down, even though there were only thirty-five minutes left on my shift. Pulling up another chair, I propped my feet up and lit a cigarette. I put my head back to relax and calmly exhaled smoke upward. That’s when the note Sal had given me earlier came to mind. I took it out of my pocket and glanced at the number again. Not one I recognized. It wasn’t easy getting up because it felt so good being off my feet, but my curiosity took control. I paced into the kitchen and sneaked to the back area where the wall phone was located. We weren’t supposed to use the phone unless we got permission, but it would be a quick call and Sal wouldn’t find out. Picking up the receiver, I dialed the number. On the third ring, a male voice answered.

“This is Marty,” I said. “Somebody called me?”

“Hey.”

“Who is this?”

“Dude, did you forget me already?”

It was Neho. I turned my face to the phone and lowered my voice. “How’d you know where I work?”

“I’m psychic, man.”

My mind raced. “So what’s up?”

“You want to meet me at Maxwell’s tonight?”

“What’s that?”

“A bar off of Fourth Street and the freeway. It’s in that shopping center. You can’t miss it.”

“What time?”

“When do you get off?”

“Ten.”

“After that?”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll be there.”

Just as I hung up the phone, Sal was in my face.

“Break time’s over, Marty. What were you doing using the phone?”

“I looked everywhere for you but you must have been upstairs with the boss man.”

“I don’t believe you. You still got a table out there and you need to stock the pantry before you leave tonight.”

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“Right.” I sidestepped him and raced away. Sal could be a pain sometimes, but he always stood up for me with the owner. He also knew I was among the best food servers they had from all the compliments I got.

“You need to ask before using the phone, Marty. Next time I’ll write you up.”

My pace increased. I hurried to finish my shift and left to meet Neho.

Maxwell’s Lounge was located exactly where Neho said it was. The bar was situated along the perimeter wall on the right side. The lights were dim. There were two pool tables across from the bar with round pendant lights illuminating them. Small tables with stools were scattered beyond this area. The jukebox was playing and the crowd was modest. Neho was nowhere in sight. I marched up to the bar, ordered a beer and sat down. That’s when I sensed someone behind me and swiveled around. It was him.

“Thanks for coming.” Neho was dressed in a V-neck sweater that showed his chest hair. That was an instant turn-on.

“Thanks for the invite.”

He leaned into me as if he was going to kiss me.

I pulled back. “What are you doing?”

“What we did the other night. I thought you liked it?”

“We’re in a public bar, Neho.”

He laughed. “This is a gay bar, Martín. I’m sorry to tell you, but now your reputation’s shot.” Neho always called me Martín, which was endearing to me. I looked around and noticed the absence of any women. A closer look revealed the pictures on one wall next to the bar were of nude men. My eyes made out two guys lip-locking in a corner. “Yeah, so it is.” I reached into my shirt pocket for a cigarette and lit it. The bartender was grinning as he laid my beer down. “What are you drinking?” I asked Neho.

He looked at the bartender. “Jack and coke.” Neho took a seat next to me and smiled. “You’re freaking hot, Martín.”

I grinned. “So does Zaria know you’re gay?”

“Does your roomie know about you?”

I took a sip of beer. “I didn’t even know about me.”

“Until this weekend?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you all right with that?”

“I’m not making an appointment to see a shrink, if that’s what you mean.”

“I’m glad. I like you.”

I took a drag off my cigarette. “Really? At class today, I didn’t think you even noticed me.”

He looked down and slowly stirred his drink. “You were wearing a red plaid shirt with a white tee underneath, and tight 501’s. You looked macho.”

“So why didn’t you say something?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

I took another drag and slowly exhaled. My smile was palpable. “I like you too, Neho. So what are we going to do about that?”

“Maybe hang out?”

“You want to come to my apartment this weekend?”

“Is your roomie going to be there?”

“Probably.”

He shook his head. “Can’t do that. It’s complicated but since he’s dating Zaria, I can’t let him see us together.”

I winced. “Okay, so what if I pick you up and we can go hiking in the mountains?”

“Hiking sound good, but let’s meet someplace.”

“What’s the big deal if I pick you up? Nobody’s going to know.”

His body grew tense, and his brows narrowed. “Trust me on this, Martín, it’s better for me if we meet someplace other than my house.”

I sighed and wondered what it was with all this mystery. “Okay, let’s meet here in the parking lot on Saturday morning.”

He guzzled the rest of his drink and looked at his watch. “I gotta go.”

“Why? We just got here!”

“I’m really sorry, but I have something I have to do.”

I was seething. My eyes narrowed and my voice grew louder. “Let me get this straight, Neho. You ignore me in class, call me at work to meet you here and when I do, you decide to leave after a few minutes. This isn’t cool.”

Neho tried to cup my hands, but I pulled away. “I’m really sorry about this, Martín. Believe me, this wasn’t what I had in mind, but just

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before I left home to come here, I found out something I need to do that can't wait." He leaned into me. "I'll make it up to you, I promise."

He was pleading with me and I could see the sincerity in his eyes. "Okay, if that's the way it has to be."

He rose. "Can I kiss you now?" he asked. His voice was so sweet.

Even though I was still upset, how could I have denied him a kiss? I couldn't help but smile and that gave him my answer. It was a tender, innocent kiss. He took my hands and squeezed them. "I'll see you on Saturday," he said as his hands slipped away and he left.

I continued sitting at the bar drinking my beer when someone sitting two stools away asked if that was my boyfriend. The man was older with the looks of a writer, long curly dark hair, beard and glasses. I smirked. "Yeah...no... I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I'm new at this."

"New, as in your first boyfriend?"

"That and I'm just coming out."

"Is this your first time in here, too?"

"Is it so obvious?"

"So many firsts." He moved closer. "I'm Eli." He offered his hand.

"Marty," I said as I shook it.

"You two make a cute couple."

"Thanks." I sipped my beer. "Do you have a boyfriend?"

"Not anymore. We were together for two years and broke up a few months ago. He moved to Montana to manage his family's ranch."

"Montana! Do they even have gay people in Montana?"

"Closeted cowboys that get horned up rodeoing in the day and come out to fuck the sheep at night."

I laughed.

Eli was an archivist for the museum of archeology and science in Albuquerque. He went on to tell me that the only reason he fell for his boyfriend was because it reminded him of his own father. They moved into an apartment together and that's when he discovered that his boyfriend couldn't keep a job, was a lousy housekeeper and was having sex with neighbors he met at the pool. Eli left him and when his boyfriend finally found him, begged to get back together. He refused.

Eli bought me a beer and asked how I had met Neho. I told him all

about our short relationship. Our conversation went on for another hour, then I told him I had to leave.

“Well, good luck with your boyfriend,” he said. “I’ve just about given up on finding true love with another guy. But who knows, maybe you two will be the exception and move into a house with a white picket fence and live happily ever after.”

Chapter Four

After class on Thursday, Neho took his time getting his things together. He apparently noticed that Greg usually exited the classroom before I did. It was typical of Greg to do so because his next class was in the College of Business located at the other end of campus. Pitching his backpack behind him, Neho eyed me. We both headed for the exit and walked out the door together.

“Where you going now?” I asked.

“The library until my next class. How about you?”

I lit up a cigarette. “English Lit in about forty minutes.”

We continued walking. Neho had a wandering gaze. “You work tonight?” he asked.

“Yeah. I’m off Sunday and Monday.”

“What about your roomie?”

“He’s off Wednesday and Thursday. Why do you ask?”

“Just curious.”

We continued walking as I puffed on my cigarette. “So, do you hang out at Maxwell’s?” I asked.

“I’ve been there a few times. I heard it was a gay bar, so I went to check it out on a Saturday night. I drove around about ten times before I got enough courage to park and go inside. Parking was a problem because every space was taken. I found a spot on the street and started walking to the bar. I heard some guys yelling behind me. I kept walking thinking they were getting ready to pounce on me. Turns out they were yelling because I’d left my lights on. After I went back and turned them off, I headed to the bar, again.

“I didn’t know what to expect, but when I opened the door, the music was loud and the place was packed. They were having a drag show that night, I heard somebody say. I didn’t know what that was. Lots of the guys were wearing either leather or tank tops and Levis. I bumped elbows all the way to the bar and managed to order a drink. Some of the guys were eyeing me hard and I got nervous, so I started walking across the bar to the back area where they have a stage. I found an empty corner and stood there sipping on my drink until some guy in a skin-tight tee came up to me and started a conversation. After a few minutes he got weird and started pawing me, so I told him to back off. He got pissed and stomped off. Then the drag show started. It was guys dressed as ladies lip-synching. Some were good, some not so good. It was fun. We need to go there on a Saturday night, Martín. You might like it.”

“Sure, we can do that.” We continued walking but I noticed he kept looking at his watch. “After you left on Tuesday night, I stayed to finish my beer and ended up meeting a guy named Eli. We talked for about an hour.”

Neho’s eyes thinned. “Did you guys get it on?” His tone turned cold, like that first night in his room when I asked about his friends.

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know. Anyway, it’s none of my business.”

I sensed he may have regretted the question. I considered whether to answer it. I hardly knew Neho, but I didn’t want to get sideways before anything between us got started. “We didn’t get it on.” I stopped to put my cigarette out. “Eli works at the archeology and history museum. He saw you leave and assumed we were dating. So he invited both of us to visit the museum for a personal tour.”

“We’re still going hiking Saturday?” Neho asked.

“It might rain on Saturday. You want to do the museum, instead?”

“No, I think we should go up to the mountains like we planned.”

“But what if the day turns lousy?”

He glared at me. “You suggested hiking, so we should do that.”

His expression was a grimace that brought to mind my reaction when I was young and Dad backpedaled on a promise. It rarely happened, but when it did, my disappointment was inconsolable. “Well, let’s see how the day turns out.” This conversation was not going well.

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“I gotta go.” Neho took a sharp left and scurried away without another word.

My eyes followed him as my mind replayed our conversation. I questioned whether I wanted to go much further with Neho. Aside from being a heart tease, he was likable in so many ways. When we were together, he made me laugh. His attention was always on me. He made me feel happy except when he got weird and turned cold. If I weighted the pros and cons of continuing our relationship, the former would win out by only a hair.

When I got back home after school that day, Greg was lying on the couch listening to music and reading a book.

“Any good?” I asked.

“Sci-fi, not bad.”

I took a seat on the chair across from him. “How’s it going with Zaria?”

“She needs to study for a test tomorrow, so we’re not hanging out tonight.”

“Sounds like you guys are getting pretty tight.”

“She’s a foxy babe, what can I say. She’s got nice tits and she likes to fuck. So, yeah, I’d say we’re tight.”

“Have you met her parents?” I asked in a tone I hoped was indifferent.

Greg put his book down. “Yeah, and they’re both strange.” He marked the page, tossed the book on the coffee table and sat up. “Her mom’s short and always smiling. It’s like if you told her the house was on fire, she’d be grinning ear to ear while she called the fire department. Her dad’s an asshole.”

“Why do you say that?”

“We were all sitting outside and he was grilling burgers.”

“The four of you?” My curiosity as to whether Neho was there played into my question.

“Yeah. She’s got a brother, but he came around later when the food was ready. I think we have a class with him.”

I remained silent.

“Her dad mentioned how vandals had broken into houses in the neighborhood. Her mom decided to tell us her own story. Every summer her parents would rent a cabin in the mountains for a month. One day her parents drove into the village to get groceries and left her and three

brothers at home. Her brothers decided to hike in the forest and went off, leaving her alone. She was about fourteen at the time. A man drove up to the cabin, got out of his car and knocked on the door. He was carrying a water jug. When she opened it, he said, he had run out of water and asked if he could refill his jug. His English was broken and he looked Hispanic, like many of the neighbors with cabins in the area, so it wasn't unusual. She let him inside. When he found out she was alone, he got closer and tried to attack her. She fought him off, got away and ran outside into the forest. When he came out of the house and couldn't find her, he drove away. The Sheriff caught up to him and found out he was wanted for burglary. All the time she was telling us this story, she had this smile going on.

“That’s what you get for letting Mexicans in your house,’ Zaria’s dad said. ‘I got a gun that will make sure they never get into this house.’ He definitely has a thing against them.”

My skin crawled. “I guess Zaria won’t be inviting me to their house for a burger anytime soon,” I joked as I stood up and went into my bedroom. My heart sank at what I heard. The more I learned about Neho and his family, the more his strange behavior began making sense. Now I understood why he didn’t want me to pick him up at his house when I suggested going hiking. But there was more that I didn’t know, like why his personality changed so quickly. As I lay on the bed and mulled over all of this I decided it was best to cut my losses and stop seeing him.

After work that evening, I headed to my car. As I switched on the ignition, someone knocked on my window. It was Neho. I rolled it down.

His smile was alluring. “Would you follow me?” he asked.

“Where to?”

“You’ll see.”

“Neho, I don’t think—”

“Please, Martín.” His voice was pleading.

I sighed. Breaking it off at that moment seemed heartless and, despite my earlier decision, I gave into him. “Okay.”

Neho drove a classy Datsun 280z. I followed him as we exited the restaurant onto San Mateo Boulevard and continued until he turned on Montgomery Avenue and pulled into the Metropolitan Hotel’s parking lot. I pulled in next to him. We parked and exited our cars.

“What are we doing here?” I asked.

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“You’ll see.”

I had a feeling what Neho was up to, but before I could say any more, we walked toward the entrance. At any time I knew I could retreat back to my car and head home, but I decided to go along for now.

He led me into the lobby, which was ornately decorated with beautiful marble floors and striking red and gold furniture. We wandered down the hall, Neho strutting with a confident swagger as if he belonged there. The reception desk agents hardly gave us a glance. We reached the elevator and when the doors opened, he pressed the button for the seventh floor. Once there, we trudged halfway down the hall to one of the rooms he used a key to open. I followed him inside. As soon as the door closed, Neho reached for my hand. His eyes were soft with steady eye contact. His voice was almost breaking. “I’m so sorry, Martín, for this morning.”

“What’s this about?” I looked around the room, admiring the textured mustard yellow wallpaper, plush beige carpet and fancy red bed cover.

“I acted like an ass. I want to make it up to you.”

I didn’t know how to respond. It was as if my feet were on two different planes; one wanting to run and the other, stay. So many thoughts were racing through my mind. Was now a good time to break it off? Should I give Neho another chance? I needed more time to decide. “This must be costing you serious money,” I said.

“I think you’re worth it.”

“How do you know?”

He produced that cute smile again. “Because I’m never wrong.” He drew closer and touched my face. He kissed me. “Are you ready to notch it up?” he asked.

“Neho—”

He put his finger on my lips. “Martín, will you trust me?”

It was too late to back out. Actually, it wasn’t, but if I was going to have sex for the first time with another guy, I wanted it to be with him.

“It’ll be the first notch on my belt.” My mind rattled with thoughts that I might embarrass myself. What if I couldn’t perform? What exactly do we do in bed? I could still cut and run, but my curiosity for gay sex took hold.

“I brought something to mark the occasion,” He said. Neho went to the desk and opened a paper bag. It was a bottle of whiskey, Jack

Daniels. He opened it, reached for two water glasses on the desk and poured two thumb-sized drinks. We toasted and shot them down. He took the glasses, set them back on the desk, then led me to the bed and unbuttoned my shirt. I tossed it, slowly took off my tee, slipped off my shoes and let my trousers fall to the floor. My hands were shaking and I was hoping he wouldn't notice. When I reached for my boxers, he stopped me. I was relieved. I sat on the edge of the bed and he asked me to lie down. Almost naked, I felt totally vulnerable. I should have showered. Perhaps I could do that now before anything started. When his clothes came off and he leaned down to kiss me, I told him what I wanted to do.

He smiled "Go for it."

I rushed to the bathroom and quickly showered. When I was done and pulled the curtain across the tub, Neho was standing there naked with a towel. He reached out to hand it to me and watched as I dried off. Once we were back on the bed, he laid on top of me. I felt the pressure of his body on mine and that got me hard instantly. We kissed and rolled over each other. Neho was gentle when he needed to be, and not-so-gentle after I entered him. That's when the gates of heaven opened. I experienced pleasure like never before; intense bliss and joy and passion. Afterward we cuddled and slept, only to wake up a few hours later to enjoy intoxicating ecstasy, once again. Two things became crystal clear to me that night. There is a heaven and I was falling for Neho.

When I woke up the following morning, he was gone. He had mentioned having an early class, so I wasn't too surprised. I didn't see him again until Saturday morning, when I drove to Maxwell's and found him sitting in his car. I opened my door, got out and went up to him. That's when I saw a large bruise on the right side of his forehead.

"What happened?" I asked.

"It's nothing."

I insisted that he tell me but he remained tight-lipped. Despite my pleas to know what had happened, he wouldn't budge and remained secretive about it. Neho was struggling with something he was unwilling to reveal to me. For now, I decided to let it go.

Chapter Five

It had been several weeks since I'd started seeing Neho, but I hadn't been brave enough to come out to anyone. I couldn't hold back any longer about wanting to share this part of me, so I decided to tell Bernie, my sister.

Growing up, I was closest to her. Her given name is Bernadette. She's one year older than me, while Sandra, my other sister, is four years older than Bernie. The reason for the age difference, Mom told us, was because she refused to get pregnant again until Dad moved them out of the apartment they rented from his parents. The apartment was attached to my grandparent's home. While Grandpa Diaz was always kind to Mom, Grandma Diaz was the opposite. She was nosy, meddling and intrusive. It was her habit to walk into my parent's apartment unannounced to nitpick at Mom's cooking or inspect the rooms for dirt and dust. She would do her finger-slide check along the windowsill and declare, "*Esto necesita atención,*" which infuriated Mom.

Bernie and I were best friends. When we were young, we would quietly wake one another for a midnight snack and tiptoe to the kitchen. Bernie's sandwich of choice was mayonnaise and cabbage, while mine was cheese. I taught Bernie to ride a bike and she taught me to dance. That was a challenge for a guy that doesn't have much rhythm.

We lived close to the rodeo grounds, so every year after the Santa Fe Rodeo was finished, we would walk there and scour the dirt near the concession stands for lost change. We'd always find enough coins to buy too much soda and candy that made our stomachs ache.

Bernie was living in Albuquerque and sharing an apartment with

two roommates. They all worked for New Mexico Bell, the local phone company. She was engaged to Adrian Castellano, who lived in Santa Fe. Adrian was completing his apprenticeship with the electrician's union and planned to move to Albuquerque. They had yet to set the date for their marriage. I called Bernie one evening and we agreed to meet on Saturday at La Pasion, a Mexican restaurant popular with the locals.

I arrived early and took a seat at a corner booth that would give us some privacy. A few minutes later Bernie showed up. She had long, dark hair, soft hazel eyes, and a shy smile. She was wearing a red knit sweater and flared pants that made her look trendy. She gave me her typical wary smile and joined me. I got up and we hugged.

"Hey Marty, when you gonna get a haircut?"

"You don't need to worry about my hair, Bernie. So long as the boss doesn't complain, I'm good."

She laid her purse next to her as she scooted into the booth. "I think you're just rebelling because the Army made you keep it short."

I smiled. "Yeah, you're probably right."

"How's school?" she asked.

"School is school. I'm managing. How about you? How's work?"

Before she could answer, the waiter came by to take our order. He had dark, handsome features and I eyed him a second too long before I noticed Bernie studying me. I knew that look and wondered what thoughts were ruminating in her mind. When the waiter left with our order, I continued as if nothing had happened, and asked again, "So, how's work?"

"I put in for a floor supervisor job. Adrian is upset because if I get it, that means I'll be out of the union."

"That would be an upgrade with more money?"

"Yeah, it would, but I wouldn't have the job security that I have with the union. He's thinking into the future when we're married, and I get pregnant."

"Take the upgrade."

She smiled.

The waiter brought our drinks and this time I avoided looking up at him. "Have you been by to see Mom and Dad?" she asked.

I gave her a serious stare. "I need to tell you something, Bernie."

Her eyes fixed as she gave me her total concentration. "What?"

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“I’m gay.”

A few seconds passed as I waited for her reaction. “I could tell you that I’m surprised, Marty, but I’d be lying.”

“What do you mean?”

She leaned into me. “I’ve known for a long time, *hermanito*.” That was the name she called me when we were kids.

“How could you? I just found out myself.”

“Maybe you just admitted it to yourself. I knew you were gay since high school. I wondered about you when you started going steady with that girl with red hair.”

“You mean Angela?”

“Yeah, Angela. She was always all over you, and it was like you didn’t care.”

“She ended up marrying some old guy and moved away.”

“Have you told Mom or Dad?” she asked.

I shook my head. “You’re the first one to know.”

“You have a boyfriend?”

“I think so?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I’m seeing somebody, but it’s complicated.”

“Have you guys done it already?”

“Done what?”

She formed a sly smile. “You know, *el negocio*?”

“What kind of a question is that?”

“Just curious.”

At that moment our food arrived, and the waiter laid it on the table. Bernie picked up her fork and eyed me. “Marty, I don’t care that you’re gay. I don’t even care if you won’t share *el negocio* with me. But get this through your shaggy head. You’re my brother and I’ll always love and support you every way I can.”

My heart did a flip. I was glad to have Bernie on my side and wondered when I could introduce her to Neho.

Chapter Six

Neho and I started seeing one another regularly. On Tuesday and Thursday after class, I knew to take my time and allow Greg to leave so that Neho and I could walk out together. One of those days he asked me to follow him. He was wearing a cagey grin that piqued my curiosity. We ended up at a building on the edge of campus that I had never visited before. “What is this place?” I asked.

“It’s the center for religion and contemplation.”

“What are we doing here?”

“You’ll see.”

He never broke his grin as he led me through the front doors, into a small reception foyer and down a hallway. There didn’t seem to be anyone in the building besides us. He stopped at a door marked “Vestry”. We went inside. In front there was a long table affixed to the wall with tall overhead dark wooden cabinets. There were candles and religious icons laid out on the table. Along the side walls were a series of closets in which hung an assortment of religious clothing. The gray carpet on the floor was a thin commercial grade. Neho took my hand and led me through another door that was a restroom with sinks, urinals, toilet stalls and showers. As soon as the door closed, Neho dropped his backpack, took mine and tossed it next to his, then leaned into me and pushed my back against the wall. He never broke his grin and kept eyeing me to see if I was okay having sex there. I mimicked his sly smile and that was all he needed. He kissed me and lifted my T-shirt over my head. I didn’t protest. He managed to unbuckle my jeans and with a careful motion, slowly slipped everything down to my ankles. He gently made his way

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down my chest and stomach. When he reached my cock, he took it in his mouth and unbuttoned his shirt. In no time he slipped off his shoes, dropped his pants and stood naked in front of me. We slowly dropped to the hard, linoleum floor and had sex for so long that I missed my English Lit class.

Another time, Neho led me to a hidden corner in the library where we went to heaven again, and still another time to the baseball locker room. There was no end to the private, remote places he found to have sex.

On Sunday and Monday evenings, Neho would drive to my apartment. Greg would be at work, so we were able to spend that time together. Sometimes we would go out for dinner and other times we would get take-out and eat in the apartment while studying or listening to music. We would occasionally smoke some weed, but eventually end up in the bedroom having great sex. Neho would always leave before Greg got home. But there was one time that Greg happened to get an early out from work, and showed up at the apartment hours before his shift was supposed to end. We were naked on my bed when we heard someone come in. Instantly, we grew silent. Neho's face went white. His breathing became rapid. I got out of bed, put on my shorts and went to close my bedroom door. When I looked up, Greg was standing not more than five feet from me. It was an awkward moment as we faced one another. I looked down at the table where we had left our plates and wrappings from take-out. From the expression on my face and the mess on the table, it was apparent I wasn't alone. Greg gave me a knowing smirk, said goodnight, went into his bedroom and shut the door. I went back into my bedroom and we continued where we had left off until Neho had to leave. He slipped out quietly.

Most of the time when we got together, Neho's mood was pleasant and fun. He had a dry wit and a knack for telling incredible stories. One of the stories involved a best friend in elementary school named Rudy. Their family ended up moving to another city and they lost touch. Many years later, Neho sent away for a telescope from a company in Florida, but it arrived broken. He phoned the company to complain, but inadvertently transposed the numbers. When the caller answered, it was Rudy. Another was about a time his family vacationed in Telluride, Colorado and he forgot his book at the hotel after checking out. Two

years later, while searching through used books at an Albuquerque bookstore, he picked up a copy of that same book, *The Catcher in the Rye*. When he opened the cover, his name was scripted on the page. It was the exact book he had left behind in Telluride. His telling was so convincing that it left me speechless.

Then there were those occasions when he became so distraught and his spirit so broken that there was little I could say or do to help him. He would rub his arm as if he was cold. He would get defensive and angry. The first time it happened was a Sunday morning. We had decided to meet at Maxwell's and drive to Santa Fe. My intention was to show him the places where I grew up. When we met up that morning, he was stony and tight-lipped. He handed me his keys. "You drive," he said in a demanding tone.

I was put off by his lousy attitude. When we got into his car, I studied him for a few seconds and the thought of confronting him raced through my mind, but I decided to let it go. Perhaps his mood would improve. We started the drive. It was total silence for the first few minutes until I spoke. "What's going on, Neho?"

"It was your idea to drive to Santa Fe. You tell me what's going on."

I glanced at him, confused by what he said. "We had plans to do this, if you remember. But it sounds like you're having second thoughts."

"Don't turn this around. If you don't want to go, just say so."

"I don't understand you. Your attitude sucks."

His arm-rubbing became more pronounced. He remained quiet. Just before I got to the freeway, I decided to turn the car around. He saw that I was heading back to Maxwell's but said nothing. When we got to the parking lot, I parked his car next to mine. He was looking straight ahead and rocking anxiously.

I glared at him. "This isn't working for me. Let's get together another time."

His eyes fixed on me. "So this is it? It's over?"

His question took me by surprise. "I never said that. You're putting words in my mouth. Do you want it to be over?" Anger rose in my chest. Was it his intention to end our relationship? It seemed so from the way things started out that morning.

"You're the one leaving me," Neho said.

Now he was turning the tables on me. I wasn't going to let that

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happen. I had to challenge him but I needed a minute to get my thoughts together. I got out of the car, closed the door and leaned against the hood. I took out a cigarette and lit it. I glanced back and saw that Neho was tense; his lips were pressed together. Perhaps it wasn't his intention to end it and he was just having a bad day. I didn't need to put up with his attitude, though. He needed to know that I wasn't his punching bag every time he was off. I thought about finishing my cigarette, saying goodbye and leaving. But my instincts were telling me something different.

During the weeks and months that we dated, I had grown so emotionally attached to Neho. He had become such a big part of my life with his quirky stories, his mysterious behaviors and his fondness for sex, particularly in strange places. We were building a relationship I never knew could exist. Throughout my life, no one had ever made me feel so many different emotions. His beautiful, naked body imbued intense excitement and arousal in me. The passion in our sex consumed me. The tenderness of holding one another filled my heart with affection. The longing for Neho when we parted became agonizing. That was when I first realized I was falling in love.

Out of nowhere, my mind recalled a silly argument my parents had one day. Dad had gone to the refrigerator for green chile to put on his tortilla-liverwurst sandwich, unaware that Mom had tossed it because it was old. It escalated into a ridiculous exchange, but they quieted, and we all resumed watching TV. After a few minutes, Dad got up from his recliner, went up to Mom who was sitting on the couch, leaned down and kissed her.

Just like grandpa had taught me, I looked inside and searched for the peace that would keep me on my path. I knew what I had to do. I chucked my cigarette on the ground and stomped it out. When I got back into the car, I put my hand on Neho's. "I'm not leaving you. But I want you to know that I'm not going to be your scapegoat when you're in a lousy mood. You understand what I'm saying?"

He gave me that look like when you don't want to admit you're wrong. "Yeah."

We stayed staring straight ahead, wondering what to say next. Then he spoke. His voice was pleasant. "Shouldn't we get started if we're going to Santa Fe?"

I looked over and saw that mischievous grin on his face. I couldn't

help smiling back. “Yeah.” I was glad we had been able to work out our first argument. I fished the keys from my pocket, started the car and we drove off. I had no idea what my lover was dealing with. It would be several weeks before he trusted me enough to reveal the nature of his despair: the sickening abuse from his stepfather.

Chapter Seven

After driving Neho by my old high school and a by few notable landmarks in Santa Fe, I suggested we go to my parents' house so he could meet them. Neho was all for that.

When I was growing up, Santa Fe was a small town. Ours, like so many of my friends and relatives, was a chile and beans upbringing; modest, humble and adequate. Dad never threw anything away if there was the slightest chance it would have some future utility. He drove a blue Ford station wagon that got an oil change when he thought it needed one and when money was available. He was always stoic, rarely showing much emotion, like most World War II vets. During the week, he was as sober as a judge. But when the weekend hit, he'd get lit up with his friends at the DeVargas Fraternal Lodge, which everybody just called The Lodge.

The Lodge was a members-only club. The only requirements were that you had to be sponsored by a member, be at least twenty-one and have been born in New Mexico. There was a women's auxiliary called the DeVargas Ladies Auxiliary. The whole building consisted of a bar with a pool table, a dance hall with a piano and a small kitchen in back. The bar generally opened after five on weekdays and at noon on Saturdays. It was closed on Sundays. Both Mom and Dad were heavily involved.

Dad worked for the State Engineer's Office as a clerk. Years earlier, to save money for a house, Dad tended bar at night at The Lodge after his regular job. Mom banked Dad's checks and paid the bills. Every month, she'd reach for the back of an envelope and begin making the

list of what was owed and who would get it. Growing up, we always got what we needed, although not always what we wanted. But somehow, Dad's paychecks and Mom's budgeting always balanced.

Our house on Colon Street was situated around neighbors we had known all of our lives. It was an old, almost exclusively Hispanic neighborhood with spacious lots. Everyone looked out for each other and almost no one locked their doors during the day. Dad had built a low brick wall around the front. Both the front and back yards had large swaths of grass, which I'd been tasked to mow with a push mower every week during summer. Since I had moved away, Dad was doing the lawns, but now he used a gas-powered machine. Mom grew flowers in the ground that lined the sidewalk leading up to the front door. Since it was late October, the fescue grass was now brown, and the geraniums, marigolds and snapdragons had died.

"This is it," I said as I parked along the curb.

He glanced at our house. "Nice." Knowing the posh surroundings Neho was accustomed to, I sensed "nice" was the only term he could come up with to describe my parent's humble dwellings.

We exited the car and walked up the sidewalk. Through the large picture window, I could see that Dad had the television tuned to a football game. I opened the screen, turned the knob and pushed open the door to let Neho in before me. Dad was sitting in his recliner and stood as soon as he saw us. Mom came out of the kitchen with a look of surprise. We hugged and I introduced them to Neho. We exchanged some conversation and Mom insisted that we were staying for lunch. She went back into the kitchen and the three of us sat down to watch the game.

"Who's ahead?" Neho asked Dad.

"The Cowboys just scored a field goal."

I had never developed a deep interest in sports. Bernie, on the other hand, loved watching football with Dad. When I still lived at home, I would occasionally join them until I couldn't take anymore. I wondered if Neho really liked the game or was faking it out of respect for Dad. But when they started talking about offensive and defensive moves, and throwing out names like Staubach and Payton and Herrera and Musso, I knew Neho's appreciation for the game was genuine. Dad got up from his recliner, went to the kitchen and returned with three beers, handing

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Neho and me one each. I stayed watching a few more plays and listening to them carrying on their conversation, then got up and strolled into the kitchen. Mom had begun warming beans and green chile on the stove. The oven was heating up for a casserole she had prepared the previous day. She came back to the kitchen table and began forming balls from the flour mixture to roll out for tortillas. Mom smiled at me when I pulled out a chair and sat down with my beer.

“Have you seen Bernie?” she asked.

“We had lunch a few weeks ago.” I stayed watching Mom, amazed at the ease in which she rolled out perfectly round circles for tortillas. She had made them for as long as I could remember, but I had never actually seen her do it. “How’s Sandra and her family?” I asked. Sandra was married with two kids.

“They’re doing good. But she’s upset at your grandma.”

“Grandma Diaz?”

Mom gave a slight nod and pursed her lips.

“What did she do this time?”

“She asked Sandra to drive her to the grocery store. On the way out, your grandma dented the door of their new car with the grocery cart. When Sandra called her on it, your grandma said it was going to get banged up anyway.”

I laughed. That was Grandma Diaz, all right. I stared down at the floured cutting board in deep thought.

She moved to the hot griddle and laid the flattened circle on it. “*¿Que pasa, mi hijo?*” she asked as she came back to start another.

“Nothing.”

“Don’t tell me nothing. I know you!”

“I need to tell you something.”

She stopped what she was doing. “*¿Que?*”

I hadn’t thought about coming out to Mom yet. It had been the furthest thing from my mind when we drove into Santa Fe. But being alone with her in the kitchen, that moment felt like the perfect time. I decided to go for it. I looked up at her. “I’m gay.”

She slowly formed a loving smile, bent down and kissed me on the forehead. “That’s all right.”

I was surprised by her calm reaction. She grabbed another one of the little balls and rolled it out again. “Have you told your dad yet?”

I shook my head.

“Don’t wait too long.”

“I’ll be back later this week. I’ll tell him then.”

“¿Es tu novio?” she asked under her breath as she cocked her head toward the living room where Neho and Dad were sitting.

I smiled. “Yeah.”

She smiled and raised her eyebrows in a gesture clearly expressing her approval. “*Que guapo! ¿Quien es la mujer?*”

I gave her a strange look. “It doesn’t work that way, Mom.”

“Pues, how does it work?”

I took another sip of beer. “We’re equal.”

I was convinced that the next question coming out of her mouth was going to be what Bernie had wanted to know. What was it with them? But before she could say more, Dad and Neho strolled into the kitchen. The game had gone into half-time and Neho, apparently mesmerized at the sight of Mom’s tortilla-making deftness, took a seat at the table. As soon as she finished with the tortillas, she laid out the table with food and we started eating.

It was heartening for me to see that not only did Neho and Dad share a love for football, but my boyfriend couldn’t get enough of Mom’s cooking. As we were leaving she gave him a hug and invited him back.

“Your parents are awesome,” he said as we got on the road for the trip back to Albuquerque. I sensed the sincerity in his voice. He really meant it.

“Yeah, I think they’re pretty special, too.”

“I had a family like that a long time ago.”

“What do you mean?”

He began to tell me about his past.

Neho was born in Denver. His real name was Neil Michael Warren. When he was very young and anyone would ask his name, he always muttered Neho, so that name stuck. Robert, his dad, worked as a banker while Maddie, his mom, was a legal secretary. He was an only child because Maddie had developed diabetes and after two miscarriages, her doctor told her they needed to stop trying.

In addition to the family car, Robert had a motorcycle that he rode most weekends. When Neho was old enough, they would trek up into the mountains on the bike.

Their house had a large park behind it where he and Lucas, his best friend, spent hours playing. They had known one another since grade school and were inseparable. Lucas was a regular at the Warren's dinner table. On weekends, they would stay up watching television until the sign-off came on, and retreat to Neho's bedroom to sleep. In summer, they would hike into the forest, play ball in the park or bike to the river where they jumped in to cool off, and usually wouldn't get back home until just before dusk.

As they rode their bikes home on one of those evenings, there was a strange car parked in Neho's driveway. They got to the front yard, dropped their bikes and went inside. Maddie was on the couch, tears streaming down her face. Their church pastor was sitting next to her holding her hand. When Maddie told Neho that his dad had been killed in a motorcycle accident, he began shaking in disbelief. He raced out the door and Lucas followed behind. They continued running until they were well inside the park. Their breathing was heavy.

"It can't be true!" Neho said as he wept.

Lucas stood in front of him. Slowly, he slumped into Neho and put his arms around his best friend. Neho collapsed into him. When he recovered, he lifted his head. Even in the emerging darkness he could clearly see Lucas. Inches separated their faces. They moved closer but at the last second, they pulled back. Afterward they didn't speak, even as Lucas rode away.

Losing his dad was devastating. Neho was overcome with sadness and anger which he expressed in fights he picked at school. He saw the grief his mom was experiencing and found himself pressured to man up and support her. When the school year was ending and Maddie suggested leaving Denver and their agonizing loss behind them, Neho went along even though he hated the idea of moving to a new city, going to a new school and having to make new friends.

Neither he nor Lucas had brought up the incident at the park until Neho told him they were moving to Albuquerque. The night before the move, the two friends took a walk in the park. They talked and joked about their fun times together and how much they were going to miss

one another, then they lay on the grass.

“I know it’s totally lame, but I wanted to kiss you that night,” Lucas said.

“Me, too.”

“You think we’re fags?”

“Maybe.”

They laughed. Lucas rose up and gave Neho a playful kiss. “So what!”

Instantly, Neho felt aroused and looked away to hide his discomfort. “Yeah, so what!”

Since that day, Neho had known he was different—a condition he couldn’t imagine ever sharing with Maddie.

Chapter Eight

I still hadn't told Greg that I was gay. He kept suggesting we double date so he and Zaria could meet the mystery lady. I kept making excuses, but his curiosity was piqued and he wouldn't let it rest. He'd grill me about where I met her, what she looked like, where she worked, and dozens more probing questions. My responses were always vague and elusive. He started joking about it at work in front of Sal and others. Soon they started in on me, too. I'm certain Greg suspected something was odd because he knew me too well to be so guarded about my flame. Now that the mystery involved so many people, I wondered how I was going to get off the gum tree. But as circumstances would have it, the whole charade shifted out of my control.

It was the night before Thanksgiving and the restaurant crowd was light. Greg drove that day and when we got off work, he suggested going out drinking. Sal and a few other food servers decided to join us, and we ended up at Holly Molly's Bar just off Lomas Boulevard. While we were drinking, talking, and playing darts, two of the guys started dancing and schmoozing it up with some of the ladies that were there. I was surprised that Sal didn't join them because he was better looking than any of them. Shortly before one o'clock, Greg and I decided to call it a night and head home.

The minute we got to the apartment, we headed straight to our bedrooms and crashed. I hadn't been asleep more than an hour when I heard a knock at the door. At first I thought it was a dream, but the knocking grew louder and I climbed out of bed. Greg had also heard the commotion and we headed to the front door. Without looking through

the peep hole, Greg opened it.

Neho was standing outside barefoot, his shirt partly ripped open. His face was white and his lips were trembling. He was shaking uncontrollably. As hard as he tried to speak, his words ran together and what he was saying was unclear. He looked as if he'd been beaten up.

I crossed in front of Greg and brought Neho inside. "What's going on?"

"Can I crash here tonight?" Neho whispered to me.

"No problem."

Greg closed the door, a confused expression on his face. "What happened? Do we need to call the cops?"

Neho's eyebrows pinched together. "No."

I could see that he was in no condition to explain. "I think we all need to get some sleep and talk about it tomorrow."

Greg got a blank look on his face. His mouth opened as if to say something, but nothing came out.

I led Neho into my bedroom and could feel Greg's stare until I closed the door. "You want to sleep?" I asked.

"Yeah."

I watched him slip off his clothes and get into bed. I joined him, anxious to find out what happened, and asked if he was okay.

"Not really. The bastard tried to... Never mind."

"Who tried to do what?" I asked. My voice was desperate.

"Lev tried to rape me."

I rose up and my face tightened. I could hardly believe what I was hearing. "Your stepdad?"

"Let's talk tomorrow?"

"Neho, how did—"

"Please, Martín?" He curled up in a fetal position at the edge of the bed and remained motionless.

Soon after, when I knew Neho would say no more, I switched off the light and lay back down, but sleep didn't come easy.

The following morning, we woke up late. I tramped into the kitchen to make coffee and noticed Greg's keys were gone, which meant he was already out of the apartment. I knew he had made plans to introduce Zaria to his parents at their Thanksgiving feast. I was relieved that Neho and I would be alone.

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I had told my parents that I might join them for Thanksgiving dinner that afternoon, but now it would depend on how I could help Neho. A few minutes later, he strolled into the kitchen.

“How you doing?” I asked.

Neho looked somber. “Better than last night.” He moved close and kissed me.

“Coffee?”

“Sure.”

After pouring our cups, we moved into the living room. Glancing outside, I could see a beautiful, cloudless sky. I set my cup on the coffee table, opened the sliding glass door and made my way out to the balcony for fresh air to relive my throbbing headache. There was a stream of cars traveling along the boulevard. After a few deep breaths that helped assuage my hangover, I strolled back inside, reached for my coffee cup and sat on the couch. Neho was sitting opposite me, his bare feet under him and his hands around his cup. I didn’t want to be presumptuous and start the conversation that I knew was coming, so I just sat back, sipped my coffee and smiled at him.

Neho took a drink and placed his cup on the table. “Lev went out drinking with his office buddies last night. I had a feeling it wasn’t going to go well because I suspected he would get back home drunk. When I went to bed, I locked my door. I left my shirt and trousers on, just in case he got inside my room and things got out of control. I was asleep when he came into my room at about one-thirty. He apparently used a pin key to open it. He tried getting into bed with me and that’s when I woke up. I pushed him away, but he held me down and started unbuttoning my trousers. I fought back. He didn’t expect it because I had never done that before. I kneed his balls as hard as I could. That’s when he let go of me and began moaning. I climbed over him and got out of bed. He reached for my shirt and ripped it. When I got free, I ran out of my room, up the stairs and out the kitchen door. I made it to my car and was shaking so badly I could hardly put the key in the ignition. I finally got my car started and drove off. It was cold and I put the heater as high as it would go. I was driving like a maniac, weaving back and forth. I don’t know how I would have explained myself if I’d been stopped by the cops. I didn’t know where else to go, so I came here.”

My hands clenched and my teeth were grinding. Neho’s voice was

shaking. I placed my coffee cup on the table, went over and put my arm around him. "I'm glad you did," I whispered.

"I think I scared the crap out of your roomie."

I laughed and went back to the couch. "Yeah, you did."

"You think he's figured out we're gay?"

I picked up my cup and took another sip. "Pretty much."

He lowered his head and put his hands over his face. When he raised his head again, he looked grim. "It's been going on for about two years. I don't know how to stop it."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Lev and me."

My jaw dropped.

"It started after I graduated high school." Neho got up from his chair to refill his cup and when he came back, remained quiet for a time. I think he was trying to put his thoughts together. His expression was pained. "I wish my past was different, Martín. I think it's important that you know about it so you can decide if we have a future."

Aside from my irrepresible headache, I tried to get my mind ready for what I was about to hear. Could what he was about to reveal really determine our future? In my state, would I be able to fully understand it? My choice would have been to postpone this conversation for another time, but Neho was hurting and he needed to talk now.

He took a deep breath, then began. "A few weeks after I graduated, Lev took us on a vacation to South Padre Island with a stopover in Houston to meet his parents, Pavel and Irena. They're Russian immigrants who came to the U.S. in the twenties. Pavel got a job in a Houston refinery and worked there until he managed to save enough money and open a laundry. He hired an employee, a Mexican neighbor, to help him and Irena with the work. When their business grew, he hired more Mexicans because they worked for low wages and no benefits. Lev said that his dad worked them hard and routinely fired them for any reason or no reason. The pool of unskilled replacements was endless.

"Lev has two older brothers, Ivan and Viktor. As soon as they got old enough, Pavel put them to work in the laundry after school and on Saturdays. Lev never had an interest in the laundry and enrolled in college after finishing high school. When Pavel retired, Ivan and Viktor took control of the business.

“During our stay we tried to avoid Pavel. He was bitter and short-tempered. Lev and the old man always spoke in Russian. Even though I couldn’t understand what they said, it was like they were always arguing. When we were getting ready to leave, the two barely spoke to one another. I think Lev regretted making that trip back home.

“Lev drove us to South Padre Island, a place he knew well. We spent five days on the beach and had a great time before heading back home. When we got to Midland, which is about half-way to Albuquerque, Lev decided we would spend the night. He pulled into a hotel and went in to register. When he came out he had two keys in his hand and said they had no connecting rooms and that our rooms were on different floors. Maddie and Zaria would stay in one room, and he and I in the other. We dropped off our luggage in the rooms and went down to the restaurant to eat.”

I thought to myself that I couldn’t remember a time when my family had ever stayed at a hotel, but I’m sure my parents would never have stayed in the same room as us.

Neho continued. “Afterward, Maddie and Zaria went back to their room to crash. Lev asked me to walk with him. It was beginning to get dark outside. We left the hotel, crossed the street and headed down the block until we reached a bar called Jackie’s Tavern. He told me we were going in for a drink. I reminded Lev that I wasn’t twenty-one yet, and he said eighteen was the drinking age in Texas. We strolled inside.

“The place was loud and crowded. The wooden floor creaked and the bar looked grubby. We found an empty table across from the bar and sat down. An old waitress wearing a cowboy hat and boots came to our table. Lev ordered two beers and two shots of Jack Daniels for us. We talked mostly about sports and college. After we had chugged our second whiskey and sipped on our third beer, which I couldn’t finish, we finally left the bar and headed back to the hotel.

Why was Neho giving me so many details about the bar they went to? Maybe he was just trying to prepare me for what came next? I kept quiet and let him continue.

“As soon as I got into the room, I ran to the bathroom because my bladder was about to burst. When I came out, Lev was standing in the hallway by the door. He had this strange look on his face, but I ignored him. I was pretty wasted and remember tossing my shoes, cutoffs and

T-shirt to the floor, and stretching out on one of the beds. The room was muggy. I closed my eyes and everything started spinning. A minute later I felt a hand on my thigh, but I thought it was a dream. Then he reached under my boxers and grabbed my cock. When I opened my eyes, Lev was hovering over me. He was naked. He dropped to his knees at the edge of the bed and took my cock into his mouth. This couldn't be happening. I needed to get up, but I couldn't move. All I could see was his head bobbing up and down on my cock. He stood up and laid on top of me, rubbing his cock on mine. He had me pinned down. We had sex that night and afterward he moved to the other bed and fell asleep. I was afraid to get out of bed and wiped myself with the sheet. Eventually I fell asleep.

“When I woke up in the morning, I was alone in the room. My head was throbbing. I remember closing my eyes again, and that's when the images of that night started playing in my mind. It couldn't be true, I thought. My stomach turned. I started to retch. I got up and ran to the toilet. I remember sitting on the floor with my arms around the basin and beginning to dry heave. When I recovered, I looked down and that was when I knew it was all real. I was naked.”

Chapter Nine

Neho's voice was flat and cold. It lacked any emotion. The morning was passing fast and I knew I wouldn't make it to my parent's Thanksgiving table after all. I went over to him again and this time he stood up. I wrapped my arms around him and he held me tight as if he was relieved to be talking about it to me.

"It's going to be alright," I said.

He didn't respond. After a few moments we released each other.

"I'll be right back." My voice was soft and low, like when you want to give reassurance that you're not running away from what you just heard. I waited for him to acknowledge me. Neho nodded, although he refused to meet my eyes. I went into the kitchen and phoned my parents, explaining that I wouldn't be there because it would be cutting it too close to drive back and get to work on time. They were disappointed but understanding. I was reeling anger and outrage at his step-father's assault. My mouth was parched and dry. I filled a glass with water, then returned to the living room, glass in hand. Neho was staring out the balcony slider deep in thought.

I stood next to him. "You were drunk and he took advantage of you. You know that, right?"

Neho stared at me with heartsick eyes as if testing my tenacity. "The story doesn't end there."

"I didn't think it would."

He looked at his watch. "Can you still make it to your parent's house for dinner?"

I knew his question was meant to put off the rest of his story to

another time. "I've already made the call. I'm not going."

"You sure about that?"

I smiled. "Yeah, I'm sure." Neho's voice was steadier. He seemed to be in control of his emotions. He formed a slight grin. "If you lend me a shirt and a pair of shoes, I'll take you out to lunch?"

My headache was now tolerable, and the coffee had settled my stomach. "Sure, but I'm not wild about turkey. Can we do something else, like Chinese?"

His grin gave way to a broader smile. "Chinese on Thanksgiving sounds good!"

When Neho went into the bathroom to shower, I stayed in the living room smoking a cigarette and trying to take in all he had told me. At the time, I didn't know the psychology behind sexual predators and how they groom their victims. I also didn't know the backstory of Lev's sudden interest in Maddie after being introduced to Neho. My thoughts were like crossed wires and I was trying to untangle the reasoning in everything he had revealed to me. The more I was learning about him, the louder the caution bells rang in my head.

What was I getting into? I was reminded of my eagerness to buy my first car. It was old but affordable. Unfortunately, it ended up needing more work than my wallet could handle, and I quickly sold it at a loss. Never again!

We didn't have to drive far to find the Asian Pearl, a Chinese restaurant on San Mateo Boulevard. The interior was decorated in red hues with simple cinnamon wood furnishings. It had a relaxing atmosphere. A young, Asian woman dressed in a kimono greeted us. She spoke in a high-pitched voice. There weren't many guests inside and we chose a booth.

After we gave the waiter our order, I looked at Neho. "Why did it go on so long?"

"At first, it was because he threatened me. After that, Mom gave him control of my life."

"What do you mean?"

"On a Saturday afternoon Zaria had gone out with friends and Mom was grocery shopping. I was outside washing my car. Just as I had pulled it into the garage to polish it, Lev showed up. He'd been drinking, but not so much that he didn't know what he was doing. He stumbled up to

me and shoved me against the wall. He stuck his hand down my pants and grabbed my cock. I could have pushed him away, but I didn't. I was afraid of him. He managed to unbutton my pants and let them fall to the floor. He began sucking me off. I let him do it. Even though I knew it was wrong and I was going to feel miserable afterward, I didn't stop him. He turned me around, dropped his pants and did the deed. When he was finished with me, he pulled up his pants and warned that if I ever told anyone, he would kick me out of his house. No one would believe me anyway, he said, as he stumbled out of the garage. I dropped to the floor and wept. After that second time I became fair game for him.

"I was confused when we had sex. There were times that I got aroused and even creamed. So I thought that if I was enjoying it, maybe it wasn't so bad. As idiotic as it sounds, I felt as if I was carrying my weight in Lev's house by giving him sex."

I think I was starting to understand.

The waitress brought our food and set it on the table. We shared our entrees and he continued with his story.

"Things began to change when I got the acceptance letter for the university in Arizona. I had completed the application, made out a check for the deposit and was ready to mail it until Lev cornered me. He had taught me to play tennis and I became his partner on Tuesdays and Thursdays. One day he canceled our match and he drove me to Jefferson Park to talk about my annuity."

"What's that?"

"It's something my dad set up for me before he died. He had taken out a term insurance policy just in case something should happen to him. So when he died, the policy paid off and an investment guy at a bank in Denver took over managing it. I can't take possession of it until I'm twenty-four and mom agrees to release it to me. Right now, it's paying for my college."

"Will it pay for all four years?"

"That, and hopefully I'll have enough after graduation to travel. But then Lev told me that Mom had given him control of my annuity. That wasn't a total surprise. I suspect Lev pressured her so he could have more control over me. On our walk, Lev said that the investments he chose were the same as those in his own portfolio, and he was confident the money would continue to grow steadily. He told me that if I decided

to go out-of-state, it would cost more than ten thousand dollars. But if I stayed in Albuquerque, it would be a quarter of that since there was no room and board expense, and enough to up my allowance. He said the university in Arizona would put a huge dent in the principal and by the time I graduated, there may be nothing left. He put his arm around me. That's the first time he had ever done anything like that and I hated it. He stopped to stare at me. He said that it was my decision, but he didn't want to lose his tennis partner. My silence gave the message that we both knew what that meant."

It was hard for me to keep my eyes off Neho. They revealed the pain he had endured. My eating utensils were couched between my fingers but I couldn't bring myself to lift the food to my mouth. Our meal was getting cold. While I hoped his story would break soon, I greatly wanted to know more. My toes pattered inside my shoes as I restrained my impatience and continued listening.

"I thought about how desperately I wanted to travel to Europe after graduation and how I needed my annuity money to do that. Lev had started easing off on the restrictions at home. He removed my curfew on the condition that I didn't get into trouble. That was awesome. Mom didn't like it, but Lev ruled the household. He stopped shaming and embarrassing me all the time when I did things he didn't like.

"Mom's marriage to Lev had never been good. After the first year, they constantly argued. Mom was getting tired of working at the law firm and she wanted to quit her job, but Lev was pressuring her to stay on. Mom complained constantly about Lev waking her when he came to bed late, which happened too often. It was typical for Lev to stay up working until after midnight and she'd have a hard time getting back to sleep. He got tired of hearing her complain, so he decided to convert the basement into a bedroom. He hired some carpenters to do the remodel, and two months later, he moved into my room and I moved to the basement bedroom. In the end I decided to stay in Albuquerque because he eased up on me, I felt safer in my new room and I wanted to save my annuity money. I should have known that things would only get worse."

Neho finally stopped talking and we started eating our meal. I was glad about that because I needed time to absorb everything he had revealed.

When we left the restaurant, Neho asked me to stop at a phone booth

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so he could call his mom. When he returned to the car, he was upset. Maddie had pleaded with him to join them for Thanksgiving dinner, but he'd refused. She'd told him Lev was angry, and Neho replied that he was staying with a friend and would call her every day to check in.

When she asked about the friend, he ended the call.

Chapter Ten

In an effort to brighten Neho's mood, I suggested taking a drive to the mountains. He agreed. The weather was moderate in the city, but it would be chilly the higher we climbed, so we stopped by the apartment for light jackets. Neho stayed in the car while I ran up to get them.

As soon as I opened our apartment door, Zaria came running up to me. She looked worried. "Have you seen Neho?"

My voice strained as I cleared my throat. "Ah, yeah, I have."

"I need to talk to him. Where is he?"

"He's downstairs in the car."

"Can you take me to him?"

I took a deep breath. "Let me bring him up." I raced to the car and told Neho that Zaria was in the apartment and wanted to see him.

"Oh, fuck." His neck arched back.

"What do you want to do?" I asked.

"Run away."

I put my hand on his shoulder. "Not a good idea, boyfriend."

We headed upstairs to the apartment and as soon as we entered, Zaria was in his face. "Why didn't you tell me you were gay?" she asked.

"Why? What difference would that have made?"

"Is that what the fight with Dad was about last night?"

Neho gave me a quick glance. "Yeah."

"Have you told your mom?" Zaria asked.

Neho shook his head.

"You need to come home so we can figure out what to do."

"No, not yet."

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“What are you going to do?” Zaria gave an exasperated sigh. “Where you going to stay?”

I spoke up. “He can stay with me for as long as he wants.”

Zaria wasn’t convinced by that. “What about school? What about your clothes?”

“I’ll stop by tomorrow after they leave for work,” Neho said.

“I really want to help you,” Zaria said.

Neho formed a slight smile. “I’ll be okay.”

Greg spoke up. “There’s too much drama here. I think it’s time to light up a joint.”

On the afternoon of Thanksgiving, Neho and I decided to skip the mountain drive and hang out with Greg and Zaria. We listened to music, got high and had conversations about movies, life and everything in between until Greg and Zaria retreated to his bedroom, and Neho and I to mine. Later, I inched out of bed as Neho slept soundly. I showered, dressed and headed to work.

When I got home that night, the apartment was quiet. Greg and Zaria had apparently gone out. Thinking that Neho was in bed, I was headed to the bedroom when I happened to see a shadow out on the balcony. I went to the slider and saw Neho sitting on the floor with his back against the glass. He was staring into space. A bottle of whiskey was next to him. He was shivering.

I opened the slider and stepped outside. “What are you doing out here?”

He looked up at me. “Losing myself.”

“Can’t you do it inside where it’s warmer?”

“It’s not the same.”

“You’re drunk, Neho.”

“You want me to leave?”

“I want you to come inside.”

“You’re too good for me, Martín. I should have never...”

I managed to get him up, bring him inside and laid him on the couch. I touched his face, it was cold as ice. I reached for his hands and they were just as cold. I started rubbing them to try to warm him. He was mumbling incoherently.

I grabbed a blanket off my bed and wrapped him in it. I put my arms around him. When he began falling asleep, I got him up and inched him

into the bedroom. After getting his clothes off, I got him into bed. His body was still cold, but the blankets would warm him soon enough. He closed his eyes and went to sleep. I left him and went to the balcony to get the half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels. I sat in the living room with only the light from the half-moon reflecting inside. Neho's story wouldn't stop churning in my mind. I lit a cigarette, took a swig of whiskey and contemplated my next move. A thought of home in Santa Fe came to mind.

While I loved my parents, I loathed Dad's drinking habits. Growing up, alcohol was the mainstay of any social gatherings we attended. Our holidays always included my parents' friends from The Lodge and ample booze to put most of the men under the table. Early on, I swore that booze would never dominate my social life. But here I was, swigging whiskey from the bottle and starting a relationship with someone who seemingly self-medicated with it. I knew I was going to have to get control of my life before it got out of hand. How to do that was the question. I had no answer at that moment. I took another swig, then another until I finally passed out on the chair.

Greg may or may not have seen me when he came in early that morning, because he didn't disturb me. When the rays of the sun hit my eyes, I woke up and stumbled to the bedroom where Neho was still sleeping. I slipped into bed with him. His body was warm. My head was throbbing and my stomach queasy, just like the day before. As I was cursing myself for my foolishness, I felt Neho's warm breath on my neck and his arm lock tightly around my chest. His head rose up and he nibbled on my ear. When I managed to turn on my back, he licked his way across my cheek to my lips and kissed me.

"I love you," he whispered.

I opened my eyes to his handsome face staring down at me. His breath was raw, and I imagined mine was, as well. "What happened last night?" I asked him.

"What do you mean?" he asked as he flopped down on his back.

"Outside in the cold with a bottle of booze."

"Do you want me out of here?"

"What I want is to know I'm not going to find you frozen to death on my balcony with an empty bottle of booze at your side."

"You don't understand."

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“What is it that I don’t understand?”

He started to get up from the bed but I reached for his arm. “Neho, I want to understand, but you’ve got to help me do that. I’m processing what you’ve told me, but it’s going to take time.”

He broke my grip and gave me a cold stare. “That sounds like a nice way of telling me we need to break up.”

My voice grew louder. “Don’t put words in my mouth. That’s not what I’m saying—”

“If this is too much for you to handle, Martín, I understand. I’ve been struggling with it for two years, and I still don’t know what to do.” His voice was loud. If Greg’s door was open, he would have overheard our argument.

I tried to lower my own and calm our quarrel. “I can handle it, Neho, but what I can’t handle is for you to kill yourself.”

“Why? What would be the big deal?” His eyes were darting about; he couldn’t keep them on me. He started rubbing his hand along his arm.

“You’d cut short what could have been.”

That seemed to quiet him. He was biting his lip as he looked out the window. He let that register for a few quiet moments before getting out of bed. “I need to shower. Can I borrow a towel?” His tone was more polite, as if taking in what I said. Or maybe he was dealing with a hangover headache.

“Yeah. I’ll take it in there in a minute.” I sat in bed, replaying in my head the argument we had just had. Did I say the wrong things? I knew he needed help. More than anything, I knew he was afraid and needed my support. What could I do now to let him know I was there for him? As soon as I heard him in the shower, I went into the bathroom with his towel and laid it across the toilet seat. I took my shorts off, pulled the shower curtain open and got in. He faced me and we kissed. Regardless of what might happen in the future, I decided at that moment that I would be there for him. It was the right thing to do. More than that, when I was with him, my soul was filled with passion and joy, emotions I was beginning to understand.

Chapter Eleven

We stopped at Neho's house to load up my car with his books and clothes, then headed to the White Rabbit Coffee House, a small restaurant close to downtown. It was a popular eatery with college students because it had good, cheap food. During the car ride there we talked about books and music and television, anything other than the elephant in the room. But when we got to the restaurant, I opened the elephant pen. If I had any hope of helping him, I needed to know his entire story. At first he hesitated, thinking it would just cause more problems between us, but I promised him that that wouldn't happen. I had every intention of keeping my promise. He continued with his story.

"I think Lev put my bedroom in the basement so that it would be easier to come around late at night. It only happened when he was drinking. He would come into the room, lock the door, take his clothes off and get into bed with me. We didn't talk. The sex only lasted about ten minutes, then he'd get up, put his clothes back on and leave. One night when he came in my room, I challenged him. I told him I didn't want to do it anymore. He was blitzed and got furious. He pulled me by my hair and said it was my fault that it started in the first place. It was too late to stop it. He accused me of acting stupid and said that I was lucky to have him because nobody would want a faggot like me. He had this control on me and I didn't challenge it again until I met Gabriel.

"We met at an auto dealership while we waited for our cars to get fixed. He was a high school teacher who grew up in Phoenix and moved to Albuquerque to get away from his parents. He hadn't told them he was gay because they were conservative in their politics and religion.

“Gabriel was fun and we became good friends. After about two months, we had sex for the first time. We continued having sex every time I went over. He made me crazy, I couldn’t get enough of him. Then we fell in love. A few months later, he suggested moving in together, which meant that he’d move out of his small one-bedroom and we’d find a two-bedroom. I agreed.” Neho took a sip of his water.

“Why couldn’t you just move into his one-bedroom?” I asked.

“He wouldn’t be able to explain it to his parents if they came for a visit.”

Our food had arrived and I began eating. Neho held a fork in one hand and continually kept flexing his fingers on the other. His eyes kept shifting from the food on his plate to me.

“I was desperate to get out of Lev’s house and this was my way of doing it. Gabriel called me at home one night and told me about a two bedroom apartment we should check out. He gave me the address and asked me to meet him there at three-thirty the following afternoon.” Neho dropped his fork and arched his neck upward. His breathing was deep. It was obvious he was trying to contain his emotions.

I stopped eating and clenched my hands. I wanted to reach out to him, but that wouldn’t go well in a public restaurant at that time. “It’s alright,” I told him. We were sitting in a booth across from each other and I managed tap his shoe with mine as a gesture of support.

He recovered and continued. “I got there early. I sat in my car for more than an hour, but he never showed. I called his apartment but got no answer. My calls continued all evening and into the night, but he never picked up.

“After school the following afternoon, I drove to his apartment, but he wasn’t there. I waited to see if he would show, but he didn’t. The apartment manager told me Gabriel had been shot and killed during a robbery at a convenience store the previous night.”

I gasped. My fork cluttered against my plate. “That’s... I’m so sorry.”

Neho swallowed. “I had heard about a murder on the newscast that morning but it never occurred to me that Gabriel was the victim. I went back to speak with the manager the following day and asked for his parent’s phone number. She wouldn’t give it to me, but she agreed to relay a message that I wanted to speak to them. I never got that call.”

Neho shrugged. “After that day, I got so depressed that I stopped going to class. To fall in love, then Gabriel’s murdered and I don’t get the chance to say goodbye, that was bad enough. But when I thought about having to continue living at home, it was all too much for me. I decided to drop out of college. By some universal blessing, I met Ashlyn, who probably saved my life.

I interrupted him. “Neho, you haven’t touched your food. You need to eat something.” He picked up his fork again and began eating. After a few bites, he continued.

“The day I showed up at the administration office, Ashlyn was at the front counter. She was a psych major doing some work-study to earn money. I told her I wanted to drop out, and she asked why. I started to shake and knew I was going to lose it. Ashlyn immediately told someone she was going on break, and walked me out of the building to a café. She got us coffee and said, ‘What’s going on, Neil?’

“No one had called me by my real name for a long time. Something clicked inside me that we were strangers to one another, and it wouldn’t matter what I told her because we had no connections. Then I felt like a dam had broken inside me and I started crying. Customers around us took notice and I felt embarrassed. ‘Don’t worry about them,’ she said. Fortunately our table was far enough away that nobody could overhear our conversation. She gave me a tissue and when I got control, I told her about being gay and losing Gabriel. I told her that I never got to say good-bye to him. I told her how much I missed him. I told her about our plans to move in together and how much I wanted to leave home. When I was done, she reached for my hand and cupped it. Everything I was experiencing was perfectly normal, she said. I was going through grief. It was going to take time to get past losing Gabriel, but eventually I would get better. We stayed talking for a long time and in the end she convinced me not to drop out. She took my phone number before we left the café and called that evening to check up on me. After that, we became good friends.”

“It’s good that you had somebody to talk to,” I said. “Particularly someone who understood what you were going through.”

He nodded but didn’t say anything else. I stood up and went to the bathroom. When I got back, Neho had almost finished his plate. “Let’s get out of here,” he said. We paid the check and left.

On the way back home we remained quiet. But as my mind reflected on all he had told me, I was still curious about his relationship to Lev after Gabriel's passing, so I asked him.

"Lev apparently noticed that my life was changing. He stopped coming into my room at night. We still had our tennis matches, but never had much to say to one another. He continued to pay my tuition and give me money for books and a weekly allowance, but I knew it was coming out of my annuity. When I'd ask about it, he never gave me a straight answer. I asked Mom a few times to find out how my annuity was doing, and she promised she would, but when I reminded her, she said that as long as the tuition was being paid and I was getting money every week, I shouldn't worry about it. Then I met you."

My thoughts instantly reflected on grandpa's advice about always being aware of events that come into your life and what they teach you on your journey. By far, meeting Neho was one of the most challenging experiences I had ever encountered.

He continued with his story. "Just as I was leaving home to meet you at Maxwell's that first time, Zaria told me her dad kept all of the financial files in his briefcase. She'd overheard my conversation with Mom about my annuity statement and thought I'd want to know. Remember how I took off so quickly that night?"

I laughed. "How could I forget?"

Neho gave me an anxious stare. "Well, it was because Lev and Mom had gone out to a retirement party that evening. I wanted to go through his briefcase before they got back. But they were already home when I got there. A few days later, when they went out one evening, I went through Lev's briefcase and found the file that had my statements. I was relieved to see that there was still plenty of money in my account. I put everything back and went to bed.

"Sometime after midnight, Lev came into my bedroom. He turned on the light, came up to my bed and punched me in the face. 'Next time you go through my briefcase will be the last time,' he said, then he left. After that, I decided never to have sex with him again. Then Thanksgiving happened and I ended up squatting at your apartment."

Chapter Twelve

I hear a mourning dove cooing loudly and look over to see it perched on the Lilac Vitex tree. It draws me back to the present moment with Em.

She's sitting across from me, engrossed in my story. "That was a horrible time for victims of sexual abuse," Em says. "The laws on male rape were archaic, reporting of that type of sexual abuse was rare and investigations were perfunctory. I can only imagine what Neho must have been going through."

"You're right about that. Back then, everyone thought that men couldn't be raped. Rape survivors tended to deny that it happened because they were afraid of the stigma that was attached to it. They thought that they would be branded as weak or vulnerable, or that their sexual identity would be questioned, not unlike today."

"From what you've told me, it sounds like Neho tried to rationalize Lev's assaults."

"In all the time we were together, I got to know Neho better than anyone. At first, Neho couldn't articulate to me his reasoning for allowing the rapes to happen. It wasn't until years later that I pieced it together."

Em's nose wrinkles as she tilts her head. "I don't understand."

I reach for her empty plate and place it and our silverware on top of mine as I grasp for the right words to explain. "What you referred to as Neho rationalizing those times he was being assaulted is actually something much more conflicting. It was an abnormal thought process. You see, when he was being raped by Lev, Neho started believing that it was just casual sex. He thought that if Lev wasn't getting it from Maddie, then he had to find a substitute, and rather than being unfaithful,

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he used Neho for sex. Neho never believed Lev was gay. He didn't show any stereotypical signs. Lev was tall, buff, manly and aggressive. He was an authority figure both at home and at work. He was a prominent attorney that people looked up to. He made lots of money, was married to an attractive woman and no one dared question his reputation. So the rapes confused Neho. The fact that Neho would ejaculate sometimes when Lev was raping him led him to believe that he was complicit in what was happening, so he was loath to blame Lev. He thought of it as a rite of passage to manhood. In fact, he regarded it as normal."

"That's not my idea of normal," Em says as her eyebrows furrow.

"Neho had a straight college friend and they went out drinking occasionally. One night, he broached the subject of incest and his friend's reaction was total revulsion. While he never told his friend about Lev or about being raped, his friend's response was so strong that Neho began questioning what Lev was doing to him. Shortly after that was the first time he demanded that Lev stop."

"How can *that* be? Neho must have had a clue that what Lev was doing to him was wrong."

I take a slow sip of wine and hold on to my glass after laying it on the table. "At the time there were no books, no information, no rape crises lines, no one he could trust and no sources to find answers to his questions. He had to figure it out all by himself. Then he met Gabriel and experienced new emotions; feelings like happiness, affection, enjoyment and love. That finally convinced him that what Lev was doing to him was not right."

Em pours herself the last bit of wine. "I'm more curious than ever to find out how this resolves."

Neho stayed at my apartment for three weeks and every night he would phone his mom. She couldn't understand why he wasn't home. She pleaded to see him and he promised it would happen soon. Zaria continued to press him to come home as well, but he refused. All of that changed one day at school.

We were walking out of the philosophy class on Tuesday and just as we passed the double doors, we found Lev waiting outside. He was

wearing a dark suit and tie, and had on a brown overcoat. He was taller than Neho, and burly with hard facial features. Surrounded by students in flared jeans, Levi jackets, and canvas shoes, Lev looked out of place. As soon as Neho saw him, he froze.

Lev approached us. "Neho, we need to talk."

With his head held high and a clenched jaw, Neho responded, "We don't have anything to talk about." He sounded confident, like he was in control.

"Walk with me." Lev wasn't asking. He was demanding.

After learning about the hold Lev had on Neho, I was hoping he'd stand firm but I suspected he might cave. I spoke up. "Neho, stay here."

Lev's eyes narrowed as he glanced at me. "You need to stay out of this. It's none of your business." His voice was biting.

"Maybe I'm making it my business."

Lev looked at Neho. "Is this your boyfriend?"

"What if he is?"

Lev sneered. "Let's go."

"I told you, we don't have anything to talk about."

"If you care about your annuity, then believe me when I say we need to talk."

"Why now? What about all those times I asked you and you ignored me? What makes this any different?"

"You keep asking questions about it," said Lev. "Here's your chance to find out."

I could see Neho's resistance fading. "Don't go, Neho."

"I've got to."

"Then let me go with you?"

"Stay out of this!" Lev yelled out. His voice attracted curious glances from other students.

Neho glanced at me. I could sense fear in his bearing. "I'll see you after class, Martín."

"Please, let me go with you?"

He formed a slight smile. "No, I'll be okay."

"I want to make sure you're going to be okay!"

"Don't worry, I will." Then he repeated, "I'll see you after class." I don't know if he was trying to convince me or himself that all would go well.

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As the two walked away, a chill came down my spine. Was I witnessing something I would regret not acting more forcefully upon?

Between classes I couldn't find Neho anywhere. After my last class, I waited at the student union building to see if he would show. He didn't. I raced back to the apartment.

Greg was sitting at the dining room table with his accounting book open. "Your boyfriend left," he said as he looked up at me.

"Left where?"

"Home."

My legs grew weak and my stomach dropped. "When did he leave?"

"About an hour ago. He came in, packed up his stuff, left the key on the table and left."

"Did he say anything?"

"Yeah. 'Thanks for everything. See you on campus.'"

"That's all he said?"

"Yep."

I became numb. I went into my bedroom just to confirm what Greg had said was true. Everything Neho had brought was gone. I decided to phone him. Neho answered, told me he couldn't talk but he would tell me everything when we would meet up. I asked him when that would be and he promised it would be soon. In the meantime I shouldn't call there again.

I was totally confused by our conversation. I was relieved he was alright, but his voice sounded so distant and cold. There were no tender or caring words like we commonly exchanged. Perhaps his mom or Lev were close by, listening to his side of the conversation? It left me with an empty feeling, as if I were speaking with a stranger. I went into the living room and sat on the couch.

"Did you guys break up?" Greg asked.

"I don't know. Lev showed up at school today. He and Neho went off to talk. I didn't see Neho the rest of the day. When I called him a few minutes ago to find out what's going on, he couldn't talk. That's all I know."

"You two seemed like you were pretty tight."

"We were, or I think we were."

Greg went back to studying his accounting book until I interrupted him.

“I need to apologize.”

Greg looked over at me. “Apologize for what?”

“That I never told you I was gay.”

He got an odd expression on his face. “Can I ask you something?”

“Go for it.”

“I’m not gay, but we’ve been roomies going on two years—”

“You want to know why I didn’t tell you?”

“No. I was just curious why you never hit on me?”

I burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny? I’m serious.”

“Greg, I’ve never hit on you because you’re not gay.”

“How did you know that?”

“Queerdar!”

“Fuck you! You wanna do a joint before work?”

I didn’t hear from Neho that day or the next. He didn’t show up at school, either. I couldn’t wait any longer and called him before leaving for work on Friday. Fortunately, Zaria answered and put him on the line. “Neho, what’s going on?” I asked.

“I can’t talk now, Martín.” He spoke just above a whisper.

“Well, when can you talk? I need to know—”

“Meet me outside of Maxwell’s tonight after you get off work.” He hung up the phone.

I went to work that evening, but my mind was elsewhere. I knew the service I was giving my customers was poor and sloppy, but I couldn’t focus.

Sal approached me in the kitchen. “Are you sick, Marty?”

“No.”

“Then why you acting like you’re sick?”

“What are you talking about?” I knew exactly what he meant.

“Your service has been for shit tonight. You need to step it up, my friend.”

“I’m on it.”

He gave me a long stare as if he was reading my mind, and then returned to his work.

I arrived at Maxwell’s sometime after ten. As soon as I got out of my car, Neho drove up. He didn’t bother to park, but merely rolled down the window. I could barely make out his face which was shadowed by

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the pole lighting in the lot. He kept staring forward. I instantly got the feeling that whatever was going to happen would not be good.

“Are you okay? What’s going on?” I asked.

“We need to break it off.”

I recoiled. “What? Why?”

He cleared his throat. “It’s better this way.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I just don’t think it’s a good idea—”

“Would you at least *look* at me when you’re talking?” Anger was building in my chest. My voice was loud.

His eyes quickly shifted to me. “I know you’re upset, but I have to do this. I need to go,” he said.

“So this is it?” I yelled out.

“I’m sorry, Martín.” He started to drive off. I banged my hand on the roof of his car. He stopped.

Tears rolled down my face. “You can’t just do this to me. I’ve been there for you when you needed me. To walk away now without any explanation—”

“I never asked you to do anything for me. You did it because you wanted to.” Neho looked down at his lap, then back up to me. “I’m sorry but I can’t anymore.” He was also crying and his voice was cracking.

“What happened between you and Lev? Don’t you think I deserve to know why you’re doing this?”

He composed himself and glared at me. “There’s nothing more to say. It’s my decision.” He drove off.

I stumbled through the parking lot, trembling and replaying our conversation in my mind. A couple leaving the bar stopped when they saw me. “Are you alright?” one of them asked. I couldn’t form an answer. I made it to my car and drove off.

I hardly slept that night. What could have happened to make Neho break up with me? He’d been so distant and at the end, his voice so cold and unfeeling. Why would he do that after sharing so much about his life? I began wondering how much he told me was actually true.

The following morning, I was tired and irritable. I took a shower, got dressed and went down to my car with the intention of driving to Santa Fe to visit my parents. But after getting on the freeway, I detoured and drove the opposite direction back into the city. I decided to seek out

someone who had been in my shoes, and to whom I could talk openly about what had happened. In less than ten minutes, I was in the parking lot of the museum of archeology and science. I went into the lobby and asked for Eli. A docent picked up the phone and called him. I wondered if he would even remember me.

A few seconds later, Eli was walking toward me. He had a thin grin on his face. "Marty," he said as he extended his hand.

"You do remember me?"

He leaned into me. "How could I forget that handsome face? Where's your boyfriend?"

"Aah, I'm not sure." My tone expressed my exhaustion.

"Oh, oh. Do I sense trouble in Oz?"

"Don't put money on the wizard. He's a fake."

Eli pursed his lips. "So sorry."

"Me too."

"Let me show you around this wonderful place," he said.

"I'd like that."

He took me into a room and talked about the artifacts that were on loan from Athens. The large glass enclosures contained a display of weapons and sheaths, as well as gold jewelry from the ancient Greek era. A little

beyond that were large pots with art depicting soldiers marching into battle. Eli's explanations were articulate, but didn't resonate mindfully

for someone so sleep-deprived and heartbroken. He took a minute to catch his breath and that's when I changed the subject. "Is it common in gay relationships to break it off without any explanation?" I asked him.

He gave me a caring look. "I think we should go to the coffee shop, sit down and talk."

We made our way through the maze of rooms and toward the exit where the souvenir and coffee shop were located. He greeted the slender young guy behind the coffee counter and asked me to find a seat while he got us coffee. There was only one other couple in the café and I chose a table away from them. A few minutes later, Eli appeared with two cups and laid one in front of me. "I forgot to ask if you take cream or sugar."

"Black is fine."

"Did you break up with him or he with you?" Eli asked as he sat down.

"He with me, but the way it happened was a shock. Everything was

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going great between us, then he disappeared for a few days, and when we finally caught up in a parking lot, he rolled down his window. ‘We need to break it off but don’t ask me why.’ He couldn’t drive away fast enough.”

“Marty, you’ve got to learn that gay men are like jellybeans. When you open a box, you might eat the licorice, but after two or three of them, you get bored and go on to the brown or yellow or red, or some other flavor. Gay men get bored easily, and they like variety. That pesky four-letter word sometimes makes its way into the mix, but always fizzles out. A gay long-term relationship is an oxymoron.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I’m telling you from experience. History has taught me there are three guiding principles of the gay male species?”

“What’s that?”

“Party hardy, fuck a lot and die with a pretty face.”

“Who came up with that?”

He grinned. “Our gay forefathers.”

We finished our coffee and as I left the museum, I could only think that this was not the way it’s supposed to be. As I searched for meaning from what I had experienced with Neho’s behavior and what I was being told by Eli, it made no sense. I continued to feel strongly that a long-term gay relationship for me was possible. Maybe the future would give me some guidance. My only hope now was to trust my instincts to lead me on the right path.

Chapter Thirteen

Neho dropped out of the philosophy class we shared. On rare occasions, I would catch a glimpse of him walking the campus to class, but I always tried to be circumspect and avoid running into him. It was bad enough that I still harbored deep feelings for him, but to have an encounter would be too painful.

I tried focusing on schoolwork and studying hard for final exams before Christmas break. When Greg noticed me moping around, he'd suggest going out for food or a beer, and sometimes both. It helped but not much.

One week before Christmas, Bernie called me to ask for a ride to work the next day because her car was in the shop. That night, Greg and I had gotten stoned after work and I got to bed late. I set the alarm to get up early.

My mind was still numb when I awoke in the morning and headed out. I got Bernie to work on time, then started back to the apartment only to get into a car accident. Fortunately, no one was injured, but my car was not drivable. The police cited me and my car was towed. When I told Bernie what had happened, she spoke to Adrian and he agreed to lend me his motorcycle until my car got fixed. I hadn't ridden one since high school, but accepted the offer. I hated not having a car, but riding a motorcycle gave me a sense of freedom that boosted my mood and kept reminding me that I would recover from the breakup.

Early the following week, I was in my macro-economics class when I got a note that I had a meeting at the Center for Religion and Contemplation. The only person who had ever taken me there was

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Neho, so I suspected the meeting was with him. The handwriting was not Neho's, though.

I went to the administration office and spoke to the female student sitting behind the desk. "I just got this note in my class. Can you tell me who wrote it?"

She got up from her desk and examined the note. "It looks like Ashlyn's handwriting, but I can't be sure. Is there a problem?"

"Yeah, there is. Is she here?"

"I'm sorry, she won't be back in until tomorrow morning. You can see her then."

I returned to my parked motorcycle with every intention of driving home. My emotions were high and my mind, muddled. Just before putting on my helmet, I had second thoughts. Were Eli's loathsome assessments of gay relationships true? Maybe this was an opportunity to confront Neho and find out. I checked my watch. It was one-fifteen. I secured the helmet back on the bike, picked up my books and headed for the building. By the time I got there, it was one-thirty. I suspected Neho was gone and my aim, futile. I went into the building and, like the last time, it was empty. Instead of going into the Vestry office, I proceeded straight ahead and opened the door into the sanctuary. Neho's shoulder-length dark hair was the first thing that caught my eye. He was sitting in the second pew and formed a slight grin when he saw me.

"You praying?" I asked as I moved toward him.

"I don't know how to do that."

"Fold your hands and talk to God."

"I don't believe in God," he replied.

"What's this about, Neho?"

He scooted over and his eyes invited me to sit next to him. "I was hoping we could talk."

"I don't know what there is to talk about. I don't know if I can even believe you anymore."

His eyes bulged. "Martín, I have never lied to you. That's the god's honest truth."

"I thought you didn't believe in God."

"It's a little g."

I snickered, scooted into the pew and sat down. My anger seemed to give way to curiosity. What was it he wanted to say?

“I’m glad you weren’t hurt in the car accident.”

“You heard about that?”

“Zaria told me.”

I remained silent.

“I’ve missed you so much, Martín. I was afraid you wouldn’t come.”

“I’m here. But I still don’t know what this is about.”

“It’s about a choice I’ve made.” He sighed deeply and rubbed his arm as he told me the whole story. “When we left you that day at school, Lev starting ranting about Mexicans, and you. When I threatened to walk away if he didn’t stop, he changed the subject to my coming home. He said my mom needed me and promised we could start a new page in our relationship.”

“What about the night before Thanksgiving?” I asked.

Neho shrugged. “He said he wasn’t aware of anything unusual happening that night.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“Yeah. It’s why I told him no way, I’m not coming home. But he told me he could improve my investments, make sure my annuity stayed healthy. Plus he’d increase my allowance and share the quarterly statements.”

That sounded too generous for someone like Lev. “What’s the catch?” I said it partly as a joke but Neho didn’t smile.

“You. I had to keep away from you. I also have to remain his partner at the tennis club, but we’d just play tennis. Nothing else. He was much more insistent that I couldn’t have anything to do with you. If I did, he’d take all the money from the annuity and I’d be left with nothing.”

Neho’s eyes flitted back and forth. “I’m so ashamed about what I did to you, Martín. Last night I decided that I want you more than anything. Lev can do whatever he wants to do, but he can’t stop me from... I can’t stop thinking about you.” His face looked so earnest. “If you’ll give me another chance, I promise nothing like this will ever happen again.”

“So, were you lying when you said you couldn’t do this anymore?”

Neho fidgeted. “I’ve never stopped loving you, Martín. That’s not a lie.”

I weighed the deep hurt I’d experienced when losing Neho against what he was asking. Was I willing to risk it again? Everything Neho had told me explained his actions. I had no reason to doubt his account

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or his intentions. I felt tremendous compassion for Neho while at the same time wondering if I could believe it wouldn't happen again. I thought about all the good times we shared and how happy he made me. I decided to trust my instincts and go for it. I gave him a soft gaze that expressed my understanding and inched closer until our lips met. I could feel his tears on my face.

In my Catholic upbringing, gay kissing in front of Jesus on the cross was sacrilegious. But even if a lightning bolt was to suddenly come down and strike us, I couldn't imagine a more blissful death.

Chapter Fourteen

Neho and I started spending all of our free time together. On Christmas Eve, he left my apartment early to be with his family. Both Greg and I were scheduled to work that evening as Sal anticipated it was going to be busy.

“So you and Neho made up?” Greg asked as he drove us to work.

I grinned from ear to ear. “Yeah.”

“Is he going to move in again?”

“Nah, he’s staying put for now.”

“Has he told his mom yet?”

“You mean about being gay?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t think so.”

“I bet it wipes the smile off her face.”

I chuckled. “Or not.”

On Christmas day, Neho came by the apartment in the late morning. Our plan was to drive to Santa Fe and celebrate the occasion with my family. As soon as he came inside, he handed me a present. “Merry Christmas.”

I kissed him and walked him over to our small tree. “Here’s yours.” I handed him a nicely wrapped package.

He put it up to his ear and shook it. “What is it?”

“Open it and find out.”

Neho carefully unwrapped it and opened the box to find a pair of Foster Grant aviator glasses. He tried them on and beamed. “How did you know?”

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“I thought you’d need them when you become a drifter.”

We laughed.

I opened Neho’s present. It was a fancy cigarette lighter with the inscription, “To Martin with love”. I hugged and kissed him.

Greg walked out of his room to see us. “That’s weird,” he said.

My eyebrows pressed together. “What’s weird?”

“Two dudes kissing.”

“Wait till you see two dudes screwing.”

“Not happening!” He rolled his eyes and went into the kitchen.

We left the apartment and got into Neho’s car for the trip to Santa Fe. Since we’d gotten back together, I was content. Whenever I saw him smile, my heart fluttered. His laugh made me laugh. The cologne he used, a woody aromatic scent, thrilled me to my core. On occasion when he was driving, he’d reach with his free hand and wrap his small finger around mine or lay his hand on my leg. When we were out in public, he would purposely brush his hand against mine. Through all these feelings and endearments, I was experiencing the essence of love and its marrow that consumed me. But my mind would occasionally revert to Eli’s cynicism of gay relationships, and make me wonder if all this bliss could continue.

We arrived at my parents’ house just after noon. There were cars parked in the driveway and along the street in front of their house. “You have a big family,” Neho said.

“Yeah, but don’t worry, they’re all pretty tame except Grandma Diaz. You need to watch out for her. She’s grumpy.”

“She can’t be anything like my step-grandfather. I told you what a scumbag he is.”

We gathered the Christmas gifts I’d bought for the family and made our way to the front door. As soon as we opened it, we were crushed by the loud voices of my relatives talking and laughing. Bernie was the first to see us and came to hug me as soon as I dropped the gifts under the tree. I introduced her to Neho. Dad was next and Mom was a few relatives behind. Everybody was in a festive mood. Dad invited us to the kitchen where we were squeezed by all the women who were cooking. Tía Sarita, who wasn’t really my aunt but a good family friend, was the only one missing, but she had made other plans. The aroma was homey and delicious. There was a large vat of posole with menudo

cooking on the stove, a pot of red chile, another with pinto beans. The enchiladas were in the oven, and fresh tortillas on the griddle. There were other covered dishes that I couldn't make out. Dad managed to get to the refrigerator and grab some beers to hand us. Neho was enjoying all the commotion. We made our way back into the living room where I introduced him to Grandma Diaz.

"Who is he?" she asked.

"This is Neho, Grandma. He's my friend."

She extended her hand as she gave him a cutting stare through her bifocals. "You look like that doctor on General Hospital."

Neho blushed. "I'm a student. I go to the same university as Martín."

Her voice turned sugary. "I bet you have a lot of girlfriends?"

He laughed. I decided to rescue him from the conversation and introduce him to Adrian.

"This is Bernie's fiancé. He's lending me his motorcycle while my car's getting fixed."

They shook hands and then Adrian faced me. "I'm going to need it next weekend, Marty. I'm going biking with some friends."

"No problem. I'll get it back to you."

Somebody got up from their chair by Dad and I offered the seat to Neho. I thought he would be comfortable sitting among my uncles who were talking sports. I suspected he could make out their Spanish-English lingo. I went down the hallway to the bathroom and just as I was about to go in, Bernie came up to me.

"Is he your boyfriend?"

I smiled.

"I'll trade you for Adrian?"

"No."

"Why are all the cute ones gay?" she asked.

"It's because Eve tempted Adam with an apple. Gay guys know better."

"Where did you hear that?"

"Gay religious studies 101."

"There's no such class!"

"There should be!"

She changed the subject. "When do you go to court for your citation?"

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“In three weeks.”

“You need a lawyer?”

“I can’t afford one.”

“I met an attorney at my roommate’s birthday party. Her name’s Tsosie Garcia and she just graduated from law school and opened her practice last year. She’s nice.”

“Give me her number and I might call her.”

She put her hand up to my hair and messed it. “Get a haircut, *hermanito*. You’ll need to impress the judge.”

Both of us were enjoying spending time with my family and Neho couldn’t get enough of the food. By late afternoon we decided it was time to leave. Grandma Diaz hugged me while squeezing a ten-dollar bill into my hand. As long as I can remember, she routinely did that, and I always thanked her for it. She joked with Neho that she would see him again on her soap opera and he leaned down and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Mom packed up a care package along with some Christmas gifts for me to take home and Dad wished us a safe trip. Once we were on the road, Neho said, “Your grandma’s anything but grumpy.”

I smirked. “You caught her on a good day. I think she crushed on you.”

He chuckled. “She’s sweet.”

“Can you give me a ride back from Santa Fe next week? I need to return Adrian’s motorcycle.”

“Sure. But is your car going to be fixed by then?”

“They promised it would be.”

The radio was playing soft music. I relaxed and let my eyes close. I’d started to nod off when Neho spoke. “Are you sure Adrian’s straight?”

My eyes sprung open. “What?”

“I asked if you’re sure Adrian’s straight.”

I was stumped by the question and adjusted myself in the seat. “I hope he is. He’s marrying my sister. Why?”

“Oh, it’s probably nothing. Just some mixed messages.”

“What kind of mixed messages?”

“It’s not a big deal. Let’s drop it.”

“Nuh uh, you don’t get off that easy. You got my attention. What happened?”

“We did a couple of shots together and he kept giving me these

weird looks. When I went to the bathroom, he followed me. I told him I'd just be a minute and closed the door. That's it."

"Anything happen when you came out?"

"He was gone. Last time I saw him he was in the backyard drinking beer with one of your cousins."

Neho was right. It was odd, but probably nothing. I'd see if I could pick up any unusual vibes when I returned his bike.

Chapter Fifteen

Neho spent Christmas night with me. That was the first time we had slept together since the breakup.

One week later, on New Year's Eve, we went to Maxwell's to celebrate. The place was packed and the energy, intense.

Among the throng of partiers, I recognized some faces I never thought to see in this gay bar. There were a few of my high school classmates who were just as surprised to see me. I caught up with an old camping pal I grew up with whose parents also belonged to The Lodge. I spotted Mr. Phillips, my economics professor, who gave me a nod and a smile. Eli came to talk to us and whispered that he was glad Neho and I were back together. We exchanged phone numbers and promised to visit in the coming year. In my mind, that was unlikely to happen. But the one person that left me open-mouthed was Sal. Both he and another guy, who I presumed was his boyfriend, had just arrived wearing identical tuxedos with black and white silk scarves. They were quickly greeted by friends as if they were celebrities. It wasn't until close to the midnight hour that Sal happened to glance in my direction. He did a double take, said something to his boyfriend, and came over to where Neho and I stood holding one another. He had a smile on his face. "Happy New Year's, Marty."

"Same to you, Sal," I replied.

He glanced at Neho. "You going to introduce me to your boyfriend?"

"Sal, this is Neho. Neho, Sal." They shook hands.

"We're having friends to the house tomorrow for food and drinks. You two should come."

Neho gave me a slight nod and I said, "Sure."

"Good. I'll get you the address." Sal raised his drink and we all toasted. "*Buon anno.*" He glanced back and forth between Neho and me. "You two make a good couple."

"Thanks," I said.

"We'll talk later, Marty." Sal went back to his group. Before the night ended, Sal came over to where we were standing and introduced us to Carlos. He gave us a card with their address. "Be safe, guys. See you tomorrow."

The following day, we drove to Comillas, a small farming and ranching village and a suburb of Albuquerque. The sky was clear but the day, cold. Sal's directions led us on an unpaved road to a small cluster of houses. His house was easy to find as a number of cars were parked in the narrow driveway and on the road, which bordered an irrigation channel. There was an adobe wall surrounding the front of the property. The entrance was arched with quaint double gates painted in a turquoise shade. The brick walkway, done in a herringbone pattern that was age-worn, led to the old distressed wooden front door. Carlos answered our knock. He was dressed in a cashmere sweater and flared trousers, and graciously invited us inside. Carlos led us through the elegant foyer to a large gathering room where guests were drinking and socializing. As soon as Sal saw us, he came over.

"I'm glad you two made it," he said as he gave each of us a quick hug.

Neho's eyes were darting between Sal and the ornate furnishings in the room. "You have a beautiful house."

"Thank you. Carlos's family grew up here. We bought it when they passed away a few years ago."

"Thanks for inviting us, Sal," I said.

"How about mimosas? Or we also have coffee—"

I interrupted. "A mimosa sounds fine."

"Me, too," said Neho.

Sal glanced at a young man who was holding a tray and offering hors d'oeuvres to the guests. "Tommie, can you bring some Mimosas for Marty and Neho?"

Tommie raised his hand in acknowledgment and quickly retreated to another room.

“Let me introduce you around,” Sal said.

The breadth of Sal and Carlos’s social circle was truly amazing. Troy and Evan, a flashy, charismatic couple, owned a gallery in Old Town, while Marcos, a fortyish geriatrician and his partner, Florin, a handsome East European interior designer, lived in Santa Fe. Seth was a funny, quick-witted tease who operated several hair salons in the city. But what floored us was when Sal introduced us to Peter Morris, a popular local television weatherman, and his boyfriend, Mateo. Peter was shorter and more striking than he appeared on TV. We sat and talked with them. They were both warm and friendly, and took a liking to us. They took our phone number and promised to have us to their home sometime. Even though Neho and I appeared to be the youngest couple at the brunch, everyone treated us cordially.

Shortly after the noon hour, Carlos announced that the food was ready and led everyone into the kitchen where a buffet style counter had been set up. There were large platters of scrambled eggs, sausage, bacon, roasted potatoes, red and green chile, French toast and an assortment of breads and rolls. I had never experienced such an elegant social gathering of gay men. I was thrilled to be among them. It was clear to me that Neho was also enjoying the gathering, too, because he was easily mingling and chatting with the guests. When most everyone had filled their plate and drifted back to the great room, Sal remained to refill an ice bucket. With my plate in hand, I edged over to him. “You know, you’ve really blown me away, Sal.”

“What do you mean?”

“To find out my boss is gay and get invited to his amazing house for a brunch with lots of interesting guests!”

He formed a thin smile. “I had suspicions about you, Marty, especially when you wouldn’t tell anybody who you were dating.”

“How long have you and Carlos been together?” I asked.

“Going on sixteen years.”

“No way. How have you guys managed that?”

He gave me a serious eye. “Are you just making conversation, or do you really want to know?”

“Sal, I’ve been with Neho about three months and we almost broke up once. I’d kill to know what it takes to stay together.”

“So, you’ll kill me if I tell you?”

“Nah, I take that back. I’d hate to get a new boss.”

“Put your plate here—” he gestured to a small counter “—and follow me.”

Sal took me down a small hallway that led into their bedroom. It was a large room and had a queen bed with tall dark wood bedposts and an intricately carved headboard. There were two stuffed chairs and a chest of drawers. Facing the foot of the bed was an enormous dresser. Just above that was a framed art piece. He pointed to it. “That’s the secret.”

The painting depicted two beautifully sculpted male nudes lying on a bed. One of the nudes had his hand covering his mouth and was whispering into the ear of the other.

“I don’t understand,” I said.

“What do you think he’s saying to the other?”

“I haven’t a clue.”

“Let me tell you something about my past.” Sal took on a serious look, but his voice remained friendly. “I was born in Bloomfield, a neighborhood not too far from Pittsburgh. Most everybody who lives there is Italian. My family is second generation Italian from the Abruzzo region in Italy. Some Italian men have mistresses and some of the wives learn to accept it. My pop was one of them. When he told my mom he was going out for a while, she knew he was going to see his mistress. So, she didn’t worry. But, if Pop was to tell her he was going to the grocery store, and came back hours later empty-handed, she had something to worry about. He had lied to her. She would wonder what else he was lying to her about. That would be the cause of a lot of problems in their marriage.

“Carlos and I don’t go by most of the rules of a straight marriage. We’ve always made up our own rules as we go along. But one thing I did learn from my family is if I ever tell Carlos I’m going out for a while, he knows where I’m going. That means we’ve talked about it and we’ve come to some sort of understanding. If I ever say to him I’m going to the grocery store, I damn well better bring something back. Because if I ever come back empty-handed, that, my friend, is the beginning of the end. I’ve never given him reason to doubt me, and neither has he. Trust is everything. You understand what I’m saying?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Okay. Now let’s go eat.” Sal put his arm around my back and led

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me out of the room. “So now if you were to look at that picture again, Marty, what do you think he’s saying to the other guy?”

I thought for a second. “My turn to bottom tonight?”

Sal broke out into roaring laughter.

At the time I had no idea this was the start of an unwavering friendship with Sal, nor that it would sustain Neho and me through a brutal ordeal that would almost destroy us.

Chapter Sixteen

It was the beginning of the New Year and school had started up, once again. I was happy to have my car back. Unfortunately, Adrian was at work when I returned his bike, so we never got to meet up.

Neho and I had no classes together, so we met some days at noon in the student union cafeteria. Neho would spend an occasional weekend at the apartment, but most often he spent his nights at home. I couldn't wait for the time we spent together at my apartment. Greg was out most weekend evenings partying with Zaria, and that gave Neho and me a lot of alone time. We'd sit next to each other in the living room couch and listen to the radio. We'd talk about our past and mostly laugh at our stories about stupid things we did growing up. When Greg and Zaria got home, they'd beeline to his bedroom. That's when we knew the hour was late and head to bed. The following morning, we'd open our eyes to each other and cuddle until we managed to come around. I'd go into the kitchen, make coffee and bring back two cups. Neho took his with lots of cream and I liked mine black. We'd sit up, look out the window and plan our day as we sipped the brew. Hiking was always an option, but we also liked going to a local café by the university to play the pinball machines. On occasion, we'd go to the zoo or an art museum. That was my favorite thing, but Neho didn't particularly appreciate art. He'd go along and make jokes about the paintings.

During the week, Neho would call the apartment after I got off work and we'd talk late into the night. One evening he told me that Lev had asked if he was still seeing "the Mexican". When he admitted that he was, Lev replied to never bring that trash into his house. Neho pounded

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his fists on the concrete wall and swore to leave home after graduation and not look back.

One night, I was walking to my car after work when I spotted a shadow leaning up against it. It was Neho. Something must be wrong because he never met me at work. His breath smelled of alcohol and he was cold, so we got into my car and I started up the heater. I reminded him of his promise to ease up on the booze. He assured me that it had only been two drinks at Maxwell's before our meetup. I doubted it was only two. He was clearly distressed.

"I told my mom I was gay," said Neho. "She got upset and wants me to see a shrink."

"Wow. When did that happen?"

He told me that two nights earlier he and Maddie were alone and he raised the subject about his annuity. He criticized her for not talking with him before handing it over to Lev to manage. She apologized. He asked her to take it back, but she saw no reason to do that. His tuition and books were being paid, he was getting a sizable weekly allowance and Lev had assured her the annuity would have a hefty sum after he graduated. The fact that he didn't trust Lev wasn't good enough and she saw no reason to do as he asked. That's when he changed the subject and told her he was gay.

At first Maddie didn't understand what he was telling her. He explained his attraction to guys instead of women and she minimized it saying it was something he would grow away from. He said he had a boyfriend and assured her it wasn't a phase. He was born homosexual. She asked him not to speak about it to either Lev or Zaria, but when he said they already knew, she grew angry and stormed out of the room.

She didn't speak to him the following morning, and when she got home from work in the afternoon, he got handed a note with a warning to keep the appointment. The note had the name of a psychiatrist and the appointed date and time.

I asked if he wanted to stay in the apartment that night, but he wanted to get home and make up with his mom. That wouldn't be easy with the smell of booze on his breath, I said. His plan was to go home and get to bed. He would talk to her in the morning.

"This is pretty serious," I said. "Maybe you need to think about what you're going to say to her. You should come back to my apartment

tonight and we can talk more about it tomorrow morning.”

Neho reached for my hand and squeezed it. “I don’t know what to do. This is killing me, Martín.” He hung his head and closed his eyes. “I’m so tired of all this.”

“Get through it tonight, Neho. Tomorrow will be better.”

He looked at me. His eyes were glassy. “If it wasn’t for you, I probably wouldn’t be here.”

My heart raced. “What do you mean?”

“Never mind. I need to go home.”

“Come to my apartment, Neho,” I insisted.

He shook his head. “Thanks, but it’s better if I go home.”

“At least let me drive you. You’re in no shape to be on the road.”

He put up a small fuss, but in the end he agreed. When I got there, I parked a house away. He leaned over to kiss me then got out of the car. I waited until I saw him go inside, then drove off.

Several times in the past, Neho had alluded to the thought of suicide. Considering all that he had been through, it wasn’t totally surprising. I couldn’t let that happen and would do whatever I needed to do to make sure he’d be okay.

I met Neho at the school cafeteria the following day. Earlier that morning Zaria had driven him to get his car. He looked fine. I told him I was going to see an attorney about my citation and invited him to come along but he had a conflict and couldn’t make it.

Before going to see the attorney, I stopped to visit Tía Sarita. Since moving to Albuquerque, I regularly went by to see her and bring a few groceries from Clovinas, a Santa Fe market that was popular with locals. Tía Sarita and Tío Armando, her husband, had moved from Santa Fe to Albuquerque after he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He had been receiving treatment at the local Veteran’s Hospital until he died. At eighty-two, she lived alone. On this visit I brought her pinto beans, chicos, blue corn for atole, and ground red chile. She was always happy to see me, and we sat in her small kitchen drinking coffee, eating her apple empanadas, and catching up. She told stories about her past that amazed me. About an hour later, I kissed her good-bye and left to keep my appointment with Tsosie Garcia.

Tsosie’s office was located minutes from Tía Sarita’s home and close to Old Town. It was a single-story red brick Victorian home that

had been converted to law offices. The sign carried the names of three attorneys including hers. The receptionist was a young girl who looked to be high school age. She introduced herself as Denise and asked me to take a seat. The room was uncomfortably warm and sparsely furnished with mismatched chairs and two old oak side tables with copies of out-of-date magazines. None of what I saw impressed me. I took my jacket off and combed through the periodicals. Before I had a chance to select one, a woman dressed in a long, flowing skirt, a light blouse and a turquoise necklace came out. Her facial features, coarse straight black hair, dark eyes and high cheek bones, revealed she was Native American. She introduced herself as Tsosie Garcia, extended her hand and invited me back to her office.

Tsosie's office was what I would have expected a typical attorney's office to look like. On one wall was a built-in bookcase filled with legal volumes. She had a large maple desk crowded with files, and a credenza behind stacked with more files. But my eyes instantly centered on the wool rug in front of her desk. It was woven in a Navajo storm pattern with vibrant colors of red, gray and black. "That's a beautiful rug. Is it Navajo?"

Tsosie beamed. "Yes it is! My uncle's a weaver. He gave it to me when I graduated law school."

"My grandma had some Navajo rugs and taught me about them."

"Was your grandma a weaver?"

I chuckled. "No, she worked at a restaurant in Santa Fe, but knew some Navajo weavers."

We sat down. I told her I was a struggling student who had let his insurance lapse and had gotten cited by the cops after getting into a car accident. I took the citation out and showed it to her. She took it from me and studied it. She asked me to go over the details of the accident, which I did. She took ample notes and kept interrupting me with pointed questions, some of which I thought had no relevance, but I answered anyway. I was impressed by her thoroughness and attention to detail. When her questions finally ended, I asked how much it was going to cost to have her represent me in court. She smiled and told me it would be on a sliding scale but not to worry about it for now. She left to make a copy of my citation. When Tsosie returned, she handed the citation back and suggested that I wear a collared shirt and tie to court. I thanked her

and left. As I drove away, I thought about how judgmental I had been while sitting in their waiting area. That was so wrong. Tsosie had won my admiration.

My court date took place two weeks later. I dressed in a dark blue collared shirt and a borrowed tie, and met Tsosie at the courthouse elevator.

“It’s really crowded in there,” I said pointing to the courtroom.

“Yeah, it usually is, but most of the cases are adjudicated quickly.”

Tsosie looked at her watch. “They’re about ready to start, let’s go in and find a seat.”

We went into the room and found available seating at the far end of one of the benches. A few minutes past the hour, the judge appeared and sat on the dais. The bailiff called the court to order, and the clerk called the first case. It involved a driver with numerous prior convictions. The judge found him guilty, fined him fifty dollars and ordered that he attend driving school. The clerk continued to call case after case, with some taking more time than others. Steadily the courtroom was clearing out and I was getting tired of waiting. Finally, one hour and twenty minutes after we had gotten there, my case was called. Tsosie and I stood and marched to the podium. The clerk asked the galley if Officer Craig was present. He was the cop that had issued me the citation. There was no response.

Immediately Tsosie spoke up. “Your Honor, I request that this case be dismissed with prejudice inasmuch as Officer Craig has not made an appearance here today.”

With hardly a glance at either Tsosie or myself, the judge responded. “Request granted. Matter dismissed. Next case.”

As we were walking out of the courtroom, my legs wobbled, as if I was walking on a cloud. “Holy crap, is that it? Is it over?” I asked Tsosie.

She smiled at me. “That’s it!”

It was hard to believe. All my worrying about the citation had been for nothing.

When we left the building, I shook her hand and thanked Tsosie profusely. I asked her to send me the bill and I would pay it promptly, then we parted ways. Now I knew what it felt like to walk out of court with your attorney having won the case, just like on TV. I stretched my arms out and reached for the sky.

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As soon as I got inside my apartment, the phone rang and I rushed to pick it up.

It was Neho. “Martín, I’ve been arrested.”

“What? Why?”

“He did it again. This time he tried to kill me.”

Chapter Seventeen

I raced to the police station and told the first cop I saw that I wanted to post bail for Neil Warren. He pointed to the long desk. “That’s where you need to go.”

I sprinted to the desk and told the cop what I wanted. It took a few minutes to fill out the paperwork and write a check. Then I waited.

I lit a cigarette and sat on the lobby bench. About twenty minutes later, Neho appeared. He had a blank stare and looked tired. I gave him a quick hug and we went outside. It was a bright, cloudless day and the sunshine had brought some warmth. We got to my car and sat inside. Tears rippled down Neho’s face. I tried to hold him but he broke away.

“He raped me.”

I swallowed hard as my lips pressed tight. I could hardly believe it. How much more could Neho take? In the softest voice I could muster, I asked if he wanted to talk about it.

He shook his head. “Later,” he said with his voice breaking. He had a dazed expression. I started the car and we drove off.

Fortunately Greg wasn’t home when we got to the apartment. We sat on the couch and I asked Neho if he was hungry. He shook his head. He was despondent. I had never seen him so low and I felt helpless. I sat next to him and tried holding his hand, but he moved away. His eyes were cast downward. After a few minutes he spoke. His voice was a dull monotone.

“Lev came into my room last night when I was asleep. He’d been drinking, as usual, took off his clothes and got into my bed. I woke up when I felt his arm around my neck. He was choking me. He got my

underwear down to my knees with his other hand, then turned me on my stomach. I was losing consciousness because I couldn't breathe. I thought I was going to die. He started forcing himself—" Tears streamed down his face again, and I got up to get him some water. Neho took a sip and continued.

"I knew I had to do something or I would die. I pushed back as hard as I could and we fell off the bed, to the floor. I landed on top and knocked the wind out of him. I managed to stand, pull up my underwear and kick him in the face with my bare foot. I was gasping for air. I remember stumbling out of my bedroom. Somehow I made it up the stairs to the kitchen phone. I picked it up and called the emergency number.

"Maddie and Zaria woke up with all the commotion and ran into the kitchen. It was so hard to speak because my throat felt like it was on fire. Lev came running into the kitchen and grabbed the phone from me, but the dispatcher had already hung up. He called them back and tried to cancel the call. It was too late for that, the cops were already on their way. Mom saw the large bruise on Lev's face and wanted to know what was going on. Lev told her I had started a fight with him. I denied it but couldn't say anything more. My throat was hurting too much.

"About fifteen minutes later two cops came to the house and Lev went outside to talk to them. I think he tried to get them to go away. When they wouldn't, he brought them inside. One of them asked what had happened and I told them Lev raped me. They looked at one another and went back outside to call their supervisor. When the supervisor arrived, they separated us.

"One of the cops took me into the kitchen and we sat down at the table. He began throwing out questions. I started shaking. I couldn't help it. My mind was trying to process what had happened, and I had a cop asking questions as if I was to blame. He got angry and said I needed to get control of myself. He stood up and stepped out of the kitchen. About twenty minutes later he came back and started with his questions again. I tried answering them, but my throat felt as if I had swallowed acid. When he finished writing down the statement, he handed me a pen and told me to sign it. I picked it up to read it, but he said I just needed to sign it. After that, he took it and raced out of the kitchen. About an hour later the three cops came in. Sergeant Lowrey, the one in charge, told me I was being arrested for assaulting Lev. The cops didn't take anything I

told them seriously, Martín.”

I believed everything Neho said and I wanted to help him any way I could, but he grew distant and aloof. When I asked if there was anything I could do, he said he wanted to take a shower. I handed him a towel and he got up and went to the bathroom. After about twenty minutes I started to worry and knocked on the bathroom door. There was no answer. I peeked in and through the curtain I could see him standing under the stream of water motionless. When I pulled back the curtain, he was rubbing his arm and had a blank look on his face. I grabbed the towel, turned off the water, and dried him off. That’s when he came to life. He got a frightened look on his face and grabbed the towel from me. It was as if he didn’t recognize me at first. He was shivering. He asked me to step out while he finished drying off. His expression was empty. Once he was dry, he went into my bedroom and asked to borrow some clothes. He looked at me and said he needed to get out of the apartment. Neho dressed and we got in my car. I had just driven out of the apartment building when he asked if he could stay with me temporarily. Like before, I assured him he could stay as long as he wanted.

He formed a weak smile. “Can you drive to my house? I need to pack some clothes and get my car.”

When we got there, no one was at Neho’s house. We went inside and headed to his bedroom. Just as we entered it, he began retching. He ran to the bathroom and I followed behind. He started having dry heaves. I held his hair and put my hand on his back to try and comfort him. When he recovered, he stood and went to the sink to drink water. “I need to get my stuff and get out of here.” He sounded so desperate.

We went back into his bedroom where he took out a suitcase, opened it and tossed clothes into it. I arranged the clothes so they would all fit, latched it, then went outside with the luggage and threw it in the back of my car. Neho came out of his house with arms full of more clothes. I ran inside to retrieve his backpack and schoolbooks. After my car was loaded up, he carried a few more things to his car, which had limited trunk space. When we were done, I asked him to follow me to a restaurant to get something to eat. I knew he hadn’t eaten since the previous day. He didn’t object and once there, he managed to get some coffee and scrambled eggs down. We headed back to the apartment to put away his things.

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Greg came out of his room a few minutes after we arrived. Apparently he had spoken with Zaria about the evening's incident. When he saw us carrying Neho's clothes into my bedroom, he stopped me. "You guys doing okay?"

"Yeah, barely."

He palmed my back. "Let me know if you need anything." He retreated back into his room.

I called Sal a few hours before my shift was supposed to start and asked for the evening off. He balked, but when I told him I had an emergency involving Neho, he said he'd see me the following night.

That night Neho and I sat in the living room with the television tuned to a program neither of us paid much attention to. Greg was at work, so we were alone. I could see the angst in Neho's face and gestures and hear it in his voice. When I tried making conversation, he would barely respond. I made sandwiches for us and served them with chips, but he didn't touch any of it. When I tried sitting next to him and put my arm around him, he asked me not to touch him. That was a blow to me. At that moment, I knew Neho was experiencing something that was probably going to alter our relationship. How? It was too early to tell.

"I need to get out of here for a while," he said. "Let's go to Maxwell's."

"That's not a good idea. Let's go for a walk, instead." We put on our coats, left the apartment and strolled two blocks to Findley Park, a small public park with a playground.

"I could have died last night," Neho said. "He wouldn't let me breathe."

I remained quiet and let him speak.

"I can't get that out of my mind, Martin."

I decided not to question him. We continued walking for about thirty minutes and when I could hardly feel my toes or hands or face, we left the park and headed back to the apartment.

By nine-thirty that evening, we were in bed. Neho asked if I would leave the blinds open to bring some light into the room. When I tried touching him, he winced. I lay down and tried to sleep. I knew that for Neho, sleep would be unlikely. When I woke up the following morning, he was sitting at the edge of the bed.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He looked at me and gave a strange expression as if experiencing anger and fear at the same time. “I need to do something about what happened. I can’t let it go.”

“What are you thinking?”

“I need to see a lawyer.”

Chapter Eighteen

Four days later, we were sitting in Tsosie's office. She held up a document. "I ordered a copy of the police report." She started reading from it. "Your stepfather's Lev Kazlov?"

Neho grimaced. "Yeah... I wish he wasn't."

"I know of him. He does criminal law."

"He's also a rapist," Neho said.

Tsosie frowned and then went back to reading the report. "Are you aware of what he's alleging?"

"The cops just said Lev had accused me of assaulting him."

"The report says that one week earlier you had spoken to your mother and told her you were gay," Tsosie said. "You told her about your boyfriend and asked if she would take back your annuity from your stepdad's control, but she refused. The implication was that you intended to press your mother for a higher allowance." She gave Neho a quick glance and continued. "Lev asserts that you went into his office at home late in the evening and asked if you could speak to him. You were in your underwear. He wanted to know what you wanted to talk about, and you suggested talking in your bedroom. He was curious, put down what he was doing and followed you. When you were both in the bedroom, you told him you were gay. You said you found him attractive. Sometime during the conversation you asked if he would increase your allowance. When he wanted to know why, you replied it was because you needed the money for your boyfriend. Lev said he had met your Mexican boyfriend once before. He refused your request and at that point you went up to him, got on your knees and started unbuckling his

belt. He pushed you away. You got angry and punched him in the face.” Tsosie looked at Neho. “Is any of that true?”

Neho’s eyes widened as he rubbed his arm. His voice was strained. “Some of it is true. I asked Mom to take the annuity back from Lev because he threatened to bankrupt it. During that conversation, I told her I was gay and that I had a boyfriend. Everything after that is a lie. He choked me and raped me.”

“But you did strike him?” she asked.

“I didn’t punch him, I kicked him. But that was after he raped me. Why would I call the cops if any of what he said was true? The truth is Lev and I have been having sex for almost two years. When I put a stop to it, he began assaulting me. It went beyond anything that had happened before.”

Tsosie took off her glasses and stared at Neho. “How old were you the first time you had sex with Lev?”

“I had just turned eighteen.”

“Give me a minute.” Tsosie picked up her phone and told Denise to cancel her lunch appointment. As she laid the receiver down, she looked back at Neho and put her glasses back on. “You need to start from the beginning.”

Tsosie took detailed notes, like she did with me, and stopped to ask questions as he told his story. When Neho was done, she stayed looking down for the longest time, then stood up to look out her window. “Why did you decide to press charges against your stepdad now?”

“What do you mean?”

Tsosie pivoted around to face him. “On at least one other occasion, he tried to force sex where you fought back. I’m wondering why you chose this time to call the police and charge him.”

“He was getting more violent. I think he would have killed me to get what he wanted.”

She ruminated on what Neho said. “From what you told me, you consented to having sex with Lev for two years?”

“Don’t I have a right to stop him from forcing me to have sex?”

“Did you ever tell Lev you didn’t want to have sex with him any longer?”

“We never talked about it much. He never wanted to admit we were having sex.”

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“How did he know you didn’t want sex with him anymore?” Tsosie asked.

“I gave him a pretty clear sign when I kicked him in the balls and ran out of the house that first time. I stayed away for three weeks. When he came to school and we talked, he told me that there would be no repeats of the past.”

“What does that mean?”

“I took it to mean that he wasn’t going to come into my room for sex anymore.”

“Is there any proof that he forced his way into your room and assaulted you four nights ago?”

“Just my word.”

Tsosie sat back down. “Last year the state legislature overhauled the rape statute. It changed the definition of rape from only male-upon-female sexual assault to the use of the word ‘persons.’ This change was significant because it recognized that men could also be sexually assaulted, and that it can happen in many different ways. It essentially codified male-on-male rape. But the difficulty in sustaining this type of charge is proving it. By your own admission, you’d been having consensual sex with your stepfather for two years.”

Neho became outraged; his face was beet red and his voice, sharp. “How could you say it was consensual when he threatened me if I didn’t have sex with him?”

Tsosie winced. “You said that Lev threatened to kick you out of the house and later threatened to bankrupt your annuity if you rejected his sexual advances. Did he carry out either of those threats?”

“Not yet.”

“So the evidence basically comes down to credibility. What you’re seeking to do by filing a sexual assault charge against Lev is going to be a very difficult case to prosecute. The fact that you’re gay will work against you. There is a great deal of prejudice by the public toward gay people. Your stepdad knows the law well, and how to skirt it. You’re going to be forced to reveal much of your private life. In all likelihood it may not even proceed past the investigation stage. If it does, the other side is going to do everything it can to discredit you. Your reputation will be damaged. If and when the newspapers and TV pick up the story, the embarrassment and shame is going to be vicious. You’re probably

going to be alienated by your friends and family. Your mother may reject you when she learns you were having sex with her husband. Aside from all of that and depending on how far your case proceeds, it's going to get expensive. Are you willing to risk all of that?"

Neho's response was quick. "Are you willing to take this case?"

Tsosit curled her lips and thought for a second. "I've been in practice for less than two years, Neho. I've never had a case like this before. I'll admit that I'm ill-matched for your stepfather's knowledge, skill and experience of the law. I'm a Navajo woman who has experienced a great deal of inequity. There's an old Navajo saying that goes, 'Man's law changes with his understanding of man. Only the laws of the spirit remain always the same.' What I may lack in mastery, I make up for in spirit. If you are intent on pursuing this charge, I will do all I can to offer you my best counsel."

Neho was clenching his fists. I saw his eyes narrow and his lips press together. There was steely determination in his bearing.

"I want to press charges against Lev."

Chapter Nineteen

We left Tsosie's office and went outside. Neho looked down the street. "Let's go get coffee," he said, pointing to a small café about a block away. We made our way along the sidewalk silently, but so many thoughts were racing in my mind. In my view, Neho's decision to press charges was hasty and perhaps he should have given it more thought. Now that it was decided, I suspected it was going to be a difficult time. But I resolved to do whatever I could to help him through it. I would tell Neho that he could stay at the apartment permanently. If Greg objected, we could move out and find a place.

We strolled into the Early Brew Café, got our drinks and took a table by the large picture window. Neho lifted his cup, took a small sip, then set it back down on the table and started rotating it between his hands in an anxious gesture. He looked up at me. "Martín, I want you to know that I won't be offended if you want to break it off."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"You don't deserve any of this."

"Don't you think that's my call to make?" My muscles tensed as I trusted my gut feeling to say the right thing. "You don't deserve any of this either. Regardless of what happens, I'm with you on this. I love you and I'm here for you."

He stared down at the table to give some thought to what I said, then looked back up. "I think that this is my battle and I need to fight it with everything I've got. If it takes all the money I have in my annuity to pay Tsosie, I'll do it. I don't care anymore what happens to me or my reputation. I hate him and I'm going to do everything I can to expose

him for what he is, for what he did to me the past two years.”

“I don’t understand? You’re taking this beyond what he did four days ago?”

“I’ve been talking to Ashlyn. I told her all about Lev and me. She said that what Lev did was textbook abuse. She called him a predator. She said Lev knew exactly what he was doing, that he groomed me.”

“What’s that?”

“Lev won my trust by trying to act like my dad. He tested my boundaries and he took control of my life. He gave me a lot of attention like I was his son. After every tennis match he would slap me on my back, then a slap on my ass. In the shower he’d elbow me like a macho shrug and sometimes when we sat next to one another, he’d put his hand on my knee. He made it seem like it was all so natural. He’d buy me stuff, like audio equipment and a car, to soften me up for what he had in mind. When we had sex the first time, he had it all planned out. When I’d tell him it didn’t feel right having sex with him, he’d threaten me, humiliate me or scare me with bankrupting my annuity. I’m not saying that I’m not at fault, because I do share part of the blame. I was fucking my mom’s husband. That would have never happened but for Lev’s sick plan to get me in bed. I’m going after him for much more than what happened four nights ago. I’m holding nothing back. When you and I got together, I never intended for any of this to come out. But it did, and now I have to deal with it. I don’t want any of it coming down on you. You’ve been too good to me, Martín. I care about you, and I don’t want to hurt you. That’s why I’m telling you it’s alright if you want to break it off.”

“Where would you go? What would you do?”

“I have some money in the bank. I can get a job. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

I touched his hand lightly with my finger. “I’m not giving you up.”

“I’m having a hard time getting over this Martín. I don’t think it’s going to be the same between us, at least not for a while.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m scared. I’m hurt. I’m angry. My trust has really been shattered.”

“I’m still not giving you up.”

We left the coffee shop and said nothing more about his decision to press charges for the rest of the day.



My determination to stand by Neho was tested at the police station the following afternoon. Neho was there to give his statement.

Tsosie looked at her watch. “We only have a few minutes before our meeting. Listen to what I’m about to tell you, Neho. This is important. Tell the truth in your own words and don’t exaggerate. Answer only the questions that they ask. Don’t volunteer anything more. Think about what you’re going to say before you say it. If you make a mistake in something you’ve said, correct it immediately. Above all, don’t lose your temper. It’s likely they’re going to ask you questions that may be shameful and embarrassing.” Tsosie shook her finger for emphasis and in a slow cadence repeated, “Don’t lose your temper.”

The three of us proceeded into the building and went up to the same desk I had approached when I had bailed out Neho. As we waited for an officer to appear, Tsosie peered at me. “They may not let you inside when Neho gives his statement. So, be prepared for that.” When an officer came up to the desk, Tsosie told him why we were there. It was as if he had advance notice about our meeting because he knew exactly who we were seeing. He led us through double doors, up the elevator to a room down the hallway. The officer knocked and when the door opened, he whispered something we were unable to hear, then quickly walked away.

The officer in the room came to the door. “I’m Detective Mark Reid. Come in.” Reid was fortyish with belly flab distending his shirt buttons. He was dressed in a dark suit. His demeanor was smug. He had a drab interior office with gray painted walls and dull fluorescent lighting. There was a metal desk with a pull-out shelf that held a typewriter. The desktop had a large calendar blotter and a three-tier organizer stacked with files. A four-drawer wooden file cabinet sat on the corner. There was a swivel chair with a thin cushion on the seat behind the desk and two metal chairs in front.

Reid extended his hand. “You are?” he asked Tsosie.

“I’m Tsosie Garcia and this is my client, Neil Warren.”

Reid shook Neho’s hand. “And you are?” he asked me.

Tsosie responded. “This is Martín Diaz. He’s here for support.”

"I'm going to have to ask you to step outside," he said to me.

"I'd like to stay."

Neho spoke up. "I want him to stay."

Reid's voice was detached and businesslike. He looked at Tsosie. "I can't have him in here while Mr. Warren's giving a statement. It's policy."

I was going to argue but Tsosie lowered her head and raised her eyebrows at me. I gave a parting glance and a half-smile to Neho before walking out.

I stepped out to a long hallway with offices on both sides, lit a cigarette and strolled down the passage.

A police officer heading for a nearby office stopped when he saw me. "Can I help you?"

"Oh, no. I'm waiting for a friend who's giving a statement."

"You might be waiting a long time," he said.

"Are you kidding?"

He shook his head. "Nope. They usually take an hour or two."

"Really? I might have to leave for work before my friend gets out. Can you give him a message for me?"

"You can leave your message with the desk sergeant downstairs. Who's taking your friend's statement?"

"Mark Reid."

"Wow, it must be an important case!"

"Why do you say that?"

"Reid only handles cases from the chief or deputy chief."

"Why is that?"

He cleared his throat. "I need to get back to work."

"Is there someplace I can wait?" I asked.

"I'll get you a folding chair if you want."

"Sure, that would be great."

A few minutes later he reappeared with the chair. Rather than setting it in the hallway, I placed it in a small recess by the elevator and sat down.

Two and a half hours later, when they still had not emerged and my last cigarette was gone, I took the elevator and headed back down to the lobby. I called Greg and asked if he could gather my work clothes and pick me up. I went back to the desk and asked the cop who had escorted

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us to Reid's office, if he could tell Neho and his attorney, after they finished with Reid, that I had to leave for work.

He sneered, "Sure thing," and walked away.

Greg picked me up about twenty minutes later. I hadn't mentioned anything about why I was there, and Greg usually didn't pry, but there was a definite change in his attitude. He avoided eye contact and his voice was rough.

"What's going on, Marty?"

"What do you mean?"

He gave me a biting gaze. "If you don't want to tell me, that's fine, but things are getting weird."

"Lev attacked Neho and he filed charges against his stepdad. Neho's giving a statement to the police."

He thought for a few seconds. "It's all starting to make sense now."

"What's starting to make sense?"

"Zaria and I aren't together anymore. She broke it off. A few weeks ago, she starting talking about Neho and her dad, but what she said never made much sense. About a week ago she stopped talking about them and grew standoffish, like she didn't want to hang out with me anymore. A few days ago she said she needed time alone and cut it off between us. It's no big deal. I was thinking about doing the same thing, but she beat me to it."

"Lev and Neho are pointing fingers at one another and Zaria's probably taking her dad's side. Apparently his mom's taking Lev's side, too. Neho hasn't talked to any of them since the attack."

"You believe Neho?"

"There's a lot of backstory to what happened. With everything I know, I'm convinced that Lev is a total slime bag."

"Yeah, well, the times I've met up with him, I wouldn't have nominated him man of the year either." He glanced back at me, but this time his face had softened. "So maybe now we'll have more time to party together. The three of us."

"Yeah, maybe."

When I got home that night, Neho was still awake. He was sitting on the bed with his back against the headboard. I took my shoes off and joined him. "Sorry I couldn't stay, I had to leave for work."

"He didn't believe me, Martin."

“Reid didn’t believe you?”

“We were there for almost four hours. I told him everything that happened. He kept turning everything around as if I was to blame for all of it. He wanted to know if I had closed the bathroom door when I went in to pee the first night Lev and I had sex. He asked me to show him how I stood in front of the toilet to pee and if I exposed my penis to Lev. He wanted to know why I had taken my clothes off in front of Lev and laid on top of the blankets. If I was so modest and innocent, why hadn’t I gotten under them?”

I shook my head. “Are you kidding me?”

“He asked if I had an erection when I was lying on top of the bed. He wanted to know if I found Lev attractive, if I acted in any way to tempt or entice him to have sex with me. If I really thought having sex with my stepdad was so offensive, why hadn’t I stopped it that night. He wanted to know exactly what we did and whether I had actively or passively consented to any of it. He asked if I had found it pleasurable and if I had ejaculated. That’s how the entire interview went. When we got out of there, even Tsosie was angry. I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“I’m so sorry, Neho. Can I do anything?”

“I don’t think there’s anything anybody can do right now.”

I tried to hug him, but he quickly moved away.

“I just need to think right now.”

I went to bed and Neho remained staring out the bedroom window. Despite being bone tired from school and work, it took me a long time to fall asleep. My last thought, I remember, was that Neho was managing this without booze, and that was a good thing.

Chapter Twenty

When Neho mentioned things may not be the same between us for a while, I never suspected the bounds of that prediction. The first time I arrived home after work and found him asleep, I bent down to kiss his forehead. He jolted awake and pushed me away. When he recovered, he apologized, but I knew not to try that again. If Neho was asleep when I got home from work, he would have the bedroom lamp on or the blinds open to let in the outside light into the room. During the first few weeks after the assault, he developed insomnia. His sleep became erratic. We slept together, but separately. Whenever I tried touching him, he would jostle my hand away. During those nights when he did manage to sleep, he'd fight with himself and I'd shake him lightly and talk to him until he woke up from the nightmare. He couldn't sleep with the bedroom door closed. Even his sleep posture changed. Rather than on his side, as in the past, he now slept on his back.

The possibility of having sex with Neho was non-existent. The first time I tried initiating it by giving him a sly wink and smile, just like before, he made an excuse to leave the apartment. Another time when we were alone, I stepped up to him and we kissed. So long as he knew my intention, he was fine with it. Then I started getting more intense and curled my hands under the back of his tee, but he pushed us apart. He backed away until he hit the wall and collapsed to the floor in despair. When he recovered and we were sitting in the living room, I asked him what he wanted.

He was rubbing his elbow. His voice was choking with emotion. "You won't like my answer, Martín."

I knew from his morbid expression he was referring to taking his life. “Promise me that won’t happen. If you ever need to talk, I’m always here for you.”

The only response I got back from him was a slight nod.

It was like Neho was in another reality. He was a different person and I hated it. I struggled to be patient with him and his recovery, if that was ever to happen, but it was becoming more difficult with each passing day. I cursed that bastard of a stepfather who had done this to him.

It wasn’t as if Neho didn’t carry his weight in the apartment after he moved in with Greg and me, because he did more than either of us. He contributed one-third of the rent and donated generously to our grocery and utility jar. On Saturday mornings, I normally gathered my dirty clothes, bagged them and took them off to the self-service laundromat. The first time Neho went with me, he took notice of how I separated the clothes and how much detergent I used. After that, he took it upon himself to launder our clothes when I was away at work. I got home late one afternoon and found him in the kitchen. He had a book open and was reading the instructions.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Making lasagna,” he replied as he continued reading.

“You know how to cook?”

“I do now.”

“Where’d you get the cookbook?”

“Library.”

Before work, Greg, Neho and I sat at the dining table feasting on his creation, and although the noodles were clumpy and the cheese was dry, we applauded his effort. As time went on, his cooking improved.

I finally got to meet Ashlyn in the cafeteria at the Student Union building. She was sitting with Neho having breakfast when I joined them. Aside from being attractive, Ashlyn had a vivacious personality. Her quick wit was endearing. From our short conversation, it was evident that she was intuitive and smart. I could see why Neho liked her so much.

Neho began spending more of his after school time with Ashlyn. They would go off to a coffee shop or to her apartment and visit for hours. He stayed late one time helping her paint her apartment. The

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following Saturday, she invited him to go thrift store shopping for a coffee table. He never told me what they talked about, and I didn't ask.

Greg and I got home from work late one night, and I was surprised that Neho wasn't there. In the past, he had always left a note on the bed as to his whereabouts so I wouldn't worry, but not this time. I decided to call Ashlyn to see if he was with her, but just as I retrieved her number the phone rang. It was Eli.

"Did you break up with your boyfriend again?" he asked.

"What are you talking about?"

"Your boyfriend, he's here at Maxwell's getting drunk and picking fights. They're ready to throw him out."

"I'll be right down." I hung up the phone and grabbed my car keys.

"What's going on?" Greg asked.

"It's Neho. He's drunk. I need to go pick him up."

"You want me to go along?"

I sighed. "Nah, I'll be all right." I snatched my coat and ran out the door.

As soon as I stepped into the bar, I saw Neho sitting next to Eli, mumbling nonsense. I put my hand on Eli's back. "Thanks for the call. I owe you."

He smirked. "Hope it turns out okay."

I went up to Neho and talked him into turning around to face me. "Let's go home."

He looked up at me with glassy eyes and mumbled something incoherent. I reached for his arm, got him off the stool and led him out of the bar. When we got to my car, I opened the passenger door and helped him inside. It was cold and he had apparently lost his jacket. I took mine off and put it around him, then raced around the car and got in. Fortunately the engine was still warm and I turned the heat knob to high as I headed back home.

"I never lied to you," Neho said. His voice was maudlin. I didn't respond. He continued. "I never lied to you, but I didn't tell you everything."

"Everything about what?" I asked.

"About that night."

"What are you talking about?"

"When he raped me, Martín."

I didn't respond. I waited for him to continue.

“When he was screwing me, he kept repeating that this was my punishment for fucking with Mexicans.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Joel Usoro had been an investigative journalist with the Duke City Daily News for more than seven years. In that time, he had received a number of awards and citations from his peers and professional organizations. Usoro had a reputation for exposing sensational news stories on crime and political corruption. A seasoned reporter, Usoro could smell the early stages of a good story and had cultivated a large body of resources he could call on.

Skimming through the police blotter and hobnobbing with some of the officers at the front desk, he learned about a complaint filed by a gay man alleging rape. Some of the officers were claiming that the rapist was a well-known lawyer. The matter caught Usoro's attention and he delved deeper into the story.

Usoro was related to police Sergeant James Lowrey, a proud and cocky supervisor who'd been on the force for fourteen years. They were first cousins. Usoro and Lowrey had attended the same high school where they played varsity basketball. They had remained close friends and always celebrated the holiday together with family.

It wasn't often that Usoro called on Lowrey for an inside scoop regarding stories he was pursuing. However, the gay rape case appeared novel and intriguing, and he tapped his cousin for the lowdown. Lowrey revealed that the investigation was being directed by the deputy chief because it involved a prominent criminal attorney. The matter was being treated as classified and highly sensitive, and the detailed reports were only being circulated among the top echelons in the department. No information was being disclosed to the public. Since Lowrey had

supervised the initial dispatch call to the Kazlov household, he covertly shared with Usoro a copy of the police reports prepared by the three officers that night.

Neho and I were having lunch in the cafeteria at the student union building when Ashlyn appeared.

“Can I join you guys?” She looked anxious.

Neho beamed. “Sure.”

Ashlyn sat down and looked to Neho. “Someone came to administration looking for you.”

She handed him a card. “He’s a newspaper reporter. He wants to know where he can find you. I said we weren’t allowed to give out information about our students. He said it was important, and I told him I was just following school policy. He got flustered and left.”

Neho glanced at the card, then handed it to me. “What do you think I should do?” he asked me.

I recognized Usoro’s name from newspaper stories he had reported on. “I think you should call Tsosie.”

Ashlyn agreed.

Neho rose. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

As soon as he left our table, Ashlyn smiled at me. “I’m glad you and Neho are together. He talks so much about you and what you’ve done for him.”

Was she just making conversation or serious about the compliment? “I wish I could say he’s getting better, but I don’t see much improvement.”

She crooked her head upwards as if she was gathering her thoughts, then looked back at me. “I probably shouldn’t be telling you this, but what Neho is experiencing is called post-traumatic stress disorder. This is a fairly new term in mental health. It’s a disorder that happens when a person experiences a traumatic event. Soldiers returning from fighting in Viet Nam, for example.”

“How do you know he has that?”

“He has nightmares, mood changes, sadness, depression. Many of the symptoms.”

“Did you know that he hasn’t talked to his mom since that night?”

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That they changed the locks and he can't even get into his own house anymore?"

"He told me about that." Her face relaxed. "If you don't mind me asking, how are you coping with all of this?"

So many thoughts raced through my mind. I did a facepalm and curled my toes as I tried to answer her question. "Nothing's been the same between us. I mean I can hardly touch him without scaring him. We don't have sex anymore. Some of him is the same but a lot of him is so different. I love him, but sometimes I don't like what he's doing to himself. To us. I'm constantly worrying whether he's going to get drunk and hurt himself."

"Has he talked about hurting himself?"

"Not exactly, although he's alluded to suicide in passing. I see the hurt and wonder how much more he can take."

"I'd like to know if he ever say's anything like that again."

I nodded.

Ashlyn had an easy going manner and gave me a comforting smile. "He's a lot stronger than you think."

"How do you know that?"

"Because he's still maintaining control and because he still has faith."

"Um, faith in what?"

"Faith in you, Martín. I don't want to put more pressure on you, but right now you're the only person keeping him going. That's why I asked how you're doing."

"What do you mean?"

"You bring balance to his life. You remind him what he's living for. You give him a reason to wake up every morning."

"I think you're giving me too much credit."

"I don't think so."

"Now I know why he spends so much time with you. You seem to have all the answers."

She formed a thin smile and shook her head. "Neho has all the answers. He just needs help focusing on the questions."

"Will he ever get over it?"

"I'm sure he will, but it's going to take time."

Neho returned to the table. "I have an appointment with Tsosie

tomorrow. Three o'clock. Will you come?"

"Is it to talk about the reporter?" I asked.

"No, it's to talk to Lev's lawyer."

The following day, we arrived at Tsosie's office fifteen minutes early. Denise took us inside immediately. Tsosie had a guarded expression on her face. She asked us to sit down and looked at Neho. "As I mentioned to you on the phone, I got a call from Rob Ewing who represents Lev and he asked if I could arrange a meeting with you."

"Do you know him?" Neho asked.

"No."

"Is Lev going to be here?"

"Ewing told me he's coming alone. I suspect he's coming with an offer to settle the charge, but I don't really know."

I chimed in. "Is this the way it's done?"

She nodded. "Sometimes."

"What if we don't like what he's offering?" Neho asked.

She thought for a second. "Let's just stay calm and see what he has to say."

Several minutes before three o'clock, Tsosie's phone buzzed. She picked it up and spoke to Denise then turned to us as she put down the receiver. "He's here. Let's go into the conference room."

We followed Tsosie out of her office, down the hall and into a large room. A long, brown laminate conference table surrounded by blue fabric chairs took up most of the space. Two sets of windows facing west contributed a fair amount of sunlight that complimented the overhead florescent tubes. Rob Ewing was waiting inside the conference room. Dressed in a dark brown suit, he was tall with thinning light hair and a fake smile. Tsosie introduced herself, then us. We shook hands. Tsosie took a seat at the head of the table while Neho and I sat across from Lev's lawyer.

"So what can we do for you, Mr. Ewing?" Tsosie asked.

"We don't have to be so formal. You can call me Rob."

"Okay. What's this about?"

He looked at Neho. "I represent your stepfather—"

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“When you’re talking about Lev,” Neho said, “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t refer to him as if he was related to me.” His face grew flushed.

Tsosie put her hand over Neho’s to try and ease his spite. “Please refer to your client as either Lev or Mr. Kazlov.”

Ewing’s expression never changed. It was clear he was skilled at suppressing his emotions. “As I was saying, I represent Mr. Kazlov with regard to the charge that has been filed against him. My purpose for meeting with you, Mr. Warren, is to see if we might be able to find a workable solution whereby your charge and my client’s charge can be simultaneously withdrawn.”

“Have you or Lev given any thought to whether the prosecutor will dismiss them in the event they’re withdrawn?” Tsosie asked.

“Under the circumstances, we believe the prosecutor will agree to dismiss all charges once they’re withdrawn.”

“What are you offering?” asked Tsosie.

“I’ve been made aware that my client is managing a portfolio of equities for the benefit of Mr. Warren. I’ve also been made aware that on several occasions Mr. Warren has requested my client relinquish control of his portfolio to his mother. After considering that request, Mr. Kazlov is prepared to do so.”

“I haven’t spoken to my mom since my arrest. Why would I even consider that offer?” Neho said.

“Isn’t this what you wanted?” Ewing asked.

“Back then I did. But now everything’s changed.”

Tsosie interjected. “Would Mr. Kazlov consider relinquishing the portfolio to Neho’s control? After all, he is twenty-one and presently emancipated.”

“I’d have to consult with my client, but I suspect he would be agreeable to the offer. Is there somewhere I can use a phone and call Mr. Kazlov?”

“Of course. Follow me.”

Tsosie led Ewing out of the conference room. I noticed the expression on Neho’s face. It was the same look as when he decided to see a lawyer weeks before. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that it goes beyond money, Martín. At one time, the money in my annuity meant everything to me. But things started happening in my life that took on new meaning. You’re at the top of that

list. I don't care about my annuity anymore. What he did to me during the past two years was horrible. What he kept repeating that night was even more despicable. I'm going to have to live with what I decide today for the rest of my life."

My eyes narrowed as I gave him a serious look. "You've been through so much that it hurts me to see you so miserable. Maybe the best thing would be to try and put it behind you. Maybe we can get back to where we were before."

He was looking down in deep thought as he rubbed his elbow. "I don't know if I can do that. It doesn't seem right for me to drop everything just for money."

"It's your decision and like I told you before, I'll support you."

We waited for about twenty minutes. In that time Tsosie had joined us and our conversation turned to bland topics just to pass the time and quiet our angst. A short time later, Ewing stepped back into the conference room and sat down.

"Mr. Kazlov is prepared to return the portfolio to your control immediately, provided your charge is withdrawn today."

"What about Mr. Kazlov's charge against Neho?" Tsosie asked.

"Of course, that charge will be withdrawn as well," said Ewing.

"I want one more thing," Neho said.

"What's that?" asked Ewing.

"I want to meet with Lev face-to-face, just him and me. I want an apology for what he kept repeating to me that night."

Tsosie's eyes widened. I thought she was going to say something until Ewing spoke.

"I don't understand your request, Mr. Warren. What are you asking?"

"You go back to your client, Rob, and tell him exactly what I want. He'll know what I'm talking about."

Ewing's face dropped. "Are you rejecting our offer?" His voice was testy.

Neho glared back at Ewing. "I'm giving you a counteroffer."

Chapter Twenty-Two

I came home from work and found Neho in bed soundly asleep. That was a rare sight. I strolled into the living room, sat on a chair to relax and lit up a cigarette. I didn't bother turning on the lamp. My eyes were focused on the lights outside the sliding glass door as I recollected the discussion in Tsosie's office with Lev's lawyer. In my mind it was unlikely Lev would agree to Neho's demand. I had met him only once and I knew he was an aggressive player who was accustomed to getting what he sought. Perhaps Neho was asking too much. Trying to exact revenge on Lev might be clouding Neho's judgment. Maybe he should have accepted Lev's offer and let karma take care of the rest. I wondered if he had considered the consequences if Lev refused his demand. I wasn't convinced Neho had made the right decision but recalled Sal's lesson on trust. I would trust Neho's judgment. I snuffed out my cigarette, got up and went to bed. Just as I had closed my eyes and was starting to fall asleep, I felt Neho's foot touch mine. It was unintended, I thought, maybe an involuntary twitch. I moved my foot just a few inches away. His foot brushed up against mine again. When I woke up in the morning, our feet were still touching. If I had stretched my grin any further that morning, it would have reached my ears.

Just before heading off to school, Neho received a phone call from Tsosie. Lev had agreed to meet him on the northeast corner of Jefferson Park at ten o'clock.

"Tsosie is really upset that I'm meeting with Lev. She thinks it might hurt my case. But I have to do it. I'll miss my literature class."

"You can call Tsosie and have the meeting scheduled for another

time,” I suggested.

Neho thought about it for a few moments. “No, I want to get it done and start mending my life, our life.”

“Let me go with you?”

“I have to do this alone, Martín.”

“Remember what happened last time you went off with Lev?”

“I know better now. I know what I have to do.”

I crossed my arms. “Neho, even if I sit in the car while you talk to Lev, I’m going with you.” My voice was firm.

That seemed to jostle his thinking. “Thanks, Martín.”

We arrived at Jefferson Park ten minutes early and there were a fair amount of people, mostly walkers and joggers tramping along the paved route. The northeast corner of the park was distant from that path and secluded from the main fountains and playground, but there were still visitors strolling that area. I stayed by the car as Neho set off, but I wanted to make sure he would be safe. I followed him, getting as close as possible without being noticed. The public restrooms were near their meeting place and I ducked behind the building just as Neho approached Lev, who was sitting on a bench. Lev was wearing his long brown overcoat and had on dark glasses. He stood as soon as he saw Neho. He had his back to me and I could barely make out their conversation. In his throaty voice, Lev demanded to know why they had to meet.

“Didn’t your lawyer tell you?” Neho replied.

He moved into Neho’s space to try and intimidate him. “This isn’t a game. What the hell do you want?”

Neho didn’t budge. “I don’t have any intention of playing any games with you. You know exactly what I want.” Neho voice was clear and direct, his stance was unmovable. He was more self-assured than I had ever seen him.

“If it’s an apology, I think you have it backward. You liked what was going on. You got off every time we fucked. You were my faggot whore, Neho. Don’t you think you should be the one thanking me and apologizing for causing all this commotion?”

“I should have known you would never accept any responsibility for

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what you said and did to me!”

“I didn’t do anything to you. You did it to yourself. You picked a Mexican—”

Neho interrupted. “Don’t go there, Lev. I’m warning you, don’t say another word about him.”

“You have no idea what I can do to you, Neho. Who’s going to believe your silly rape charge instead of mine? Not even your mother believes you. Your credibility is worthless. When I’m through with you, I guarantee you’ll be serving time in jail peddling your ass to anyone who’ll protect you.”

Neho chuckled. “You think that scares me? I know the truth and you know the truth and you can’t hide from that. You can call me a faggot all you like, but look in a mirror and there’s a gutless faggot staring back at you.”

Lev raised his finger at Neho. “You’re going to withdraw your charge against me today, Neho.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Because you want your money and you want to keep what little self-respect you have.”

“I don’t care about the money anymore, Lev. As for my reputation, I have lots of time to repair it. Do you?”

Lev stepped back and clenched his fists as if he was ready to strike a punch. It was clear that he was furious.

“Do it and I guarantee you’ll be the one in jail.” At that moment, Neho looked beyond Lev and saw me. He moved away and headed toward me.

“You son-of-a-bitch!” Lev screamed at him.

Neho didn’t respond and we walked back to the car in silence. We didn’t have to speak because the smile on his face expressed his satisfaction at having stood up to Lev.

As soon as we got to the university, Neho called Tsosie and told her the details about the meeting with Lev.

“I’m sure you’ve considered that after the story appears in the newspaper, all offers are off the table,” Tsosie said. “It becomes an entirely new fight.”

He drew a deep breath. “I know that, but I can’t back down now.”

“You can still accept Ewing’s offer.”

“Nuh-uh! To give it up just for money, I *would* become Lev’s faggot whore.”

“I understand,” she said. “Neho, I don’t want you talking to any reporters alone. I suspect Ewing’s meeting with us was because Usoro, from the newspaper, may have tried to contact Lev. This was their attempt to kill the story, but soon it’s going to break. The best we can hope for is a modicum of fairness. I think we should contact Usoro and establish the terms of an exclusive interview with you. That way we might be able to control some of the content to our benefit.”

“That’s fine with me.”

“I’ll call you once I’ve arranged the meeting.”

“Tsosie, I want you to know I appreciate everything you’re doing for me. Thanks.”

“We’ll talk soon, Neho.”

Two days later, Tsosie and Neho met with Usoro at her office. I wasn’t able to join them because I had already missed too many classes and had gotten a warning.

Late the following week I was in the student union cafeteria in the early morning sipping coffee and waiting for my next class when Greg showed up. He handed me a copy of the newspaper and sat down.

“You need to see this,” he said.

I opened the paper and read the headline: *Stepson Accuses Prominent Lawyer of Rape*. As I read the story, two things were evident. Neho’s name was not revealed, nor did it have his picture. But I suspected it would just be a matter of time before that came out. I shook my head as I finished the article.

“So, is any of this true?” Greg asked.

“Yeah, except for Lev’s assault claim.”

“You know that I’ve always had your back, Marty. You’re my best friend. But this is bound to get heavy for both of us.”

“I know and I don’t have a problem if you want to bail.”

“Bail on my best friend, I don’t think so. I wouldn’t have anybody to smoke dope with.”

I gave a weak smile and looked at my watch. “Can I take this?” I

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asked, waving the newspaper.

“Have at it!”

I left to find Neho.

Chapter Twenty-Three

When Neho read the newspaper story, he was satisfied that the reporting was fair. But as I had predicted, the local television stations quickly got hold of the story and carried it in their afternoon news report. It was the lead feature story and reported in stirring detail. They broadcast Neho's name and his arrest photo. Even though Lev's name was mentioned, there was no image of him shown. Greg, Neho and I sat in front of the television watching the grisly report. When I looked at Neho, his head was bowed and his long hair hid his eyes. His posture was rigid and he was fisting his hands then loosening them. He looked as if he was going to be sick.

I wanted to hold him but that still wasn't possible. I rose and sat on the arm of his chair. I reached out my hand and he took it, which was surprising to me. "We're going to get through this, I promise you, Neho." Even though I didn't believe those words at the time, but I had to offer him reassurance and that was all that came to mind.

He didn't respond.

A few minutes later, Greg and I left for work. The image of Neho's sad face stayed with me throughout my shift. It was one of the darkest days of my life.

When Greg and I got home that evening, Neho was passed out on the couch. A half-empty bottle of whiskey was sitting on the coffee table and the radio was tuned to a local station. Greg and I gave one another knowing glances.

"You want to do a joint?" Greg's offer was about more than merely getting high. He was lending me his ear in case I needed to unload.

"No, I think I'll take him to bed and crash." I roused Neho and led

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him to the bedroom. This time there was no resistance. Even when I helped take off his clothes and lay him under the blanket, he cooperated. Not long after, I joined him in bed, but he stayed on his side for the entire night. I missed his touch, even if it was just our feet.

The news story took on a life of its own. The fact that it dealt with incest and male-on-male rape, and involved a well-known attorney, snared the public's attention. Both the television channels and the newspapers continued reporting it in various perspectives for many days. While Neho's arrest photo was conspicuously shown, no photo of Lev ever appeared in any report. Reporters waited for Neho at the university and tried following him home. Most often he dodged their tail, but there were several that learned where he lived and camped out by our landing. That was until management threatened them with arrest for trespassing.

One week later, I got to the apartment after school and found an eviction notice taped to our door. Surely it was placed on our door by mistake. We had never been late on the rent, nor caused trouble in the complex. We followed all the rules and parked in our designated spots. I sprinted down the stairs to the front office.

Judith was a thirty-something leasing agent to whom I casually spoke every month when I paid the rent. Long blonde hair with bangs and large oval glasses, she was alone in the office. As soon as I stepped in, her expression changed. The bright smile faded to a vacant gaze. She rose from her desk and walked slowly to the counter.

"Hi, Judith. I think somebody made a mistake and left this on our door."

Her fingers toyed with her hair. "It's no mistake, Marty. I'm really sorry about this."

"Sorry about what?"

"The eviction notice."

"Are you serious? Why are we being evicted?"

"It's Della, the manager. She's doing it."

"But why? I don't understand."

"Your friend, the one who's staying with you. She recognized him from the news on TV and the reporters that came looking for him."

"But that's no reason to evict us! Our lease isn't up for another seven months."

“You have three men living in a two bedroom, but the lease agreement just has Greg and you on it.”

“Oh, come on. You have Aubrey and Connie two doors down from us who have Connie’s sister living with them in a one-bedroom. Stephanie on the first floor has her parents living with her and she’s also in a one-bedroom. Why is Della picking on us?”

“I’m so sorry, Marty. You can talk to Della tomorrow when she comes in.”

“This isn’t right; she can’t do this to us.” Rather than unleash my anger on the leasing agent, I stormed out. I was fuming.

By the time I got back upstairs, Greg had gotten home. When I shared the bad news with him, his face reddened.

“I’ll go talk to that old cow tomorrow. We’ll get this straightened out.”

“I better go with you.”

“Yeah, I’ll need somebody to hold me down if I get too crazy.”

Della was firm in her decision to evict us. We offered to move to a three-bedroom, but she claimed no units of that size were available. We threatened to take the owners to court, but she knew our threat was meaningless since we were technically in violation of our lease agreement. We accused Della of discrimination, which she denied. Even if we could prove it, New Mexico offered no protection for sexual orientation. I talked to Neho about it and he called Tsosie to see if she could help. We could file an appeal, Tsosie said, but that would just delay the eviction by a few more weeks. Neho offered to move out, but I wouldn’t hear it. With no other options available, we thought about looking for new digs.

After work on Saturday night, Greg and I drove back to the apartment, picked up Neho and we went out drinking. We all needed a release after the week’s events. Greg drove us to a popular country-western bar called The Teardrop Lounge. We sat at the bar, sipping beer and watching the crowd waltzing and two-stepping to the music. When Neho went to the bathroom, Greg asked me when we were going to start looking for an apartment.

Although we hadn’t spoken about it, I wondered if Greg intended to continue rooming with us. From his question, it was apparent that he didn’t. “I don’t know. How about you?”

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“I got a lead on a place close to the university. It’s cheap. I’m going to see it on Monday.”

“I’m really sorry about all this, Greg.”

“Not to worry, Marty. Shit happens.”

I sighed. “I just hope I’m not in over my head with this heavy-duty crap Neho’s facing.”

“I’ve seen how you guys pull together. I think you’re a good match. It’ll all work out.”

“What will work out?” Neho asked as he joined us again.

“Finding an apartment,” I said.

A security guard raced up to us. “You need to get him out of here or we’ll call the police.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Ask him,” the guard replied as he scoffed at Neho.

I took a long sip of my beer, laid it down on the bar and the three of us headed for the door with the guard following close behind. “What happened?” I asked Neho.

“Some guy called me a fag and said I was in the wrong bar. I guess he didn’t like my response,” Neho said as he waved a closed fist.

Greg laughed. “Touché.”

The search for a new apartment for Neho and me began late the following week. Friday after school, we drove to a location in the southeast. Shorewood Commons was a large complex with six two-story buildings, a resident clubhouse and a community swimming pool. Two-bedroom units were pricey but still affordable. The apartment was modern and furnished. It was a slight upgrade to where we were living. Before deciding, we visited a second complex in the same general area that was slightly less appealing. As I was getting ready for work, Neho and I discussed the two options and decided to go with Shorewood Commons. Mid-morning on Saturday we returned to that complex to complete the application and put down the security deposit. Lilly, the manager, a chatty middle-aged woman with wiry hair, sat us down and handed us the forms. After we had completed them and tendered our deposit, Lilly said to expect a phone call telling us that our applications had been approved. That procedure was company policy, she said, but not to worry because no applications of recent memory had been rejected. We thanked her and left.

When we arrived back at the apartment several hours later, Lilly phoned us. Unlike our morning visit, this time her voice was terse. Our applications had been rejected, she said. Our deposit check was in the mail to us. When I asked the reason, she replied that it was confidential and hung up the phone. Even though we were angry and disappointed, we chalked it up as an anomaly and decided to continue our search.

During the next week we attempted to rent an apartment at four different complexes only to be turned down once they recognized Neho. It was as if Neho's name was on a citywide "Do Not Rent" list. The time was getting short, and we would have to find an apartment soon. Neho and I sat in the living room to consider our options.

"Why are you still with me, Martín?" He sounded frustrated and angry.

"Why do you think?"

"If I knew I wouldn't be asking you."

"Don't do this again, Neho. We've been through it too many times."

"Maybe it's time that I do something about it."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Like I move out. It would make your life a hell of a lot easier."

"You're on a self-pity trip again and I don't want to hear it."

His eyes tightened. "You need to hear it and we need to act or you're going to be out on the street in two weeks."

"Are you telling me you're ready to give up on us?"

He threw his hands up. "What am I bringing to the table, Martín? My emotions are whacked and so much of the time I'm spaced out. The cops could come around to arrest me at any time and throw me in jail. Any place we go, people recognize me as the faggot who fucked his stepfather. Everybody avoids me."

"That's not true."

"If that's not true, why can't we get an apartment?"

"It'll happen."

"I'm leaving, Martín."

I stood and faced him. My voice was deep with anger. "So you're going to walk out on me just because we haven't found an apartment? That's a poor excuse. What happens when things start getting really bad for you? When Lev's dogs start attacking you? Let me tell you something. When you made the decision not to accept Lev's offer, I questioned your

motives. But after giving it a lot of thought, I knew you were right. You didn't sell your soul. I've seen you go through more pain and hurt than most people go through in their entire lives. You've experienced things I've only read about. Your mind is struggling to heal, but the only real treatment is time. You want to know what you bring to the table? You bring strength and courage and guts and passion. I can't ask for much more than that. If you really want to leave, go ahead. But do it for you, not for me." My face flushed at the thought of Neho leaving me. But if that was his decision, I wouldn't stop him. I reached for my coat and stormed out of the apartment.

My mind was spinning with crazy images of our wonderful time together and the prospect of it ending. I got in my car and drove to the freeway, heading in the direction of Comillas. In less than fifteen minutes, I was knocking on the door of Sal and Carlos's house. Sal opened the door and flinched with surprise when he saw me. He invited me inside and we sat in his great room.

"What do you want to drink, Marty?"

"Water's good."

He brought me a glass of water and sat in a chair across from me. "Carlos had an appointment this afternoon. He won't be back for a while."

Sal didn't press me on the reason for my visit. I knew that he was aware of Neho's charge and counter-charge from all the media, but he never pried. At work, the closest he came was to ask how I was doing. I always let on as if everything was normal. Our conversation that afternoon started out with talk about work. It took me a few minutes to muster up the courage and broach the subject. "I think Neho and I are breaking up," I spurted out.

"That's not good. You want to talk about it?"

"He thinks I'd be better off without him. The bad rap he's gotten on TV and the papers has been intense. At school things have gone crazy. We got evicted from the apartment when they recognized him. We've been out looking for another place, but as soon as they recognize him, nothing's available. We go out in public and he gets harassed."

"You're both in a tough place." He was eyeing me with an expression that reminded me of Dad after I missed the fly ball that lost our little league tournament. "What do you want?" Sal asked.

I thought for a few moments. “I want to not love him as much as I do. I want to go back to not feeling the things he makes me feel. I want to stop thinking about him twenty-four-seven. I want to go back where I was before I met him.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Are you sure that’s what you want, Marty?”

I shook my head. “I don’t want him to leave, but I can’t stop him.”

“You’re both under a lot of pressure right now. You need some relief from that. Why don’t you guys take a break from all this stuff and go someplace for a couple of days? Carlos and I go to Sedona. It’s a good place to wind down. Have you ever been there?”

“No.”

“I’ll tell you what. Let me know when you want to go and I’ll make the reservation for you.”

“Is it expensive?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of it.”

“Sal, you don’t have to—”

“I know. So shut up about it.”

I flinched, then chuckled. “Thanks, Sal. If Neho’s still there when I get back to the apartment, we’ll take you up on it.”

“I might have something else for you.” He stood and scurried out of the room. When he returned, he handed me a piece of paper. “Give this guy a call. He’s a friend of Carlos. He’s family and owns some apartments in the valley.”

“Thank you, again.” I took the paper and pocketed it. “I’ll see you tonight at work?”

“I’ll be there.”

I hugged him. “I appreciate all of this.”

“Don’t be a stranger, Marty. Drop by anytime.”

I returned home to find Neho’s car was gone, and my heart sank. I raced up the stairs and into the apartment. Greg was lying on the couch resting and listening to music. I was almost out of breath. “Hey,” I said. “You seen Neho?”

“Yeah, he left a few minutes ago to the grocery store. He’s making us something to eat tonight.”

My body relaxed. I traipsed into my bedroom and punched the air while giving thanks to whoever was watching after us.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Neho and I arrived early for our ten o'clock appointment with Carlos's friend, Cree Halverson. He owned two quadplex apartments in northwest Albuquerque, each single-story buildings were separated by a common green area in the center. There was a tall block wall that fronted the paved resident parking spots. An ornamental wrought-iron gate gave access into the property. We were waiting by Neho's car when a flat-bed truck pulled up next to us and the driver exited.

Cree was a handsome lanky cowboy with dusty cinnamon boots and a white mustache. He had a firm handshake and he gave no appearance of being family.

"Where you boys from?" Cree had a slow, smoky voice with a southern twang.

"Denver originally," Neho said.

"I'm from Santa Fe. We're going to college."

He gave us an up and down look. "Good deal." He unlocked the gate and led us inside the courtyard. "So, you boys know Carlos?" he asked.

Neho looked at me to respond.

"Not well. I work with Sal. He's my boss." I wondered if Cree knew that connection and if I wasn't speaking out of school.

"Good ole boys, those two." We followed Cree's slow slog halfway down the courtyard to the second apartment on the building facing north. "This is the only apartment I have vacant right now. Most of these folks have been here for a month of Sundays and I don't get vacancies too often. Manny and his boyfriend decided to move to California. They left last week. I still need to have the place cleaned, but I can get that done

pretty quick if you boys want it. It's just a one bedroom. That gonna do you all right?"

We looked at one another. "Yeah, that works fine," Neho said.

He pulled open the screen, unlocked the door and we went inside. The living room furniture—a couch, two multicolored fabric armchairs and a rectangular coffee table—was modest. The large picture window let in just enough sunlight. A short decorative wall separated that room from the large kitchen. It had a round table with four chairs. The patio door led out to a small, enclosed backyard.

"This is really nice," I said.

"All my apartments here have private backyards, you know what I mean?" Cree replied with a wink. "In case you wanna get some sun in the buff."

I smiled and saw Neho's eyes bulge.

The bathroom was in the square hall next to the bedroom. The entire apartment was about half the size of our current apartment, but charming. The rent was considerably less than other places.

"If you decide you want it, it won't take you long to meet your neighbors. Sometimes they get together on weekends in the courtyard for cocktails and chinwaggin'. They're all pretty friendly."

Neho looked at me, eyes shining with excitement. "I like it. I think we should take it."

"How soon can we move in?" I asked Cree.

"Next week soon enough for you?"

"Yes," we both said.

"Good deal! Let's go to my truck and do the details."

Since Neho's story broke, I'd been getting calls from Mom and Bernie weekly. They wanted to know if there was any truth to the media reports and how I was doing. Mostly, they wanted to know if Neho and I were still a couple. I didn't want to discuss those things on the phone and promised to see them soon.

Shortly after we moved into our apartment, I told Neho I was driving into Santa Fe to visit my parents. I didn't invite him, and I doubt he would have accepted even if I had. I didn't know how my parents were

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going to react to my explanation of the story, and I didn't want to put Neho in an uncomfortable spot. Also, I had yet to tell Dad that I was gay.

I drove down after school on Monday, my day off, and arrived shortly before three. Mom was in the kitchen baking. As soon as she saw me, she wiped her hands on her apron, and reached up to hug me. Her eyes told me how worried she was.

"I'm praying for you, *mi hijo*. How's your friend?"

"My boyfriend," I reminded her.

"How is he?"

"He's coping. We're both coping."

"It's awful what they're saying—"

"It's half-truths, Mom. In time the real story will come out."

"I hope so."

"What's Dad saying?"

She lowered her head. "You talk to him, Marty. He's in the backyard shed. He's trying to fix the TV tray that broke again."

"Mom, that's an antique. Why haven't you guys replaced it?"

"You know your dad."

I kissed her on the cheek and stepped out the kitchen door to the shed. As soon as Dad saw me, he smiled, put down the screwdriver and came close for a quick hug.

"I think you need to get a new set of TV trays, Dad."

"Why? These are still good!"

"When Christmas comes around next year, I'll know what to get you."

"Don't waste your money."

I took a deep breath. "I've been meaning to tell you something for a long time, Dad."

He stared at me without responding.

"I'm gay."

He took a step back and folded his arms. "Does Mom know?"

"Yeah, I already told her."

He didn't know how to respond. I could tell his mind was wrestling with what he heard. He went back to the table, picked up the screwdriver and returned to work. "Are you still friends with that boy you brought over for Christmas?"

"His name's Neho, Dad. He's my boyfriend."

He dropped the screwdriver and his head drew back quickly in shock. "He's your what?"

"We've been together for about six months."

"What's the matter with you, Marty? What about all those things they're saying about him on TV?"

"We're trying to deal with it, Dad."

"Deal with it? Marty, you need to get away from him."

"We moved into an apartment together."

"No, no, no, *mi hijo*. You have to move out. You have to do it now. If you need money for another apartment, I'll give it to you. You need to get as far away from him as you can, Marty. Your reputation is everything. Think about that!"

"I can't do that, Dad."

"Why not?" He shouted the question.

"I love him."

"I didn't raise you like this, Marty. What did he do to you?"

I hadn't seen my dad this upset in years. The fact that he kept calling me by my name affirmed his wrath. "He didn't do anything to me, Dad. I just fell in love with him the same way you fell in love with Mom."

His face reddened and his voice exploded. "Don't you say that, Marty. It's not the same thing."

My voice grew louder to match his. "You may not understand it, but it is."

He calmed down a bit. "Don't you see, I only want what's best for you, *mi hijo*. You can't let what happens to that boy smear your name, Marty. That's what's going to happen if you stay with him."

"I'm sorry, Dad. I won't leave him."

He gave me a cold stare that made the hair in the back of my neck stand up. "I don't ever want you bringing him to my house again."

My eyes tightened. My teeth were grinding. "That's really not fair. You don't know the whole story."

"I've heard enough to know he's no good."

"You and mom liked Neho when I brought him over those two times and now you're not even giving him the benefit of the doubt. What you're doing is totally wrong."

"That's the way I feel about it."

"If Grandpa Diaz was alive, he would never do what you're doing."

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With his legs planted wide and his hands fisting, he blew up again. “I’m not your grandpa and I don’t give a damn what he would do! I don’t want that boy in my house.”

I matched his stance. “If he can’t come to your house, then I guess I’m not welcome here either.”

“This is your home, Marty—”

“It was my home, but it doesn’t feel like it anymore.” I left before I said anything I’d regret.

Mom was waiting for me at the door. Her sad face and understanding eyes told me she’d heard our conversation. “Give him some time, *mi hijo*. You know he loves you. He’ll get over it.”

“I know he does, but how can he say those things about Neho without hearing his side of the story?”

“Maybe if you would have talked to your dad sooner, he would have understood.”

My eyes snaked. “What do you mean?”

She gave me the staid look that meant she was going to reveal a hard truth. “You just told your dad that you were gay, that Neho was your boyfriend, and that you moved in together. What did you expect him to say? How do you think he was going to react?”

Wow, did that knock the halo off my head. She was right. What had I been thinking? I should never have sprung so much on him. What I’d done was foolish. Weeks earlier I had intended on telling dad that I was gay and that Neho was my boyfriend, but every time I thought about it, something more important came up. I knew now that I was merely making excuses because nothing should have been more important than revealing that part of my life to him. In the past, we’d never talked about sex and only once I recalled dad referring to my mom’s gay cousin as “different.” So I didn’t know what his attitude towards gay people was. I didn’t know how he would react when I told him and I dreaded having that conversation. But when the media stories broke about Neho, I also felt I needed to defend him to my parents and ended up lumping everything together. How was I going to make this right? I needed to think about what to do next. “Mom, I gotta go.”

She hugged me. “Be careful.”

I got into my car, started the ignition and gripped the steering wheel tightly. As I pressed down on the accelerator, the car barely moved. I

cursed until I noticed the emergency brake light on. This day was not going well.

Chapter Twenty-Five

When I got home, Neho was in the kitchen fixing dinner. He tilted his head to me as soon as I got through the door. “How did it go?”

“Fine.” My voice was sharp.

“Define fine?” he asked.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

He stopped stirring the gravy and stared at me. “I want to know what your parents think about what’s going on. I want to know if I’m still welcome at their house.”

My voice grew louder. “I told you, I don’t want to talk about it!” I knew my anger was being misdirected.

He folded his arms and stared me down. “Too bad. I do.”

Before I had a chance to respond, there was a knock at the door. I opened it to find a short, beefy man with a crew cut on the doorstep.

“Hi, I’m Brian, your neighbor. I thought I’d bring this loaf of banana bread I just got out of the oven and meet our new neighbors.” His voice, soft and high pitched, was incongruous to his build. He appeared older than us.

We introduced ourselves and invited him inside. I made an effort to adjust my attitude and hide my annoyance. “Thanks for this.” I took the loaf from him and put it on the kitchen table.

“Cree told us you guys were moving in,” said Brian. “My boyfriend, Nat, is at work, but you’ll meet him later. I work at Lyle’s Grocery. What do you guys do?”

“We’re both going to school,” Neho replied.

“I have a part-time waiter job in the evenings,” I said. “It helps pay

tuition and the rent.”

“You guys been together long?” asked Brian.

“Going on six months,” Neho replied. He refused to look at me.

“Nat and I have been together three years,” said Brian. “We met at one of Cree’s parties. If he ever invites you, and he will, Cree and Baylor throw outrageous parties.”

“What does Cree do, aside from renting apartments?” I asked.

“Cree and Baylor own a building supply store. They’re loaded.”

“Are all the residents living here gay?” Neho asked.

“Not all. Cree’s niece and her husband live in the apartment at the end of this building and another straight couple live across from them. But they travel all the time and don’t spend much time at their apartment. You’ll meet the others soon. When the weather gets warm we have cookouts and everybody gets together. We drink and cut loose.”

“Sounds like fun,” I said.

“Well, I can smell something cooking on the stove, so I better let you guys get to your dinner.”

“Thanks for the bread and the invitation,” Neho said as we all rose. “It was nice meeting you.”

Brian kept his eyes on Neho. “I’ve seen you on TV but don’t worry, I don’t believe much of what they report these days. You know, you’re so much more handsome than that picture they keep showing. Oh, I almost forgot. Yesterday when I came home, somebody was looking for you. He was driving a blue Chevy. It looked new.”

Neho glanced at me, then back at Brian. “Do you know who it was?”

“No, he didn’t tell me, but he wanted to know if Neil Warren lived here. He was wearing a nice suit and looked Middle Eastern. I acted dumb and shrugged my shoulders. He wanted to come through the gate, but I wouldn’t let him in. I said he needed to use the button to buzz your apartment.”

“Well, I guess if he really wants to see me, he’ll come around again.”

Just before walking out the door, Brian fixed his gaze on us. “One thing you’ll find out about everybody living here is that we all watch out for one another. You’re safe here.”

After Neho closed the door, he marched back to the kitchen to finish supper. I stayed in the living room reading the newspaper until he called me to the table when the food was ready.

For the remainder of the evening we said very little to each other. Neho was obviously upset that I wouldn't share the conversation I had with my parents, while I was trying to decide how much to say so as not to depress him further. When we went to bed that night, he slept as close to the edge as he could get. I slept uneasily that night and woke up tired. Why can't things return to normal again? What does normal even look like? Why do I feel like everything is closing in on me? As I sat on the side of the bed waiting for Neho to finish in the bathroom, I recalled one of my grandpa's Spanish sayings: "If you fall seven times, get up eight!"

When Neho came out, I handed him a cup of coffee and asked him to sit down. I told him everything. He sat quietly with a sad expression. He never touched his coffee. When I finished, he thanked me for telling him and smiled. That's when I knew things were good between us and my day was going to be alright.

Two days later, Tsosie called Neho with a message from Maddie. "She wants to talk to you and asked me for your phone number."

"Why does she want to talk to me now?"

"She only said that it was important."

"Mom turned her back on me when I really needed her. She left me in jail. I don't know if I want to talk to her. What if Lev put her up to it?"

"He could have. My advice is if you do decide to meet with her, be careful what you say. Don't say anything Lev can use against you in court."

"I don't want her having my phone number. I'll meet her someplace."

Late Friday afternoon, Neho strolled into the Early Brew Café down the street from Tsosi's office. Few customers were in the café. He got his coffee and sat at the table furthest away from anyone. A short time later his mom came in. She spotted him instantly and gave a slight wave. She was wearing a brown pants suit and carried her purse over her shoulder. She ordered her drink, went to his table and stood above him for a second. "Hello, Neho." There was no life in her voice.

“Hey, Mom.”

She sat across from him and laid her purse on her legs. “How are you, son?”

“Are you really interested?”

She leaned toward him. “I’m really interested, Neho.”

“I’ve been better.”

“Are you living with that same friend?”

“His name is Martín and he’s my boyfriend. We rented a one-bedroom apartment together.”

“That’s good. How is school going?”

“It’s going. We have spring break next week.”

“I’m not working anymore,” she said.

“Did Lev finally let you quit?”

“He had nothing to do with that.”

Neho’s brow furrowed. “Really?”

She took a drink from her cup, keeping her eyes on him. “Why does that surprise you?”

“Because he always has the last word.”

“Things have changed, Neho. It’s not like before.”

“Is that what you came to tell me?”

“I came to tell you that I miss you.”

“But you didn’t miss me enough to bail me out of jail.”

She fidgeted with her purse strap. “You don’t know how much I’ve been through since that time. You’re not the only one who’s been affected by all this. What do you think it was like hearing that your son was—”

“That your son was having sex with your husband?”

She lowered her voice and gave him a hard stare. “First you tell me that you’re...” She struggled to find the right word.

“I’m gay, mom.”

She continued. “Then you want me to take back your annuity from Lev. When you had the fight with him that night, what was I to think?”

“Mom, he raped me that night.”

“What was different that night from all those other nights you did it?”

“I can’t believe you’re asking me that question.”

She lifted her eyebrows and cocked her head. “I want to know. What was different that night?”

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“He choked me while he was raping me, Mom. I thought I was going to die. That’s the difference.”

She bit her lip. “He said you wanted more money.”

“That’s a lie. I never asked him for that.”

“Then why did you want me to take your annuity back from him?”

“Because he threatened to bankrupt it if I didn’t do what he wanted. If I didn’t continue having sex with him.”

“Neho, this is getting out of control.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are people investigating Lev to get him disbarred. Do you know what that means?”

“That means he wouldn’t be able to practice law here anymore.”

“I’m willing to let go of what happened between you and Lev because I want to see you again, son. I want us to go back to the way it was before.”

“It can never be that way again, at least not for me.”

“I want you to drop your charge, Neho.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s ruining our family.”

“Mom, you’re the only family I have. Lev is not a part of my family. I want nothing to do with him, ever again.”

“Please, Neho.”

Neho shook his head. “This could have all been avoided so easily. All I wanted was for Lev to apologize. Instead, he turned the tables and blamed me. He refused to take responsibility for any of it. He threatened to put me in jail. He’s in denial, Mom. If I drop the charge, it all gets swept under the carpet and he keeps his job and everything goes back to normal for him. What about me? What do you think it does to my reputation? It’s too late to drop the charge. If I win, I’m vindicated and if I lose, too bad for both of us, because in the end it’s all going to come out.”

A few seconds passed as Maddie thought about what he’d said. “How are you doing with money?”

“Struggling.”

“Maybe I can help you.”

“Did Lev ask you to do this?”

“What do you mean?”

“To have you ask me to drop the charge?”

“Lev and I don’t say much to each other.”

“If that’s true, why are you so concerned about family?”

She pushed her cup away, rose and swung her purse strap over her shoulder. “I need to go. Can we talk again?” Neho stared ahead and didn’t answer.

She bent down and gave him a kiss on his cheek. He waited for her to leave before taking another sip of coffee. Something had changed about her but he couldn’t put his finger on it.

Then it hit him. Her constant smile was no more.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Early Saturday morning, Neho and I loaded up the car for our seven-hour drive to Sedona. Sal had made the reservations for our two-night stay at a resort property that had recently opened. It was located several miles outside of Sedona and closer to the town of Cottonwood.

The day before, I had filled the gas tank in Neho's car, checked the oil level and ensured the spare tire was full of air. That morning, Neho had gotten up early and made ham sandwiches. He had also filled a large brown grocery bag with chips, cookies, and fruit. I had a small cooler that we loaded with sodas and a canteen for water. We had packed our clothes the night before. This was our first overnight trip and we were excited.

Neho insisted on driving and we began the trek shortly after eight o'clock. We headed through the interior streets and made our way onto the interstate that we would follow most of the way. The route was scenic as we passed beautifully sculpted mountains, an array of different landscapes, small quaint villages and larger towns. Once we turned off on the State road leading into Sedona, the topography suddenly changed. The canyons and rock formations were unbelievably striking, and the hues of red and orange sandstone along the steep and narrow cliffs were vibrant and rich. Adding to the plethora of beauty were the junipers, pines and different bushes and shrubs dotting the foothills and meandering into the cliffs. It was all so spectacular. At several places along the road we pulled over just to take in the grandeur of the surroundings.

We arrived at about a quarter to three. The resort was an upscale haunt that was beyond anything we had imagined. The reception area

was furnished with handsome chestnut leather couches and chairs, glass coffee tables and large colorful ceramic planters scattered throughout with hardy ferns and succulent plantings. The earthy wall covering complimented the taupe granite tile. It took only a few minutes to sign the register and receive our keys, and we headed up to the room.

Our room was spacious and nicely appointed. There was a multi-panel sliding glass door with a stunning view of the Cottonwood Mountains. The carpet was light blue shag and the comforters on the two double beds carried that same color scheme. There was a small television sitting on a long desk. On the other side was a round wooden table with two comfy chairs. A basket of fruit and a bottle of champagne lay on the table. The accompanying card read, "May the spirit of Sedona feed your souls. Enjoy!" It was signed Sal and Carlos.

Neho kissed me. "I'm glad we came." We hugged and he whispered, "Let's unpack and go exploring."

"I'd rather stay in here and make out with you," I replied.

He broke away from me. "There's plenty of time for that. Let's go."

We hung up our clothes and meandered through the resort. There was an outdoor swimming pool, and an exercise room that had a Jacuzzi and steam room. A small coffee shop and two restaurants were at the far end of the main building. Next to them was a bar. There were a few customers inside. We went in and sat down. The bartender, a comely blonde woman with long hair, a cute smile and a tight pullover came over. "Welcome! What can I get you boys?" We each ordered a beer. She came back with our order and set the beers in front us. "Your first time here?"

"Yeah, we just got in from Albuquerque," Neho said.

"Where are the wives?" she asked.

Neho's brows creased. "No wives. Just us."

She didn't miss a beat. "How long are you staying?"

"Three days," said Neho.

"There's lots to do here. You won't get bored. You guys have any plans?"

"What do you suggest?" I asked and took a drink of beer.

Her eyes lit up. "We have lots of great hiking trails."

"We're rookies at that."

"Then I suggest starting at Cathedral Rock and taking the trail by

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Oak Creek,” she said. “It’s my favorite. It’s an easy hike until you get to the Rock. It has some subtle elevation changes and if you don’t want to hike up the rock, you can head to the creek. I think you’ll like it.”

“Sounds like you’re quite a hiker,” Neho said.

“As often as I can get away,” she said with a laugh. “I was born here.”

He smiled at her. “Thanks for the suggestion.”

She glanced down the bar to a customer who was waving for attention. “Enjoy, guys.” She left us.

Later that evening we drove into Sedona, found a small grill and ordered beer and burgers for dinner. We were both tired from the trip and got back to the room early. We were in bed by nine.

The following morning we showered and dressed. We nixed the hotel’s restaurant for breakfast after seeing their prices and drove off to find a restaurant that fit our budget. Sofia’s Kitchen was situated between a barber shop and a real estate office in downtown Sedona. The place was packed with customers. It was a quaint diner that had probably been operating for decades. It had wooden tables with red vinyl metal chairs and thin green carpet. It took a bit of time to get coffee and even more time to place our order, but when the food finally came, it was delicious. Neho raved about his Big Bear Breakfast of ham, eggs and pancakes. My Huevos Rancheros were served with exactly the right amount of hot in the chile. With our stomachs almost bursting, we decided to work it off by taking the hike our bartender had suggested.

Oak Creek Trail in the Coconino National Forest was a short drive from Sedona. The day was warm with just a few lingering clouds. We were lucky enough to find a spot at the far end of the parking lot. I got out of the car and instantly took a deep breath of the crisp air. This was going to be a pleasant day.

There were several trails available and we chose one that was branded easy with an estimated two-hour hike time. As we hiked along the path, I was amazed by the beauty of the wildflowers that were just starting their spring bloom. We trekked through a forest of tall, hardy ash, sycamore and maple trees. The creek meandered down the canyon and formed small pools along the way. It was one of the most serene and peaceful places I had ever visited.

About an hour into our hike, we stopped to rest beside the creek in

a small grassy recess. Neho handed me two cans of warm soda from his backpack. I took them to the creek and placed them securely between some of the river rocks to let them cool. I returned to sit next to Neho on the grass, my back against a large, flat rock.

“I don’t want to go back home,” Neho said. “This place is so amazing.”

“Moving here isn’t an option until at least after we graduate,” I replied.

“This place reminds me of the motorcycle trips to the Rocky Mountains my dad would take me on. He loved the mountains and forest, and said nature was his god. He told me that when he was in the forest, he could hear the Spirit speak to him. When he died, he wanted to be cremated and his ashes scattered in the mountains.”

“Did your mom do that?”

“Nah. She buried him in the cemetery.”

I looked up at the beauty of the blue sky and was taken in by the sound of the running water. “My Grandpa Diaz used to take me up to the mountains fishing all the time. I think he felt the same way about nature, but he believed in a *creencia* called the Camino Sagrado.”

“What’s a *creencia*?”

“It’s a belief.”

“What was the belief?” Neho asked.

“When we’re born, the Divinity blesses us with two gifts, a purpose and a path.”

Neho leaned in closer to me. “Is the divinity, God?”

“The Divinity is what you perceive your higher power to be. Grandpa Diaz said that we’re all put here for a reason and it’s up to us to discover why we’re here and to pursue it. The way you do that is by walking the Camino Sagrado. He said that when we’re young, we learn most everything we need to take this journey. We learn from our parents, our relatives, our friends, the church and even strangers. We learn the difference between good and bad, right and wrong, love and hate, truth and falsehood, honesty and deceit. Then, one day, we’re forced to start this journey alone whether we want to or not. All along the path there are road signs and guideposts to continually reassure us. It’s important to keep our eyes open to recognize them. They take the form of accidents, miracles, coincidences, blessings, misfortunes, and luck.”

My eyes teared up and a lump formed in my throat. Grandpa had told me that on a day not unlike this one, while we'd sat by the lake waiting for a fish strike. Neho noticed my tears and reached for my hand to hold it. A few seconds later when I recovered, I continued. "We share this path with many people traveling the same direction. We're obligated to help one another, especially to help those who are old or tired or sick. If we listen to what these people have to say, they'll teach us how to short-cut our journey. That's called wisdom. He said there were many paths on the Camino Sagrado and it's a rough journey. Sometimes you lose your way and accidentally get on another path to your detriment. Oftentimes it's a path that connects with vice and transgression. You find your way back by looking at your reflection in a still pond. The Divinity living inside of you will speak to you and set you back on your chosen path. You'll know you're there when you have a peace and calm resonating in your soul. That feeling is called *aclaración*."

Neho was taking in every word I was speaking. He was as caught up in the *creencia* as I was when I first heard it. "What does that mean?" he asked, his voice almost a whisper.

"Seeking clarity."

He repeated the words, "Seeking clarity." He looked down at the palms of his hands as if searching for a more palpable understanding, then gazed back up at me. "I've never heard anything like this before. It's pretty mind-blowing."

"When you finish your journey, you find yourself back where you first started. By that time you're close to the end of your life. Then you'll feel this ultimate happiness because you've fulfilled your purpose. On your deathbed you'll be at peace, an intense feeling like you've never experienced before. Grandpa Diaz called it *Aclaracion completa*. You'll know then that your soul is getting ready to leave. You'll have no worries, no fears, no doubts. You'll welcome the passage and the bounty that lies beyond this life."

I got up to get our sodas from the creek. When I came back, he was deep in thought. "You all right?" I handed him a soda.

He looked up at me with wide eyes. "I was trying to take in the *creencia*. Do you believe it?"

"Yeah, at times."

"Do you practice it?"

“Not like Grandpa.”

Neho remained silent, sipping on his soda and reflecting on all I had said about the Camino Sagrado.

We had completed our hike in the early afternoon and headed back into Sedona. We found a small pub for lunch and beer. Good, mellow music was playing off the juke box. I gazed at Neho as I raised the bottle and took a drink. I had never seen him so calm or relaxed. In the short time we'd been in Sedona, our spirits had re-energized. The worries, cares and concerns back home were forgotten. We were basking in exhilaration.

After lunch, we took a leisurely walk along Main Street, passing the various shops and businesses. Every now and then, I felt his hand brush up against mine. It was an intentional nudge because occasionally I'd notice a slight smirk on his face. We strolled into several souvenir shops and bought trinkets for ourselves, and Sal and Carlos. By four o'clock, we were heading back to the hotel with the intention of soaking in the Jacuzzi to relieve our aching feet.

When we arrived inside our room, Neho headed into the bathroom to shower. When he came out, I took my turn. As I was drying myself, I wandered into the main room. That's when I saw Neho standing by the bed naked. From the teasing look on his face, there was no doubt as to his intention. For a moment I was speechless. It had been more than two months since we had had sex. I felt my cock rising. I dropped the towel and stepped toward him. In our kiss and embrace, my heart was doing backflips out of excitement. We moved closer to the bed and he lay down. He reached for my hand and brought it closer to him as I climbed on the bed and got on top. It was at that moment that I was overcome with the desire to feel him inside of me. I had never experienced that part of gay sex before, but my body wanted him desperately. The image of the print in Sal's bedroom came to mind, and I leaned over and instinctively muttered what I wanted. His mouth fell open.

“Never mind,” I said.

“It's alright. You just caught me by surprise, is all. We can try it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Did you bring lube?” he asked.

I gave him a wicked grin, jumped off the bed, ran into the bathroom and reached into my travel bag for lubricant that I had brought along.

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He watched silently as I straddled him and waved the lubricant tube. He gave me a cautious smile and a half nod. I unscrewed the cap and squeezed a daub into my hand, then coated his engorged cock. His expression turned to anticipation. Slowly I scooted up, bent my head forward to kiss him and reached behind to begin guiding his rod inside of me. I could feel my heart thumping and my stomach fluttering. A momentary thought of retreat took hold, but like a committed warrior, I pressed on. Raising up and scooting back, I slowly directed his cock to the target. When his burgeoned crown penetrated my insides, I felt an excruciating pain as if I'd been ripped apart. My breathing grew shallow like a fish out of water. I had to stop. The expression on my face must have frightened Neho because his eyes jutted out. I remained still for a few moments until the pain let up. When the full length of his cock was nestled inside of me, the sensation began to feel amazing. I lowered my head and kissed him again. His arms held me tight. At that moment it was as if a spiritual communion was taking place. I grasped the reverence of lovemaking. That notion quickly faded when we got started on a feral mating dance that eventually brought us to climax in explosive surges. Afterward, he slipped out of me, put his arm around my chest and we fell asleep.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

We made love again before leaving Sedona. We even cuddled up at night to sleep. That Neho appeared to be recovering from the rape trauma was music to my soul. As for me, whenever I pondered on my first time getting plowed, my cock would start to rise. Neho apparently suspected as much by the wayward smile on my face and his chance hand-reach to confirm it. It was tough to leave a place that had brought so much serenity and balance back into our lives. I dreaded returning to the morass we had left behind. I felt closer to Neho now than ever before. Regardless of what fate had in store for us, I had more confidence that together, we would weather it.

The trip back to Albuquerque was long and when we finally got to our apartment in the late evening, we were exhausted. As we stumbled through the gate with our luggage, Brian opened his door.

“Where have you girls been?” he asked in his falsetto voice.

“We spent the weekend in Sedona,” Neho said.

“Oooh, nice. Did you have a good time?”

“The best!” I said.

“Well, I just wanted to let you know that the same guy that came around looking for you was here again this morning before I left for work.”

“Did you find out who he was?” Neho asked.

“He works for some bar association. He didn’t say more than that.”

“Thanks for the heads-up.”

“Well, you guys have a good evening. *Ciao.*” He retreated back into his apartment.

When we got inside our apartment, Neho whipped up a quick meal of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and chicken noodle soup. My eyebrows wrinkled at the strange combination, but I didn't say a word and just ate it. Afterward we turned off the lights, headed to the bedroom and collapsed into bed.

Late the following morning, I sat at the kitchen table opening the mail and a letter from my insurance company sent a quick surge shooting through my chest. I was responsible for repair of the damages in the accident I had caused and had to pay \$1,876.52 within forty-five days. I gasped.

Neho looked up from his book. "What's up?"

I held up the letter. "I just got a bill from the insurance company."

"I thought that had all been dismissed."

"The citation was dismissed, but my car insurance had lapsed."

He got up from the couch and took the letter from my hand. "You have to pay this?"

"Yep."

He put one hand on his hip. "Where are we getting the money?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Extra shifts at the restaurant?"

"I'm selling my car," he said. "It's worth a lot of money."

"What are you talking about?"

"We need to pay this bill and I don't see any other option."

"You can't do that! How will you get around?"

"We have your car. If you're not here, I'll take the bus."

"I don't think that's such a good idea, Neho. We need to think about it."

"There's nothing to think about. I'm doing it tomorrow."

Early the following morning, and without my knowledge, Neho drove to the hardware store and bought a for-sale placard. He filled in the contact information with a black marker and pasted it in the back window of his car.

I was on my way to the grocery store when I saw it and marched back inside. "Your car is newer, more reliable, has less mileage, is better on gas, and sporty. Why don't we sell mine?"

Neho sipped his coffee as he put down the morning paper and glanced at me. "It wouldn't sell for enough to pay the insurance bill."

"It's my bill. Let me worry about it."

“It’s our bill.”

“Think about it, Neho. You love that car.

“No Martín, it’s you who loves that car. I don’t.”

“Well, I don’t believe you. Why do we always take your car when we’re running around town?”

“Because it’s smaller, easier to get around and park. And because you like riding in a sporty car.”

“It doesn’t make any sense to sell it. Give me one good reason besides paying off the insurance bill?”

He threw down the paper and leapt to his feet. His words were short, clear and forceful. “Lev gave it to me. I don’t want it. Do you understand.”

I bit my tongue, walked out the door and headed to the store. When I got back Neho was at the stove making breakfast. I put the grocery bag down, went behind him and put my arms around his chest. “I understand,” I said. I kissed the back of his neck and we never spoke about selling the car again.

Hours later the door buzzer rang. I answered it and a voice said, “I wanna buy your car.”

“We’ll be right out,” I said.

It was a sanitation worker who was collecting trash. He asked the price, gave us a fifty dollar deposit and said he would be back at four o’clock with the rest of the money.

“Don’t you want to drive it?” Neho asked.

“Nah, it’s alright.”

True to his word, he returned with \$2,100. After counting it out, Neho handed over the title and two sets of keys.

As Neho leafed through the bills, he mumbled: “Wouldn’t it be great if life was always this easy?”

I just smiled.

On my day off that week, we drove to a steakhouse to mourn the loss of Neho’s car and celebrate the ease of the sale.

Neho was back to normal and our sex life was improving. Then one day I got home from school and found him sitting in the darkened bedroom

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staring into space. He looked so sad. I tried talking to him, but that didn't help. His depressed mood continued into the following week. He was reverting back to where he was before. Neho spent most of his time either reading novels or sleeping. His interest in his studies waned.

Early one morning, I met Bernie for coffee and to collect an arthritis liniment I had promised Tia Sarita. Bernie was going into Santa Fe over the weekend and I'd asked her if she'd pick up the medicine at Clovinas.

I took the package and hugged her. "How much do I owe you?"

Bernie smiled. "Tell Tia Sarita it's on me."

"She always asks about you. When you going to visit her?"

She sighed. "Tell her I'll go by sometime soon."

"Thanks, Bernie."

She stared at me as she took a sip of coffee. "Mom misses you."

"I miss them both, but I can't do anything about it."

"How's Neho?"

"Up and down."

"You look sad, *hermanito*."

I sighed. "I just want to get back to normal again."

"Talk to me," she said.

"It's not your problem—"

"It is if it concerns you. What's going on, Marty?" A couple sat down at a table next to ours. I lowered my voice.

"He changed so much after the rape."

She put her hands on the table and leaned in closer to me. "I thought you told me he was recovering?"

"We went out of town for a weekend last month. We had a great time. Neho was getting past the trauma. But after we got home, he had a relapse. He gets depressed often. Yesterday he stayed in bed all day and missed his classes. He's doing lousy in school. He said he's not going back in the fall. He mopes around the apartment and when I suggest going somewhere or doing something, he just shakes his head. He's worried about what's going to happen with the charges Lev filed against him and if he's going to jail. His eating sucks. I think he's even lost weight. I don't know what to do."

Bernie took a sip of coffee but her eyes remained on me. It was evident to her how seriously Neho's behavior was affecting me. "He needs to see a doctor."

“When I suggest that, he says we can’t afford it.”

“Is that true?”

“We’re scraping by.”

“You need to convince him to see a doctor, Marty. I have some savings. I can help out.”

I shook my head. “No. Thanks for the offer, but I can’t take your money.”

“Does he have friends he can talk to?” she asked.

“He has a friend named Ashlyn, a psych major at school. After we moved to the new apartment and he sold his car, he stopped hanging out with her.”

She leaned back and straightened up. “Neho sold his car?”

“Yeah, that’s another story.”

“Maybe you can call Ashlyn? She might have some suggestions.”

“I don’t have her number, but I can probably hook up with her at school.”

She leaned forward and fixed her eyes on mine. “If you won’t take my money, what can I do for you?”

“Let me know how Mom and Dad are doing.”

She put her hand over mine. “Marty, I’m so sorry for what you and Neho are going through. It’s not going to be this way forever. I promise you, it will all get better.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The week got off to a bad start when I went to the administration office to speak with Ashlyn, and was told she wouldn't be back until Thursday. Then Tsosie called Neho and set up a meeting for the following day, giving no hint as to its purpose. After my last class on Tuesday, I went to the student union building to wait for Neho and drive him to Tsosie's office. A few minutes past one, he appeared. His face was drawn and his body, dragging. "I don't know how much longer I can do this," he whispered.

"I'm so sorry you're going through all this," I said. I wanted to hold him at that moment, but students were mingling all around us. "It's going to be all right. We'll get through it."

The taunts and jeers at the university had been vicious. On one occasion, a paper with the words "Daddy Fucker" was left on the seat of his desk. Neho crumpled it up, tossed it into the basket and tried to ignore the stares of those sitting around him. When he went into a restroom on another occasion, a student hassled him for a blowjob. Neho let loose and busted his lip. Fortunately, the incident went unreported. However, the most gratuitous affront came from Dr. Saiz who taught English Literature. During a class discussion of a Vladimir Nabokov novel, *Lolita*, Dr. Saiz commented that immoral behavior invites media notoriety and public attention that dishonors people and institutions far beyond that of the criminal. His eyes were targeted on Neho. His comment was not lost on those in his classroom.

We headed to my car and drove to the meeting. Neho turned his face to the door window trying to hide his tears. I hated that I couldn't

do anything to ease his pain. When we arrived, Denise quickly escorted us into Tsosie's office. She rose to greet us. It had been more than two months since we had last seen her. Tsosie reached for two envelopes on her desk and handed them to Neho.

"What are they?" he asked.

"I don't know. Your name's on the envelopes, but they were delivered here."

They were postmarked one month apart. He ripped open the flap on the first one and found a cashier's check for one hundred dollars made out in his name. The second envelope had a similarly drafted cashier's check.

"Do you know where they came from?" Tsosie asked.

He laughed. "My mom."

"I have some news to share with you guys," she said.

Neho pocketed the envelopes and we gave each other a wary glance as we sat down.

"Detective Reid wants to re-interview you, Neho."

"I'm not doing that again," he said flatly.

"I know it was hard on you the first time, but maybe this time will be different."

His body stiffened. "Why would it be different?"

"Soon after we filed the charge, two detectives went to your house—"

"You mean Lev's house?" he corrected.

"Yes, Lev's house," she repeated. "They were looking for any evidence to support your charge or Lev's charge against you. Reid said they found some items they want you to identify."

"Huh! What items?"

"I don't know. He wouldn't say."

"It's been more than three months. Why are they doing this now?" Neho asked.

"I don't know that either, but I suspect Lev has something to do with dragging the investigation. He has a lot of juice in police and judicial circles. He knows important people." She sighed and leaned forward as if she wanted to apologize for having to ask him to do this again.

Neho's eyes narrowed. "You think they might be setting me up? Something Lev planted?"

"I can't say for sure, but if you refuse to meet with Reid, it could

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hurt your case.”

Neho looked at me then looked back at Tsosie. “What do you think I should do?”

“I think you and I should meet with him,” she said.

“Do you mind if I talk to Martín alone?” he asked.

“Of course not.” She got up and started walking out of her office. “Call me when you’re done.”

Neho didn’t want to go through the same interrogation as before. We discussed the downside and the potential benefit in the event the evidence went in his favor. In the end, he knuckled down. When Tsosie came back into her office, he avoided eye contact with her.

“Okay, set it up,” Neho said.

That wasn’t the only surprise in store for us that day. When we arrived home later that afternoon, the blue Chevy Brian had told us about was parked in the lot. A polished guy dressed in a dark suit exited and introduced himself. His name was Joshua Abadi, an investigator hired by the local bar association. He extended his hand. Neho refused to shake it and instead asked what this was about.

“I’m investigating the charges against Lev Kazlov,” said Abadi.

Neho crossed his arms. He waited a few seconds before responding. “Could this investigation get him disbarred?”

Abadi’s expression was neutral. “My job is to investigate and report my findings to the client. What happens after that...” He shrugged.

“Fine. I’ll do it,” said Neho.

They set up a time to meet at Tsosie’s office, which unfortunately coincided with a critical term test for my accounting class. But Neho insisted it would be fine. I raced home after the test and asked him about the meeting before I even said hello. Neho gave me a faint smile, the first I’d seen in weeks. He said he wished the cops would have been as curious and interested in his story as Abadi, and then shared every single moment of the interview.

On Thursday, I went to the administration office only to discover that Ashlyn had taken leave and would not return until the following semester. My efforts to reconnect Neho with her were going nowhere.

The spring semester ended in early May. I was relieved that the pressure from school was off and we would have more time to enjoy one another. Neho asked Brian about job openings at Lyle's Grocery. Brian recommended Neho to the manager, a straight man but a staunch gay ally. After his interview, Neho was hired to work full-time in the produce department. With the monthly checks he was receiving from Maddie and our meager savings account, we managed to buy Neho an old, affordable VW. At least now he had transportation to get to work.

Neho liked the work and it helped lift his spirits. While he still suffered from occasional bouts of depression, they were becoming less frequent. Most days his mood was upbeat and pleasant. Even his sense of humor was returning, particularly when we got together with Sal and Carlos for an occasional Sunday dinner. We always had a fun time at their home where we met other gay couples, ate a delicious meal, and sat around their great room talking, joking, laughing and singing while Carlos played the piano. Closer to home, we got together with Brian and Nat for card games. They taught us to play pinochle and the competition between teams, where we constantly switched partners, was intense. Brian and Nat liked talking about their sex life and the three-way tricks they found at gay bars or adult theaters. Those conversations always turned campy and funny. They were good neighbors.

The meeting with Detective Reid was set for early the following week. Neho said that since I wouldn't be allowed inside the room, there was no point in me going.

Neho met Tsosie outside the police department minutes before the appointment. Just like before, they were escorted to Reid's office on the second floor, but a balding, overweight detective named Sam Perry was there also. As soon as the door closed, the questions began. This time they were framed with a more impartial slant and after about an hour of answering questions, Perry reached for a brown box sitting on top of Reid's file cabinet. He said it was evidence they had collected from Lev's house after the charges were filed. The items were taken from Neho's bedroom and asked if he could identify them. There was a belt, underwear and a single blue sock. Neho recognized the first two

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items as his own, but not the sock. It was silk, and only Lev wore those. Perry asked if he was sure about that, and Neho reaffirmed his assertion. When Tsosie asked where specifically the sock was found, neither Reid nor Perry seemed to want to answer the question. When she insisted on knowing, Reid replied that it was found underneath Neho's bed.

"You found this evidence more than three months ago. Why are we just seeing it today?" she asked.

"I don't have an answer for you," Reid replied.

Tsosie's voice rose. "Answer me this. Why is the investigation taking so long?" She was getting irritated by their vague responses.

"We're just following procedure," Reid replied.

"Has Lev ID'd his sock?" Tsosie asked.

Reid glanced at Perry. "I can't say."

"Why not?"

"It's not within my discretion," Reid said to her.

"Has Lev even been booked yet?" she asked.

Reid cupped his hands on his desk. "I'm not sure."

"Are we done here?" Tsosie asked.

Reid appeared edgy as if he couldn't wait to end the interview. "Yes, we are."

Tsosie and Neho stood and, just as they were about to leave, she glanced back at them. "I think you're withholding information and evidence that I'm privileged to have. I'll be filing charges with internal affairs."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“How do you know when these are ripe?” the customer asked Neho.

Neho looked up from stocking onions in the bin. “What?”

The customer held a potato in his hand. He was a young man and wore soiled, oily work clothes. His face was bruised. “You’re that guy, aren’t you. From the news.”

Neho’s forehead furrowed and he gave the customer an angry stare. But the longer he looked at him, the more anxious the customer got. This wasn’t an affront. Neho stopped what he was doing and approached him. “What’s your name?”

“Julian.”

“Are you all right, Julian?”

“I knew you worked here. I didn’t know where else to go.” A tear trickled down his face.

“Are you hurt?”

He didn’t respond.

“Stay here. I’ll be right back.” Neho took off his apron and ran to the back to request an early break. He returned to the produce section where Julian appeared paralyzed where he stood.

“Let’s go outside,” Neho said. He put his arm around Julian’s back and led him down the grocery aisle in slow, measured steps. It was clear to Neho what had happened to Julian. When they reached the outside, Neho led him to the east side of the building where no customers could see them. “Are you hurt?” he asked again.

Julian gave a half nod.

“Do you want me to call an ambulance?”

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He stirred. “No, you can’t do that. I don’t want to go to a hospital.”

“You need help?” Neho said.

“Will you help me?” Tears flowed in rivulets.

Neho thought for a second. “I don’t live too far from here. You want to go to my house?”

Julian kept looking down at the ground and mumbling, almost incoherently. He kept shuffling his feet like he couldn’t stay still. “Yeah, okay.”

“I need to tell them I’m leaving. I’ll get my car and be back in a minute.”

A short time later, as he was helping Julian maneuver into the passenger seat, he detected a metallic scent and looked down to see the back of Julian’s trousers soiled with dark blood. Neho didn’t give a second thought to his passenger seat as his only concern was for Julian. They were silent on the road and when they arrived at the apartment, Neho helped him out and guided him through the gate to the front door.

Julian stopped. He looked frightened. “Is anybody else here?”

“No, my roommate’s out with a friend.”

When they got inside, the first thing Julian wanted was a shower.

“If you do that, the cops aren’t going to be able to gather evidence off your clothes or your body,” Neho cautioned.

“I don’t care. I can’t report it.”

“Why?”

“I just can’t.”

Neho recalled his own rape and the trauma associated with it. He wanted to help Julian but didn’t know if this was the right thing to do. He acted on his instincts. “The bathroom’s in there,” he said, pointing at the hallway. “I’ll get you a towel.”

Julian closed and locked the door. He remained in the shower for an inordinate amount of time. When he was done, Neho lent him underwear, trousers and a T-shirt. They talked but Julian’s words and sentences were largely hard to follow. Later that day Neho drove him back to his car. In the evening, Julian phoned Neho and they continued talking until late into the night. This time he was more clear and coherent.

“I knew you from the news when I went into the store one time. I knew you’d understand.” He began telling his story.

Julian Villa was twenty when he left San Sebastian, a town located

thirty-two miles north of Santa Fe. He had grown up in the town which was situated in one of the poorest counties in New Mexico. Julian had light brown hair, almond-shaped eyes and a sad smile. He was tall and thin, but solid. Everyone knew him as *Guero*, a nickname he got from friends because of his light complexion. It was early morning when Julian packed up his car, kissed his mom's forehead as she lay on the couch sleeping, and left home. His intention was to get as far away from San Sebastian as possible, but by the time he arrived in Albuquerque, the transmission had blown a seal and his wallet was too light to have it fixed.

It was a relief to be away from the gang, the drugs and a life that was leading nowhere. In the beginning, joining had been a rite of passage. For as long as he could remember, life was about fighting, drug dealing, stealing, fencing and not getting caught. He was loyal and dependable, as well as clever and agile. He sat at the same table with the leaders. But after his best friend, Nasario, was arrested for possession, everything changed for him. He recognized his life in San Sebastian was a dead end. There was no future there for him. Gradually he planned his escape. His mom knew and encouraged him to leave. His dad, a mechanic who rarely kept a job for long and whose ruin was alcohol, had taught him how to fix cars. His older brother, a *tecató* who had used drugs since grade school, was now hooked on the dragon—heroin. Julian knew that if he was ever found, revenge would be high. That was why he always carried protection, a 9mm Smith & Wesson.

He quickly found a job at a gas station. Julian's initial aim was to save enough money, buy a dependable car and travel to California. Lots of good jobs were there. But the owner of Hudson Gas and Auto Repair took a liking to him and his work. While that wasn't enough to keep Julian in Albuquerque, the second he cast his eyes on the owner's daughter, Candice Hudson, his plans dissolved.

Candice was blonde and curvy. Her smile, which lit up her brown eyes and filled out her cheeks, was contagious. When she'd drive into the filling station in her red Ford Pinto, Julian would promptly attend to her. When she started responding to his flirting and sweet talk, he asked her out on a date. She accepted. After that they became a couple.

Candice was everything Julian had ever wanted. She was funny and made him laugh. She complimented him often. She brought out the

best in him, and he grew comfortable enough to let his guard down. He revealed all about his family and past life in the gang. She understood and appreciated him all the more. They fell in love. Julian's intention was to propose to her once his finances were straightened out. The midnight shift, which paid a premium wage but kept him at work until after two in the morning, was perfect.

It was a typical weeknight and gas sales had been slow. The overhead clock was barely creeping along. By the time it finally struck the end of his shift, Julian had locked the pumps, counted the cash, documented and balanced the fuel readings, completed all the paperwork and stuffed it all in the floor safe. He turned off the lights and was locking the door when someone grabbed him from behind and put a knife to his back. There were two of them who shoved him back inside the station. They threatened to hurt him if he made any noise. It was a robbery, he suspected, and he was prepared to give them the money in the safe. Quickly his mind calculated how much he had in his wallet. He would give them that, as well, if they asked for it. They pushed him through another door and into the garage bay. He pivoted around to face them. Even in the shadows, he recognized them. They were gang members who'd apparently spotted him working at the gas station. He called out their names and one of them punched him in the face. He tried fighting them, but they quickly subdued him and forced him to the floor. He pleaded for his life. They tied a bandana over his mouth. One of them held Julian's shoulders down while the other tore off Julian's shoes, unbuckled his belt and stripped his pants and underwear off. They turned him on his stomach and for two hours, they remained in the garage bay, taking turns torturing and raping Julian. When they finally finished, he lay on the floor bleeding from his nose, mouth, chest and rectum.

The rapists threatened to kill his family, his mother, if he ever reported them. They used a knife to carve a mark on his chest, the letter T for *traidor*, and left. It was after five in the morning when Julian was finally able to gather the strength to stand up, dress, clean the blood off the floor and rid the bay of any evidence of his assault. He locked the door, set the alarm and left the station. He was too frightened to go to his apartment, so he drove aimlessly around the city for several hours. His mind was racing with no clear idea where to go or what to do, until he recalled seeing Neho one day at the grocery store. He knew Neho would

understand, maybe even help him.

The day following his rape, Julian called in to work sick. He couldn't bring himself to answer his phone the many times it rang. He knew it was Candice on the other end, but he didn't have the courage or strength to speak to her. He remained in his efficiency apartment all day with the door securely locked.

After work Neho drove to see Julian. He was scared and angry. Neho suspected he hadn't eaten and brought him food from a drive-in.

The next day, Neho drove to Julian's during his lunch break. He still appeared listless and his concentration waned. Neho fixed him a sandwich from lunchmeat in his refrigerator, stayed as long as he could, then returned to work.

For the next several days, Neho continued looking in on Julian. They devised a code Neho could use for knocking and phoning. Julian finally began emerging from his fear and depression. He got dressed, drove to work and concocted a story about the reason for his absence. Anyone else would have been fired for the time he had taken off work, but aside from dating the boss's daughter, Julian was an exceptional mechanic. He was put back to work on the day shift.

Julian's relationship with Candice soon soured. He wasn't able to connect with her in the way he had before his assault, mainly because he couldn't bring himself to tell her. The emotions he had felt for her before were dead. He spoke to Neho about it and feared if he told Candice what had happened, she would reject him. He knew they couldn't continue on this way and planned to break off their relationship.

It was evident Julian was battling the shame, humiliation and guilt Neho had also experienced. He continued reaching out to try and help him.

At two o'clock one morning, the phone rang. I answered and it was Julian, who began a rambling and muddled rant as if he were drunk. I passed the phone to Neho. They talked for a few minutes, then the conversation ended. Neho started getting dressed and I did the same. There was no way I was going to let Neho go off at this early hour alone. We didn't exchange words until we got to my car.

"Where we going?" I asked.

Neho gave me the address and I drove in that direction.

Julian lived on the other side of town, but at that hour there was little

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traffic on the streets and the drive was quick and easy. We arrived at his apartment complex to find a small crowd gathered at his door. They'd been awakened by a gunshot. Julian Villa had taken his life with a 9mm Smith & Wesson.

Chapter Thirty

Neho and I discussed whether to attend Julian's funeral in San Sebastian. I was against going because I feared Neho would be recognized and cause unnecessary gossip. But he was insistent. He needed closure, as well as to honor Julian's memory. In order to partially disguise his appearance, Neho went to a barber and had his hair cut while letting his beard grow longer. He bought a pair of dark framed, clear lens glasses. His new look was astonishing. When I see one of the Jonas Brother's, the handsome one, on television these days, he reminds me of Neho back then.

On the day of the funeral, we got up early and drove to San Sebastian. The Catholic church was located one block from the main street. The parking lot was slowly filling with cars and trucks. We parked and made our way to the entrance. People were gathered in small groups, talking in hushed tones in Spanish. There were several women patting their eyes with tissues. We stood outside nervously and waited with all the others, trying not to stare too long at anyone. A few minutes later, the hearse arrived and parked parallel to the church entrance. Everyone took that as a cue to proceed inside. At the entrance, ushers were handing out bulletins and small cards with a religious image in front. On the backside was a memorial that included Julian's name, birth and the date he died. In less than two weeks, he would have celebrated his twenty-first birthday. A lump formed in my throat.

Once inside, Neho and I scooted into a pew toward the center of the nave. In the front I could see the profile of a short woman wearing a black dress and veil sitting next to a gray-haired man wearing a dark suit. The woman was crying. When the casket slowly went by, Neho

pointed out a pallbearer who he believed was Julian's brother. Indeed, when they reached the front, he joined his parents. We looked around the nave to see if we'd recognize Candice, but no one stood out.

The priest began the funeral service, reciting the liturgy and performing the traditional rituals. He ended with the eulogy, which was an emotional testament to a young man who had barely started experiencing life. I saw Neho's eyes tearing and tapped his hand with mine as a small gesture of comfort. When the service ended and the pallbearers walked the casket down the nave, that was when I caught the faces of Julian's parents who followed behind. You could feel the pain in his mother's core, it was heartrending.

We were outside the church when Neho stopped and stared at a dark brown car parked about ten feet away from us. I could easily make out the driver and the passenger inside: Hispanic with short hair and thick, venomous faces. They were observing the funeral but with no expressions of sadness like the other mourners. The passenger's face had a disfiguring gash starting from his earlobe down to his chin. Neho began walking toward them. I was confused and asked what he was doing, but he didn't respond. When he reached a short wall that separated us from the car, he merely stood there staring them down.

"¿*Qué miras, maricón?*" the passenger spat out.

The gay slur didn't frighten Neho and he continued to stare. I expected them to jump out like animals and attack us, so I nudged Neho. "C'mon, let's get out of here." He wouldn't move so I took hold of his arm and led him away. I could hear them laugh, but continued walking toward our car.

"That was him," Neho said.

"That was who?"

"One of the pigs who raped Julian."

"How do you know that?"

"His face. Julian told me about him."

After the funeral, Neho withdrew into himself, just like he had done after his assault. Some days I would see him in deep thought staring at the wall. It was as if he was oblivious to anything around him. After work, he would take long walks or go to a park and sit on a bench, mulling over his thoughts. Occasionally he would confide in me and share his feelings. He was taking Julian's death personally. He felt guilty that he

had not seen it coming. He kept wondering what he could have done differently. It was inconceivable to him that he and I knew all the facts surrounding Julian's rape and suicide, but we were powerless to act, to secure justice. He couldn't let it go and it continued tormenting him. I suggested that he call Ashlyn. Maybe she could offer some guidance and support.

The following day he called her and they met to talk. After that, they visited with one another regularly, just like before. She offered him insight into the theory of suicide and the likelihood that even if he had intervened, it would have only delayed the inevitable. In Ashlyn's view, the only thing that could have possibly saved Julian was intensive mental health intervention. But male rape is so rarely reported, she said, that few practitioners are qualified to offer any meaningful help. In the end, there was little anyone could have done to save Julian. Even with that realization, it still continued to haunt Neho. He researched and read all he could find on male rape. Unfortunately, there were few books or articles on the subject.

It was difficult to find enough time to spend together. Since Neho worked days and I worked nights, our only common day off was Sunday. Usually we would sleep late, have a leisurely breakfast, read the newspaper and sometimes take in a movie in the afternoon. One particular Sunday, we decided to pack a lunch and take a hike in the mountains. We started out about mid-morning and headed to the Jemez, which was about one hour away. Jemez was a historic site that had ruins of a village dating back to the early 1600s. It was also the site of an Indian pueblo. A hiking book we bought held that the east fork was an easy three-mile trek along a narrow canyon and mountain stream.

Neho brought along his backpack, which he loaded up with sandwiches and fruit. I was tasked with carrying the water canteen. We started our hike at the trailhead. The trail was wide and lush with blooming wildflowers on both sides. About one-quarter mile in, the trail became narrow and descended down a steep canyon. We easily navigated the canyon and came across a copse of hardy Douglas firs. We followed the river until we reached a footbridge that crossed it. Beyond that was a canopy of ponderosa pine, blue spruce and aspens. The river soon narrowed and that was where we decided to stop and eat. We chose a small, shaded grassy clearing and sat on the ground. Neho unzipped

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his backpack and broke out the sandwiches. As we began eating, he looked over at me. “Tell me about the Camino Sagrado again.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Exactly what you told me in Sedona.”

I scratched my head. “Why?”

“Because I think it’s resonating with me.”

“What are you talking about?”

He took a bite of his sandwich and thought for a few moments. “I think I’m going to change direction.”

I tilted my head, squinted my eye and scrunched up my cheek trying to figure out where he was going with this. “Uhm, you’re confusing me.”

“I was pretty confused myself. But it’s starting to come together.”

“Explain to me what you’re talking about.”

He took another bite, slowly chewed on it and calmly swallowed it, all the while putting his thoughts together. “I think there has to be a reason for everything that’s happened. I’ve been trying to figure it out, and nothing made much sense to me until I thought about your grandfather’s *creencia*. He talked about taking a journey and the road signs and helping others along the way. Since I started college, the journey I wanted to take when I graduated was to be a drifter in Spain, Portugal and Morocco. I dreamed about that trip. It had a magical resonance. That had been my entire focus.”

“I read the book you lent me that first time we met, Neho. I understand why you wanted to pursue that dream.”

“Now I know it’s not going to happen. I’m stuck in limbo, in this horrible circumstance. Then Julian happened. That wasn’t an accident. I’m convinced it was one of those road signs your grandfather spoke about. I wasn’t able to help Julian, but it’s tugging at me that I might be able to help somebody else in the future. The only way I can do that is if I’m trained.”

“Where’s all this leading?” I asked.

“I’m thinking of changing my political science major. Ashlyn and I have had some long conversations. I’m fairly convinced I want to follow her path.”

It sounded like good news, but I still wasn’t sure. “So you’re not dropping out after all?”

Neho shook his head as he took another bite.

“Are you sure? Have you given this serious thought? You would be tacking on at least three or four more years.”

“I’ve considered that. I’ve also considered the fact that I’ll probably have to finance it with student loans and part-time work if I lose my annuity.”

I sighed and wondered if Neho was delusional. To make such a huge change in college majors was going to be a grueling, demanding, and expensive undertaking. “This is a big decision, boyfriend.”

“Right now, it’s the only thing that makes sense to me.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Saturday night had been busy at the restaurant and by the time I got off work, I was exhausted. Neho was waiting up for me. We sat on the couch sipping on our favorite drinks and listening to music. I cherished those late evenings together. We didn't even have to speak, just feeling him next to me was enough. As I leaned over to kiss him, the phone rang. The desire to ignore it was strong, but the curiosity at the late-night call was stronger. Neho rose up and ran to the kitchen. When he came back, he had a startled look on his face. "It's your sister. You're dad's been in a car accident."

I ran to the phone. Sandra was calling from the hospital. The accident happened on the way home from The Lodge. She didn't know all the details, except that Mom was in serious condition. She had a head injury and was being evaluated for internal bleeding. Dad's injuries were less serious. My body started quaking and my lips trembled. I stared at Neho. "I'm driving to Santa Fe tonight." My voice broke.

"I'm going with you," he said.

As we raced out the door, Neho insisted on driving because he said I looked too distressed. That wasn't too far from the truth as I lit up one cigarette after another throughout the trip. Neho was constantly hounding me about my habit, and I had vowed to quit, but I had yet to gather the willpower. Throughout the trip to Santa Fe, I felt horrible at not having visited my parents since the argument with dad. That was almost two months ago. I prayed that I would never let that happen again if everything turned out alright. Between cigarettes, I was biting my nails and feeling jolts of shock to my stomach.

Just after midnight we arrived at the hospital in Santa Fe. We drove around to the parking lot closest to the emergency entrance. Once inside we sprinted down a short hallway to the waiting area. The first person we saw as we rounded the corner was Frank, Sandra's husband. He was standing by the entrance, smoking.

"Hey, Frank, where's Sandra? How are they?" My voice was loud and roused most everyone sitting in the room.

He took a puff and expelled it. I could see his eyebrows pulled together and his feet shifting nervously. "She's sitting in there." He pointed his jaw to the waiting area. Frank had always been timid and quiet, while Sandra was chatty and social. I could never understand their attraction.

We went inside and saw the room half filled with people. They looked up at us the minute we entered. Sandra was sitting by herself when we approached her. As soon as she saw us, she rose and we all hugged.

"How are they?" I asked.

"Dad's getting stitches on his head and his arm. He's doing okay. Its Mom—" My sister broke down crying. I held Sandra for a few seconds until she recovered. "They still don't know. She's not conscious. Besides the head injury, they think she might have some internal bleeding. They were doing X-rays on her. That's all they would tell me."

"Can we see her?"

"Not yet. They said they'd come for me when they were done."

"Have you talked to Dad?"

"Yeah, he should be out soon."

We sat down as she continued telling us all that she knew. As my parents were driving home from The Lodge and Dad was navigating across an intersection, his car was struck on the passenger's side by another driver who ran a traffic light. It immediately reminded me of my own accident. Dad's car was hit on the back end, his car spun around and slammed against a light pole. Neither of my parents was wearing a seat belt and it was close to a miracle that they weren't thrown out of the car.

"Does Bernie know?" I asked.

"I called her after I called you. She's on her way."

We sat talking and anxiously awaiting any word about Mom. I grew restless and went up to the front desk to inquire about Mom and to ask

when we could see her. The clerk said that Dad was with her presently and that one of us could go in. Since Sandra was the oldest, I suggested that she go first. The clerk buzzed her inside the emergency room. Frank, Neho and I continued to wait. No more than fifteen minutes later, Dad appeared. His walk was stiff. He looked somber and drained. There was a large bandage on his forehead where he'd been stitched. His left elbow was also bandaged. My heart sank seeing him this way. All of us rose as he approached. I didn't know what to expect, but I was ready for just about anything. He came up to me and hugged me with his free arm. I hugged him back. When we released, he looked at Neho. "Hello, son! Thank you for being here." He hugged Neho, and we all sat down. I breathed a sigh of relief that dad had greeted Neho so warmly.

"Mom's not doing too well." His voice was shaky and he kept wringing his hands. "She has a head injury. The doctor says they need to reduce the swelling."

"Is she still unconscious?" I asked.

He gave a slight nod, confirming it.

Just at that moment, Bernie and Adrian arrived. After we told them all we knew, Bernie went in to see Mom just as an emergency room doctor approached us. His name was Dr. Rosin and his manner was calm. We all sat down to hear what he had to say. He explained that Mom had sustained trauma to the right side of her brain. She had cerebral edema, which he described as blood that was pooling and irritating brain tissue. It was causing swelling, which was concerning. At the present time, the doctors were hopeful that the swelling would reduce on its own and her vital signs would stabilize. However, if it continued to swell, they would have to operate to relieve the pressure. For now they were merely observing her, and they probably wouldn't make a decision until the early morning. They would soon be moving her into intensive care.

We threw out a barrage of questions which he tried to answer as best he could. I'm sure he was relieved when we finished with our questions and appeared satisfied with his responses. He said that he would let us know if there were any changes and retreated back into the emergency room. We continued our vigil.

When Bernie came out, I went in to see Mom. It was difficult seeing her unconscious with wires attached to different parts of her body and hooked to machines, and tubes coming out of her mouth and nose. Her

head was bandaged and her face was bruised and ashen. There are no words to describe how I felt at that moment.

I reached for her hand and held it. It was warm and clammy. Sandra was sitting beside Mom's bed. We exchanged long stares but remained silent. Neither of us wanted to express our dire thoughts if there was a chance Mom could hear us. We instead talked to her and told her she was going to be all right. If only I believed those words. I stayed in the room until the orderlies appeared to move her to ICU. As soon as Neho saw me walk out of the emergency room, he stood.

"You all right?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"How does your mom look?"

"Not good."

A second later Dad joined us. "You worked last night, *mi hijo*. You look tired. Why don't both of you go to the house and get some sleep? We'll call if there's any change." I protested until Dad reached for Neho's arm. "Will you take him to our house and put him to bed?"

"What about you?" I asked.

"Don't worry about me. I'm here with your sisters. I'll be all right. Now go."

I felt guilty leaving them, but I was physically and emotionally exhausted. We said our goodbyes and left for my parent's home. It took us less than ten minutes to get there. As soon as we got inside, Neho and I headed down the hallway to my old bedroom, undressed and squeezed into my small bed. It was two forty-five. The instant my head hit the pillow, I was asleep.

When I woke up the following morning, I could hear noises in the house. Neho was still fast asleep. I got up quietly, dressed and strolled barefoot into the kitchen. Dad, Bernie and Adrian were drinking coffee and talking.

The swelling had gone down, but Mom's condition remained critical. Her vital signs were still unstable. We made a plan to watch over mom in shifts. I took the first one while the others went to bed.

The ICU only allowed fifteen-minute visits every hour, so I spent most of my time in the adjoining waiting room or walking the hospital halls. At noon I strolled to the cafeteria and had lunch. When I returned, the nurse told me mom had regained consciousness. I started shaking

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with excitement and ran in to see her. She was awake but confused: all normal reactions, the nurse said. Mom couldn't speak because she was still intubated. I raced to a public phone and called my family. Neho answered. I'm sure he was having trouble understanding me, because my words came out garbled and incoherent, but he shouted bits of what I said to the others and I could hear the cheering and clamoring in the background.

By early afternoon, we were all sitting in the ICU waiting room with Dr. Rosin. He planned to remove the intubation tube and, if Mom's vital signs remained stable, transfer her out of ICU. Neho and I decided we would drive back to Albuquerque, where I would pack a few things and return to Santa Fe that same evening. Neho would stay there as he had work the following day.

We weren't on the highway long before Neho opened up to me. "Remember when I mentioned my suspicions about Adrian? Well, now I know."

"What do you mean? I don't understand."

"Your sister's fiancé is gay."

I suddenly felt an emotional numbness. "How do you know that?"

"Because he asked to suck my cock."

Chapter Thirty-Two

Neho was at work helping unload produce from the delivery truck when Brian approached him. His voice was a singsong tease. “Hey Neil, a cute, young blonde thing is asking for you!”

Neho stopped what he was doing. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about a young lady who came up to my register and asked to see Neil Warren.”

“What does she want?”

“She wants you, Neil.” Brian moved in and whispered, “Does Marty know you crossed over?”

“That’s not gonna happen. Where is she?”

“She’s waiting for you in the produce isle. I told her you’d be right out. Go get em, tiger, grrr.”

Neho shook his head and gave Brian an annoyed stare as he race-walked through the chase doors. The second he reached produce, he saw her. She was standing idly and staring into space. Wearing a blue blouse and tight flared Levis, she was pretty.

Neho approached her. “Are you looking for me?”

She stared at him for a second. “Hello, Neil.” Her face was glum and she was nervously rubbing her pant leg.

“I go by Neho.”

“Is there someplace we can talk, Neho?”

“Not in here,” he replied. “What’s this about?”

“I’m Candice Hudson.”

Neho instantly recognized the name. “You were dating Julian?”

“Yes.”

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Neho waited for a shopper to walk by before he spoke again in a low voice. “How did you know about Julian and me?”

She took a deep breath. “When he wouldn’t take my calls, I drove to his apartment. I saw you going inside.”

“How did you know where I worked?”

“Julian told me he had seen you working here.”

Several more shoppers were within earshot of their conversation and Neho waited until they were gone. He crossed his arms. “What is it you want?”

“I want to know if he was...you know. If that was why he took his life.”

Neho struggled with how to answer her question. His response was short. “No.”

“Do you know why?” she asked.

He looked away for a second as he thought about what to say.

She apparently saw him wavering in his response. “Please, I need to know.”

“Why is that so important?”

“Because I’m carrying his baby.”

His arms slowly slid down to his side and his voice softened. “We can’t talk here, and I don’t get off work until five. Can we meet someplace?”

“I can meet you outside and we can drive to a park,” she suggested.

“Okay.”

“Thank you.” She gave him a weak smile and left.

The remainder of the day, Neho thought about what he would tell Candice. The fact that she had seen him going into Julian’s apartment at a time her boyfriend was avoiding her was suspicious. Was there a way to explain his connection with Julian without revealing the rape? As the hours went by, he still had no clear answer.

Candice was waiting for him by the grocery store entrance when Neho stepped outside. She suggested Harvard Park, which was a short drive away. When they arrived, they parked next to one another and stepped out of their cars.

“What year is your bug?” she asked.

“Seventy-one with lots of miles.” They began walking.

“That’s the first year they came out with the 1600 cc engine with

twin port cylinder heads.”

His eyes widened. “You’re speaking way over my head, Candice.”

“Sorry. My dad taught me all about cars.”

“Lucky you.”

“Julian and I used to spend hours talking about cars. He knew almost as much as me.”

“Was he a good mechanic?”

“My dad doesn’t give compliments lightly. When he said nobody could top Julian, that was huge.”

“How did he take Julian’s suicide?”

“My dad doesn’t talk about his emotions. I know it affected him because he was quiet and irritable. That’s normally not him.”

“How far along are you?” Neho asked.

“Two and a half months.”

“Do your parents know?”

She shook her head. “Not yet.”

“It’s none of my business, but have you thought about what you’re going to do with the baby?”

“I haven’t decided. This is all I have left of Julian. I need to know why everything changed between us, why he stopped loving me. I need to know why he killed himself. I’ve been searching for answers, but nothing makes any sense except that…” Her eyes shifted to the floor before looking at Neho again. “I had thought about meeting you, but I didn’t know if you would even talk to me.”

“He was still in love with you, Candice.”

She stopped walking and fixed her gaze on Neho. “Was he in love with you?”

“We were friends. That’s all. Julian was not gay.”

“Can you tell me what happened to him?”

He sighed heavily. “Let’s go sit down on that bench.” When they were seated, he lowered his head as if searching for words to soften what he was about to reveal. His eyes filled with compassion as he met her questioning stare. “What I’m about to tell you is going to be painful.”

“Nothing can hurt more than losing the only person I’ve ever loved.”

“Julian was raped by two members of the gang he belonged to in San Sebastian.”

Her mouth opened but nothing was uttered. She rose in disbelief and

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took a short walk. She returned and sat back down. Tears welled in her eyes and her voice was shaky. “When did it happen?”

Neho told her what he knew about the rape and how Julian had sought him out because of their shared experience. He mentioned how he had helped her boyfriend and how Julian had wanted to answer her phone calls, but couldn’t bring himself to do that.

The shock at what she was hearing was crushing. “Why didn’t he tell me?” Her voice was a strained murmur.

“He couldn’t tell you because he was too ashamed and humiliated. He thought you would leave him.”

With her shoulders heaving, Candice covered her face as she wept. “I would never have left him. He meant everything to me.”

They sat in silence and when her tears dried, Neho took her hand and cupped it. “I’m so sorry to have to tell you all this.”

She leaned into him and collapsed her head on his shoulder.

“I loved him so much, Neho. I wanted to marry him.” When she recovered after a few moments, she pulled back. “Julian and I had talked about everything the newspapers and TV were reporting about you and your stepfather, and he didn’t have nice things to say about you. When I saw you walk into his apartment that day, I could hardly believe it. After he died, I thought about how I could get back at you, but that’s when I decided I wanted to face you.”

“I’m glad you did.”

“You’re nothing like they reported, Neho. You’re a nice person. What’s going to happen to you with the court?”

“I don’t know. They’re still investigating.”

“I’m glad you told me about Julian. I couldn’t go to his funeral because I was too hurt and sad. Now that I know, maybe I can sleep again.”

“You need to stay healthy for your baby.”

“Tomorrow I’m going to drive to San Sebastian and put flowers on Julian’s grave.”

“That’s good.”

“Good luck, Neho. Can we stay in touch?” she asked.

“I would like that.”

Candice rose, bent and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you for all you did for Julian.” She clasped her hands together, then wept again as she lowered her head and slowly walked away.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Em is so absorbed in my story that she hasn't noticed the sun has set and the patio is now dark. Neither have I.

I suggest moving into the great room and as soon as we get inside, she chucks her sandals, sits on the chair and props her feet on the ottoman. I open another bottle of wine.

"In the time that I've known you and Neho, this is the first I've heard of any of this," she says.

"It's not a story you normally recount to your party friends, Em."

"So you regard me as a party friend?"

"You know what I mean."

"I'm curious about the police charges."

"Eight months after they were filed, we got a call from Tsosie. The prosecutor dismissed all charges. The evidence was insufficient to prove either assault. The conclusion was that the events of that night were consensual. Even though it was disappointing that Neho would not have his day in court, it was a relief to know that he no longer faced Lev's bogus charge and possible jail time."

Even after all the years that have passed, the rage I felt at the time comes back as I recount this part of the story. "As it turned out, the police investigation revealed several discrepancies in Lev's story. For example, the police report noted the smell of alcohol on Lev's breath, despite his denial of having anything to drink that night. The laceration on his forehead was consistent with a kick rather than punch, contradicting his assertion. When asked about the bruises on Neho's neck, Lev had no explanation. The most telling evidence was that a scuffle had occurred

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in Neho's room that night. Items from his bedside table were strewn about, the linen sheet was torn and the mattress was off the rail. Lev offered no explanation. In spite of those findings, Neho had been the one arrested. We later learned that Lev had phoned a colleague that night who intervened with the police chief on his behalf.

"The evidence was turned over to Allen Weitz, the District Attorney at the time. Weitz and Lev knew each other well. Lev was a strong supporter and contributor to Weitz's political campaign for the office. They also belonged to the same tennis club and ran around in the same circles. Because of their close connections, Weitz should have recused himself from the case, but he did not."

As I stand in the middle of the room with the bottle of wine, I can see Em's eyes fill with empathy and her mouth thin with anger.

"For a criminal conviction, the evidence had to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Lev had committed the rape. In this case where Lev and Neho had been having sex for two years with no prior reports of assault, it was presumed to have been consensual. While Lev's credibility came into question based upon the officers' investigation that night, Neho's credibility was suspect as well. Some of the facts in the unread statement Neho signed that night and the interview that Detective Reid conducted were inconsistent. Thus, it resulted in dismissal of both charges.

"Tsosie suggested that Neho could file a criminal complaint where the standard to prove the rape was not as high. However, it would be a civil rather than criminal matter and based upon what was known, it was doubtful Neho could prevail. We were both so emotionally exhausted from the case that the decision, although bittersweet, put an end to the nightmare. At the time we had no idea that Lev's comeuppance would be so costly."

"How was all that reported in the media?"

"It was one of the lead stories on television. The local newspaper reported it on the front page. They asked Neho for a comment, but Tsosie advised that it was best to say nothing."

"I have a feeling this story isn't done yet or you wouldn't have opened more wine."

"Are you up for it?"

Em sticks out her glass. I begin to pour but my hand is shaking. She

takes the bottle from me, pours her wine then reaches over to pour mine. I sit across from Em and take a few deep breaths to overcome my angst, then continue.

Neho got a call from Tsosie telling him Maddie wanted to see him again. Another meeting was set up at the same coffee shop for Saturday morning. By the time Neho arrived, Maddie was already there. After getting his drink, he weaved his way to her table and kissed her on the cheek. Her smile was subdued. She had a disquieted look. “Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, honey. You cut your hair?”

“Yeah, it’s part of my new cover.”

“You look so handsome!”

“Unfortunately, handsome doesn’t pay the bills.”

“Have you been getting the money I’ve sent you?”

“Yeah. Thanks for that. I bought a car with it. It gets me to my job.”

“You’re working?”

“Produce stocker at a grocery store.”

She smiled, but not in her typical expression. It was a forced gesture. “When do you start school again?”

“I go back in two weeks. They’re letting me work part-time so it doesn’t interfere with school.”

“I’m happy for you, Neho.” She raised her coffee cup with both hands and took a slow sip then put it back down. It was as if she was trying to find the words to reveal a hard blow. “I’m so sorry I didn’t listen to you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re annuity. The money your father left you for college.”

“What about it?”

“It’s gone. Lev took it to pay for his legal bills.”

Neho tapped his fingers on the table. His face fell in disappointment. “I guess I’m not surprised.”

She dropped her head and closed her eyes. “We’re not together anymore. I left him.”

“When?”

“A month ago. I asked him for a divorce.”

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“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I never should have married him, Neho. It was a mistake. I’ve given it a lot of thought and now I know that he deceived me.”

“How did he do that?”

Maddie went on to tell Neho the story of how their marriage came to be.

Lev had been with the law firm for ten years when she started to work there. He was forty-six, divorced and had custody of Zaria. He had a reputation of being an aggressive attorney. When Maddie was first introduced to Lev, he gave her a perfunctory greeting and hurriedly retreated back into his office. When he learned she was going to replace his previous secretary who had resigned unexpectedly, he quarreled with the office manager that he wanted someone competent and qualified, despite being clueless as to Maddie’s skills. His complaint fell on deaf ears because everyone knew how difficult Lev was to work for. No one wanted that job.

For the first few months, Lev rode Maddie unrelentingly. If she asked to have him repeat a word or a sentence during dictation, he would criticize her. On the rare occasions he found a typo, misspelling or punctuation error in a letter, he would shout at her. If she came back a minute late from a break, he would threaten to write her up. Maddie had a habit of sporting a smile regardless of the circumstance, and that irritated Lev. Eventually, he came to realize that she was not easily intimidated.

One morning when she appeared for work, she found a party invitation on her desk. It was for a Labor Day barbeque Lev was hosting for all the staff. Maddie was undecided whether to attend because of their sour relationship, but she suspected Lev would be offended if she didn’t show. She couldn’t handle any more of Lev’s rancor and she invited Neho to go along for support. He was a sixteen-year-old teenager who would rather hang around with his friends, but seeing how much it meant to her, he agreed.

They arrived at Lev’s house in the early afternoon and the first person they met was Zaria, who led them through the house and into the kitchen to grab drinks before heading outside where most of the partiers were gathered. While Maddie wandered over to join her work friends,

Zaria took Neho to their makeshift volleyball court. After introducing him to everyone, they chose teams and began playing.

The day was going better than expected for Maddie. The food was good and the conversation, enjoyable. As she made her way back from the restroom to join her friends again, she happened to stop and observe her son playing volleyball. He had his shirt off and appeared to be having a good time. She was amazed at how much muscle he was developing. He had the same handsome features as his dad. As she stood admiring him from a distance, she heard a familiar throaty voice behind her and turned around. It was Lev. He was charming and greeted her with the courtesy he had never extended to her at work. He thanked her for coming to the party and bringing her handsome son along. He asked to meet Neho. After that occasion, his attitude and demeanor toward Maddie changed.

At work the following day, Lev stopped at her desk to thank her again for attending his party. For the remainder of the day, their exchange was pleasant. He came out of his office several times to express his appreciation for rescheduling his court appearances and keeping his calendar organized. By week's end, Maddie was totally baffled by the sudden change in his behavior toward her. Co-workers noticed it and cornered Maddie, asking what was up with her boss. She had no answer.

As the weeks and months went by, Lev grew more indulgent toward her. There were even seemingly romantic advances, like the slow, suggestive smile that made her blush or the compliments on her appearance and the slight brush of his hand on hers. The occasional playful teasing made her smile. She couldn't deny these small gestures were puzzling, but not unwelcome. It had been almost three years since

Robert's death and her loneliness was crushing. Lev's incitement had awakened her spirit. That he took a special interest in Neho by giving him gifts and complimenting him on his sporting feats, was heartening.

Lev invited both of them to join him and Zaria at a private tennis club they belonged to. Soon Neho and Maddie were learning the game and enjoying Saturday brunch at Lev's tennis club.

When Maddie's birthday arrived, Lev hosted a party for the four of them at a posh French restaurant. After blowing out the candles on her birthday cake, Lev handed her a gift in a long, rectangular box wrapped in bright paper. It was a pear-shaped opal on a gold chain and matching

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earrings. By now there was no doubt as to Lev's romantic interest.

Lev's marriage proposal came one week before Valentine's Day. They were married at the courthouse by a county clerk in a simple ceremony three months later.

"I know so much more about Lev now," Maddie said. "I should have seen the signs, Neho. His interest was never in me so much as it was in you."

He shook his head, as if to say that everything she told him he had realized long ago. They remained silent for a time, taking in her words, then Neho asked, "Where are you staying?"

"I'm renting a place for now." She put her hand over his and patted it. "Aside from marrying Lev, my biggest regret is that I believed him instead of you. I should never have turned my back on you, Neho. I was so wrong. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Of course I can. It's all over now."

"Not for Lev it isn't. He's quitting the firm and moving out of Albuquerque."

Neho could hardly contain his huge smile. "Why's he doing that?"

"They're threatening to disbar him. Rather than go to a hearing they scheduled, he decided to give up his license."

"What hearing?"

"A man named Joseph Abadi investigated Lev and after learning about his report, Lev knew he couldn't win."

"What about Zaria?" Even though they weren't particularly close, he still liked her and hoped Lev's actions wouldn't get in the way of her education.

"We don't speak to one another much, but I heard them talking before I left. She plans to stay here until she graduates." There was a moment of reflection before Maddie spoke again. "I miss you so much, Neho."

"I miss you, too, Mom."

"You think we can start mending fences?"

"I'd like that."

"Can I ask you for a favor?"

"Of course."

"Will you and Martín help me look for a house?"

He tipped his head to the side and smiled warmly. "We can do that."

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When Neho got home, he told me about the conversation with Maddie and about losing his annuity. I suggested getting Tsose to file a lawsuit against Lev to recover the money, but he quickly dismissed the idea. Lev had lost his job and was leaving the city. The emotional pain was still so palpable that Neho wanted nothing more to do with him.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Every Sunday, Neho and I drove to Santa Fe to look in on Mom. When she got home from the hospital, she was on bed rest for two days. After that, she balked at any more bed rest and insisted on getting up. Her energy level was low and she needed help walking around the house. Dad and Sandra were there to help her. They also took on the housekeeping chores. Grandma Diaz made dinner several nights each week and Dad picked it up. As the days went by, Mom's strength and spirit continued to grow stronger. Within two weeks, she was managing to prepare simple dishes that only required opening a can and warming food on the stove. After four weeks, she had started rolling out tortillas and cooking beans and chile again. By the time fall semester started, she was mostly back to her old self.

The insurance company declared Dad's car to be a total loss and reimbursed him for its value. Unfortunately, the amount was less than what he believed its true value to be, but it was enough to buy a low mileage replacement. A second insurance check arrived that paid for most of Mom's medical expenses. The thought of suing the driver that caused the accident never entered their minds.

Aside from Mom recovering completely, there was another momentous outcome that resulted from the accident. During one of our visits, Dad invited me to tag along to the grocery store while Neho stayed with Mom. On our drive there, Dad talked about how close he came to losing Mom the night of the accident. He took partial blame for the accident because he believed his drinking at The Lodge had affected his reaction time, which might have otherwise prevented it from happening.

He had given it a lot of thought and decided to quit The Lodge and give up alcohol.

It was hard to believe what I was hearing. “Dad, that’s great. I never thought this would happen. I’m so proud of you.” I had no doubt that Dad had the willpower to carry out his decision. How I wished I could have inherited just a little of that strength to quit smoking.

Neho’s revelation that my sister’s fiancé had come on to him continued bothering me. It was hard to imagine Adrian propositioning Neho at my parent’s home, and especially on the morning I left for the hospital. Adrian was strong with a thick beard, broad chest, and muscled arms. Since he’d started dating Bernie, Adrian had always been invited to all of our family functions and my parents liked him well enough, although Mom thought he was too quiet. I only knew Adrian casually. He was always cordial and friendly, as well as generous, having lent me his motorcycle. I had never detected the slightest clue that he might be bisexual or gay. Bernie and I never kept secrets from each other, and while I loathed the task, I knew I had to tell her.

The week after the start of fall semester, I called Bernie and we arranged to have lunch on Saturday. Lorrie Tunes, an upscale bistro, was located in the Alta Vista Shopping Mall. I chose that restaurant because it had tall booths and a semblance of privacy, since I didn’t know how she would react to the news about Adrian. I arrived early and put my name on the wait list. A few minutes later, Bernie appeared, and we sat next to one another on the bench in the entryway to wait for our booth. Our conversation was mostly about Mom’s recovery and Dad’s new normal, sans alcohol. It didn’t take long before we were seated.

“How’s Neho?” she asked.

“Busy, like me. He changed his major to psychology.”

“That’s great! How soon can I make an appointment with him?”

“Try three or four years from now.”

“Are you kidding? By that time, I won’t be able to afford him. I’ll be married with kids, a mortgage, a car loan, and more bills. Can I make it any sooner?”

“I don’t think so. I thought you were going for that supervisor job?”

“I’m trying.”

The waiter came by to take our order. After he left, I decided it was time to grasp the nettle. “How’s Adrian?”

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She breathed a heavy sigh and her face took on a stony expression. “He’s okay.”

“Just okay?” I asked.

Her voice dropped. “Yeah, just okay.”

There was something she wasn’t telling me. “Have you guys firmed up the date?”

“To get married?”

“No, to go shopping. Of course to get married. What other date would I be talking about?”

“Why are you so interested in our marriage all of a sudden?”

“Just making conversation. If it’s a sore spot, forget I asked.”

She sighed again. “Marty, I don’t know if I want to marry him.”

“What are you saying?”

She looked down for a moment before gazing back up at me. “Keep this between us. I’m seeing somebody else.”

My forehead furrowed. Even though I was shocked to hear that she was stepping out on Adrian, I tried to make light of it. “You tramp. Is this a Me and Mrs. Jones thing?”

She smiled. “He works in the engineering department. His name’s Jude. He’s always flirting when I see him in the cafeteria. One day when I was sitting alone, he came and sat next to me. We hit it off. We’ve been seeing one another ever since.”

“Does Mr. Engineer know about Mr. Apprentice?”

She gave a slight nod. “I told him I was engaged.”

“What did he say?”

“He said he didn’t care.”

“How serious is it getting?”

I recognized that facial expression from when she was young and couldn’t hold back a secret. She took a deep breath. “I think I’m falling for him.”

“Is the feeling mutual?”

“I think so.”

“Is he cute?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Are you sure he’s not gay?”

She laughed. “He’s definitely not gay.”

Our food arrived. The waiter put it in front of us and I started in

on the fries.

“I’m so confused. I don’t know what to do,” Bernie said.

I put my food down and gave her a serious gaze. “Maybe what I’m about to tell you will change your mind.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked as she lifted the burger to her mouth.

“Adrian may not be totally straight. He made a pass at Neho.”

Her mouth fell open and her burger dropped to the plate. “No way! When? What did he do?”

I told her exactly what Neho had told me. She was in disbelief. She asked me some questions about the encounter and then said if that was true, it would change everything. Then she stopped talking. There was no point in trying to divert to another topic, because the revelation had poisoned the conversation. I finished my burger quietly while she just picked at hers then she gave me a quick, false smile as she rolled her shoulders and reached for her purse.

I could tell her mind was racing. “I’m sorry I had to tell you.”

“I’m glad you did, *hermanito*. I need to go.” Bernie stood up.

“Is there anything I can do?”

She looked down at me. “I’ll let you know.” I scooted out of the booth and hugged her. She gave me another false smile and left the restaurant.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Neho was busy all the time. His school schedule was tight since he had decided to take eighteen semester hours. He had gone part-time at Lyle's Grocery. Aside from all of that, he decided to volunteer with the Rape Crisis Hotline after seeing a flyer on the student union bulletin board.

When Neho first contacted the hotline, he spoke with Eleanor Davis, who directed the program. The hotline had been operating for only a few years and was funded solely by donations. With an all-volunteer staff, it was available twenty-four hours a day. Eleanor was appreciative of Neho's offer to assist, but women who sought help from the hotline expected to speak with women. The hotline had no male volunteers. Despite the rejection, Neho asked to meet with her and explain his reasons for volunteering. At first she was reluctant, but after she learned who he was, she agreed. Two days later they met for coffee in the student union cafeteria.

Neho spoke to her about his assault, his experience with Julian and his passion for pursuing his major as a conduit to help others, particularly male survivors of sexual assault. He told her of the tremendous impact the assault had on his life, all the shame, guilt, depression, and suicidal ideations. He talked about the difficulty in finding professionals who understood male sexual assault. He told her how his coping skills had given him the strength to start living his life again. Eleanor was able to relate to him but couldn't offer anything more than a seat in their volunteer training program. However, he would not be allowed to answer the hotline.

Neho accepted her offer.

The training was held on a Saturday. Neho was the only male in the class. It began promptly at eight o'clock and ended at four in the afternoon. The morning consisted of two speakers that talked about policy, procedure, rules, and confidentiality. In the afternoon they focused their talks on rape trauma, the effects of sexual violence, and the support systems that were available. At the end of the session Eleanor thanked him for his participation and support and wished him well in his academic pursuits.

I met Maddie for the first time one September day when Neho and I accompanied her and a real estate agent to look at homes. She was not what I had expected. Maddie had light brown hair with a curtain fringe that curled over her eyes and softened her oval face. Shorter than Neho, she wore a lavender sweater, capri pants and cordovan leather flats. She extended her hand to greet me. Her smile was constant, but I sensed genuineness in her bearing.

After visiting four homes that didn't have much appeal, she suggested stopping at a restaurant for lunch. While we ate and discussed the houses we'd seen, the notion of a townhome came up. The idea of easier outdoor maintenance, common areas, and a lower purchase price stirred her interest.

"Let's do townhouses this afternoon," Maddie said to the agent.

"You're the boss."

She glanced at Neho and me and winked. "Yeah, I am."

After lunch the agent drove us back to his office to look at the available townhome inventory in Maddie's price range. She chose three properties and we got back on the road to see them. While the first townhome was clean, spacious and situated in a desirable location close to a shopping mall, the second property floored her. It was two stories, newly built and located on the east side. It had a stunning contemporary kitchen, a view of the city from the master bedroom balcony and an ample landscaped front yard. She was giddy with delight. "What do you boys think?"

"It's nice," Neho said.

She looked to me. "What do you say, Martín?"

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I knew she had made her decision before she ever asked us. “When do you move in?”

Maddie laughed. “I like you!” She told the agent she didn’t need to see any more properties as she was ready to make an offer.

We drove back to the agent’s office to complete the paperwork. Later that night, Maddie phoned us to say that her offer was accepted, and the move-in date was one month away.

After Maddie got settled into her new home, she invited us there often. Sometimes it was for dinner and a movie on TV, and other times it was just for chat and a glass of wine in the backyard. Neho and I felt comfortable talking to her about LGBT issues, especially after she joined a local chapter of PFLAG. Maddie doted on Neho and I suspected it stemmed from the guilt she felt rejecting him for Lev.

The fall semester was flying by at record speed. Before we knew it, the holidays were upon us. We decided to divide our holiday time between Maddie and my parents. For Thanksgiving, we went to Mom and Dad’s house and got to meet Bernie’s boyfriend, Jude. Handsome with thick, brushed back hair, blue eyes and deliciously red flirtatious lips, he happened to be Jewish. Jude was unpretentious, friendly and perfectly comfortable with Neho and me. My parents took to him much more readily than Adrian. Late in the afternoon, I caught Bernie alone as she was carrying leftovers to her car.

“How did Jude get away with not being gay?” I asked her.

She smiled. “His people avoided Eve and hung out with Moses.”

I laughed. “He’s a keeper, Bernie.”

“Yeah, I think so, too.”

“How did Adrian take the break-up?”

She gave me a soft smile. “You were right on with what you told me.”

“What do you mean?”

“He was arrested for indecent exposure at a highway rest stop. He was doing *el negocio* with another guy.”

My mouth fell open. “Where did you hear that?”

“Aunt Carmela told Mom.”

“I’d like to know where she gets all her information.”

“I don’t know, but when I asked Adrian about it, he got mad and hung up on me. I threw the engagement ring in a box and mailed it back

to him. We haven't spoken since."

"I wish you and Jude good things, Bernie."

She touched my arm. "Thanks for being the best brother anyone could have."

We got through the holidays and rang in another new year. I only had one semester left to complete my undergraduate degree, while Neho had several more years to go. But he was undeterred by that prospect and continued to pal around with Ashlyn as often as he could. She was also scheduled to graduate at the end of the semester.

Greg and I got together often after work to have a drink and talk about our future. He was seriously considering law school. My plan was to get a job until Neho completed graduate school, then return for my graduate degree.

Neho and I remained incredibly busy with work, school and study.

It was a good feeling not to be weighted down with legal uncertainty and to have the support of our families. The two of us were learning to live as a couple and maturing together. That meant discovering how to mend our differences by letting go of nonsense, to manage our finances by budgeting, to put up with our individual quirks by compromising, and to temper our wants in favor of our needs. While it rarely appeared to be bliss and bright growth, our path worked. As for our sex life, it had never been more intense or passionate. Neho was an obsessive romantic.

In mid-March, Candice appeared at Lyle's Grocery to see Neho, once again. He was busy stacking bags of potatoes on the bin when he heard her call him from behind.

"Hi, Neho."

He looked over to see Candice cradling a baby dressed in blue, and his mouth fell open. "Wow. He's beautiful. He has Julian's almond eyes."

"His name's Jayden."

"When was he born?"

"February twenty-six. He was eight pounds, three ounces."

"Isn't that big?"

She laughed. "Big and healthy." Candice was noticeably upbeat and looked happy.

"Healthy like his dad," Neho replied.

Candice smiled as she handed Neho an envelope. "We're having Jayden christened next Sunday and a reception afterward. I hope

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you can come.”

“I’ll be there.”

That Sunday, I had been looking forward to relaxing at home after a busy week, but Neho talked me into accompanying him to Jayden’s christening reception. It was to be held at Candice’s parent’s home, where she was still living. With our wrapped present in hand, a personalized piggy bank Neho had picked out, we marched to the door and rang the bell. A heavy older woman with a thick powdered face and cherry red lipstick greeted us and invited us inside. There was a sizable gathering of people mingling and socializing. As soon as Candice saw us, she came over and hugged Neho. He introduced me to her, and she took us to meet her parents. They were both friendly and welcoming. Her dad led us to a long buffet table that had been set up in the dining room, offered us a glass of punch and told us to help ourselves to the food. The table, festively decorated in white lace and blue balloons, was filled with an assortment of finger sandwiches, salads, chips, various dips, deviled eggs, pastries and a square cake decorated in blue icing. Just as I picked up a paper plate and began serving, Candice appeared and took Neho away. I saw an empty chair and took it. I looked over at the guy sitting in the chair next to it, but he kept staring down at the floor.

“How’s it going?” I asked.

He smirked as he glanced up at me. “It’s going.” He looked Hispanic, with jet-black hair and dark brown features. He was dressed in khakis and a long-sleeved plaid shirt. He was smoking a cigarette and had a cup in his hand. By his clothing and appearance, he looked out of place among the mostly well-dressed Anglo crowd.

I set my cup on the floor and extended my hand. “I’m Marty.”

He shifted his cigarette to his other hand and reached for mine. “Nasario.”

“How do you know Candice?” I took a bite of the sandwich.

He kept looking down at the floor. “Julian and I hung out together.” He took a drag off his cigarette and flicked the ash into the cup he held. “I met her at the cemetery in San Sebastian. What about you?”

“I just met her today. I came with my friend.”

“How does your friend know Candice?” Nasario asked.

I thought about how to answer the question. “It’s complicated.”

“Is that the dude who works at the grocery store?” Nasario asked.

“How’d you know that?”

“Candice and I talk. I seen his picture on TV.”

I picked at the food on my plate.

“Your friend’s a good guy.” Nasario spit in the cup and put his cigarette out.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because he tried to help Julian.”

“You know about that?”

“Like I said, Candice and I talk.”

“Were you at the funeral?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Nah, I was in jail. But when I got out, I heard about what went down.”

“You mean Julian’s suicide?”

“I mean all of it.”

I took another bite of the sandwich and didn’t know how, or if, to continue the conversation. “Neho took it really hard.”

“Is that his name?”

“Yeah.”

He gave me a hard stare. “You can tell Neho that those dudes that Julian met up with ain’t around no more.”

“What dudes? Are you talking about the guy with the scar across his face and his friend?”

“Yeah, them. Somebody gave them some bad shit and they OD’d.” Nasario’s dark eyes spoke louder than the words he uttered. “Later.” He stood and walked away.

Chapter Thirty-Six

The Saturday before Easter, Brian, Nat, Neho and I went out to dinner at a nice restaurant, then we stopped by Maxwell's. The place was jammed with the crowd dancing to the loud beats of a deejay playing the Bee Gees, Donna Summer and the Village People. It was a fun night and we stayed until closing. By the time we got home, we were beat and hit the bed. Early the following morning, the phone woke me up. I managed to open one eye and saw it was barely five o'clock. I had no intention of running to the kitchen to pick it up, so I rolled over and tried to ignore it. It stopped, but a few minutes later it rang again. I looked at Neho who was sound asleep. I swore under my breath, shoved the blankets back and stomped to the kitchen to pick it up. Thoughts of what curses I planned to scream out at the caller were running through my head.

"Hello," I said in the most infuriated voice I could muster.

There was a sweet reply. "This is Eleanor Davis from the Rape Crisis Center. Is Neil Warren available?"

My head quickly cleared and my anger quelled. I didn't know what this lady wanted with Neho, but it had to be important to be calling at this early hour. My voice softened. "He's asleep, but I can wake him."

"Could you please do so?" she asked.

I ran back to the bedroom and roused Neho. When I mentioned the caller, he sprang up and ran to the kitchen. Their conversation was not long and after jotting information on a piece of paper, he hung up. "She wanted to know if I would consider meeting with a client, a student at the university who called them early this morning," Neho said to me. "He only wants to speak with a man. She gave me his location."

“Why are they contacting you now? It’s been eight months since—”

“Because I’m their only male volunteer.”

“Are you going to call him?”

“He’s in bad shape. He needs somebody now. She asked if I could visit him in his dorm.”

“Anything I can do?”

He made doggie eyes at me. “Make coffee while I get dressed?”

“No problem.”

Chris Ryan was a nineteen-year-old freshman at the university. He was a medium-built redhead with a slightly strange personality that was annoying to some but endearing to others. He was always nervous, often too agreeable and had a knack for never forgetting a name. Chris was from a small town located two hours south of Albuquerque. He was attending the university on an academic scholarship. A bright student, Chris held a 3.9 GPA in high school and a thirteen hundred SAT score. He had two older brothers, neither of whom shared his acumen, nor did he share their brawn. During rush week in September, Chris decided to join one of the university fraternities. It was an academic fraternity that didn’t require pledging. He was inducted based on his high school record, and quickly became acquainted with other fraternity brothers. Chris had a trusting nature and soon a friendship evolved with three other freshmen, Steve Harper, Tyson LeBeau, and Russ Ames. Chris spent a lot of his time with them, studying, partying and making the most of college life.

Tyson was the most outspoken and rebellious of the four. While they all smoked pot occasionally and went out drinking on weekends, Tyson usually took it to excess. Oftentimes he would stay behind and party until the early morning. He never showed a hangover and was always in good spirits. He was solidly built and extremely bright. He had a clever personality that kept the others at the top of their game. But there was a dark side to Tyson’s personality. He was narcissistic and spiteful. Most often he liked to brag about his accomplishments and always looked for validation from the others. If anyone challenged him, Tyson retaliated viciously.

One frat brother needled Tyson in the cafeteria about his ridiculous answer to an economics question. He later had the frat brother's car spray painted with *Fag*. When a girl he was dating refused to have sex with him, Tyson started rumors about her mental health. Steve and Russ were aware of Tyson's proclivities but tolerated them because of the bond of friendship they had created. Chris went along because he liked being part of the group. This semester, Chris and Tyson shared the same literature class, although Tyson frequently skipped it and continually tapped Chris for his lecture notes. When their mid-term exam required an essay, Tyson was forced to rely heavily on Chris's notes rather than anything the instructor had said. Several days after turning in the assignment, the instructor accused Tyson of plagiarism and charged him with academic misconduct. He received a failing grade.

Tyson blamed Chris. At Tyson's urging, Steve and Russ stiff-armed Chris. They excluded him from their group and ignored him when he approached them or tried talking to them. Then one night after a bout of heavy drinking, Tyson bullied the two to accompany him to punish their former friend.

The door was unlocked, and Chris was asleep. Once inside, they seized him, held him down and taped his mouth shut. He fought them and tried to defend himself, but they were too strong.

When Tyson was done and he zipped up, he bent down to whisper a threat to return if Chris ever reported it.

Within thirty minutes of Eleanor's call, Neho was knocking on Chris's dorm room. There was no answer. He knocked again, but there was still no answer. He found the nearest phone and called Eleanor. She, in turn, called Chris. When Neho went back and knocked, he heard the latch turn. He went in and found Chris in the corner of his bed, wrapped in a blanket, shaking uncontrollably and frightened.

Neho closed the door and secured the latch. "I'm with rape crisis," he said. "I'm here to help you."

Chris didn't respond.

"My name's Neil Warren, but I go by Neho." He moved closer to the bed and sat on the edge. He looked down. There was dried blood on the

sheets. A strip of duct tape was on the floor next to the night table that was lying on its side with the drawer open and the contents scattered. The clock face on the far corner of the floor had apparently been stepped on and broken. It read two forty-seven. Neho gazed back at Chris. “Will you talk to me?”

Chris gave a slight nod.

“Are you hurt?”

The nod was more pronounced.

“Can I call an ambulance?”

Chris’s voice was a scared cry. “No, don’t do that!”

“Do you know who did this to you?”

His eyes were bulging. He didn’t respond.

Neho kept a gentle, reassuring voice. “That’s okay, Chris. We don’t have to talk about that now—”

“If I report them, they’ll come back to get me.”

“That won’t happen.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’ll do everything I can to protect you.”

Chris didn’t respond.

“Have you called your parents?”

He shook his head.

“The campus police?”

Another head shake.

“I think you need to get to a hospital, Chris. I can drive you there. Can we do that?”

Chris stared at Neho, but his mind was elsewhere.

“Let me help you get dressed.” Neho didn’t wait for a response. He went into Chris’s closet and grabbed a pair of pants and a pullover. He opened the bottom drawer and reached in for a pair of boxers and white socks. He managed to move Chris to the edge of the bed and fit his boxers between his feet while slowly removing the blanket off him. As Chris stood and pulled the boxers up to his waist, Neho noticed small spots of blood soaking the material.

“Hold up, Chris.” Neho grabbed the tissue box on the floor. Pulling a handful of tissue papers out, he flattened and folded them. “You have a little blood there. Put this inside your boxers.” He did as Neho asked, but there was a disconnect between his thoughts and his motions. It was

reflexive rather than cerebral. Chris was in shock. Neho quickly helped get the pants and pullover on him, then his socks and canvas shoes on his feet. "Let's go. I'll help you."

Neho put his arm around his waist, kicked aside the scattered objects on the floor, unlatched the door and led him into the hallway. It was evident that his charge was in pain. Neho released his grip momentarily, ran back into the room and snatched the pillow. He took hold of Chris again and they lumbered down the hall. At that hour it was quiet and empty. When they got to his car, Neho laid the pillow on the passenger seat to soften the ride, and slowly helped him inside. When they arrived at the emergency room, Neho's intention was to get a wheelchair.

"No, don't leave me alone," Chris cried out as he white-knuckled the edges of the car seat.

"Okay, no problem." Neho helped his charge out of the car and they shuffled into the hospital. They made their way to the front counter and after revealing the nature of Chris's wound, a nurse was called. Within minutes he was escorted into an examination room. Neho followed behind.

Two orderlies helped Chris take off his clothes and get into a hospital gown. With help from the orderlies, Chris managed to slowly climb up on the gurney. The same nurse came in and hooked him up to a monitor that measured his vital signs. She asked him some routine questions, noted his answers on a clipboard, and told him to try and relax.

Chris became extremely confused and agitated. Although he was talking much more than earlier, it was disjointed. He spoke about the rape in rambling sentences and blamed himself for the assault. He cried, then grew sullen and withdrawn.

A youngish man in a white coat entered the room and cursorily introduced himself as Dr. Dierksheid. His demeanor was cold and indifferent. He carried a clipboard in his hand and gave Chris a hurried look then glanced down at his paperwork. "What happened?" His voice was brusque.

Chris couldn't seem to form the words to respond, so Neho answered. "He was assaulted in his dorm at the university."

"Who are you?" the doctor asked.

"Neil Warren. I'm with the rape crisis center."

"Are you gay?" he asked Chris in a harsh tone. His expression was

more insolent than merely a clinical inquiry.

Neho's eyes narrowed. "What does that have to do with his assault?"

"If you continue interrupting, I'm going to ask you to leave."

"No, he's staying with me," Chris said defiantly.

Dr. Dierksheid backed down and softened his attitude. "Okay, let's start again. Tell me what happened."

This time Chris was more lucid, and his story coherent. When he finished, Dr. Dierksheid began the examination which involved assessing the damage to his rectum. Chris was visibly frightened and embarrassed by the ordeal and cringed in pain. Dr. Dierksheid took swab samples and carefully secured them in long, thin containers. He ordered a battery of tests. Before he left, he told Chris that the hospital would be contacting the police."

"No, I don't want the police involved," Chris replied.

"We don't have a choice. We're obligated to notify them." He stepped out.

Neho eyed Chris. "Can we call your parents?"

Chris stared down to the floor and didn't respond. After a few seconds he raised his head and gave Neho their phone number.

In the time it took to draw blood, perform the tests and await the results, Neho left the room to make some phone calls, promising Chris to return soon. He left the emergency area, headed to the lobby and phoned Eleanor. She was thankful for the update. Neho asked if she would place the call to Chris's parents and she agreed to do so. As he was giving her the phone number, he noticed two University police officers walk by and approach the front desk. He quickly hung up the phone and hurried back. Rushing into the room, he approached Chris. "Listen to me, this is important. Two police officers are going to be in here soon to interview you." He went on to give the same advice he had received from Tsosie at the police department. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Chris nodded. "I think so."

"Remember, stay calm and don't lose your temper, no matter what. If you can't answer a question, don't say anything."

"Okay."

The officers knocked and entered the room, identifying themselves as Officer Silva and Officer Gutierrez from the university police force. Silva, who was the older of the two, appeared friendly while Gutierrez

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remained quiet. Silva opened his notepad and asked Chris to describe what had happened.

“I don’t want the police involved,” Chris said. His voice was shaky.

“The hospital reported you were assaulted at the university. It’s our job to investigate exactly what happened. It’s in your interest to cooperate with us, Chris. You need to trust us,” Silva said.

“What happens if I don’t cooperate?” Chris asked.

“You could be expelled,” Gutierrez blurted out.

Chris looked at Neho. “Is that true?”

Neho glared at the officers with scorn. “I doubt it, but I don’t know.”

“They threatened to come back and get me if I reported it,” Chris said.

“That won’t happen,” Silva countered. “We’ll make sure.”

Chris thought for a few moments. “Can I talk to Neho alone?”

Silva looked at Gutierrez, then back at Chris. “We’ll be right outside.” They left the room.

As they closed the door, Chris’s breathing grew heavy. “I don’t know what to do.”

“It’s your decision, Chris. Do what you think is right.”

“What would you do in my shoes?”

“I was there,” said Neho. “I was raped by my stepfather. I filed charges against him which were eventually dismissed.”

“If you had another chance, would you still do it?”

The question took Neho by surprise. He wanted to remain truthful but circumspect and thought about how he would answer. “What I did caused me to be shamed and humiliated. I lost the support of my family. I lost the money to pay for my tuition. My reputation was run through the mud. My privacy was destroyed. I’m still paying off my legal bills. In spite of all that, I would do it again, because it taught me that I’m strong in ways I could never imagine possible. My life is better for what I did.” His lips curled faintly to a smile. “You have to decide what’s best for you.”

Neho called the officers back, and Chris agreed to answer their questions. When they asked him to describe the assault, he did so in a level of detail he hadn’t provided to Dr. Dierksheid. But as he told the story, Gutierrez would frequently stop him with questions that reminded Neho of his interview with Detective Reid. Why was your

door unlocked? Why were you sleeping in only your boxer shorts? Were you drunk or high on drugs? Have you ever had sex with anyone in your dorm room before? Did you try to escape? Did you fight back? Are you gay? When Silva asked if Chris knew his assailants, he remained tightlipped. Gutierrez interjected. "If you know them, you need to tell us."

"If I don't, what happens then?"

Gutierrez was growing impatient. His eyes rolled and he shifted his stance. "How are we supposed to protect you if you don't tell us who assaulted you?"

Chris's stare at Gutierrez was blistering. "Steve Harper and Russ Ames held me down while Tyson LeBeau raped me."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

After Chris was released from the hospital, Neho drove him to his dorm where he packed a bag and they set off to a hotel. Neho stayed with Chris in the room until Silas, his father, and Colton, his brother, arrived in the afternoon. When they knocked at the door, Neho answered and went out to the hallway. He closed the door quietly and faced the two of them.

“Your son’s asleep. He’s had a great deal of trauma and needs rest. I don’t know if anyone’s told you, but Chris was assaulted in his dorm room. When he called us, I was sent to talk to him. He needed medical help, so I drove him to the hospital. While he was there, the university police came and took his statement.”

Silas was a stocky man with ginger hair and a grizzled beard. His eyes were cold and his freckled face, red. “That’s what the lady on the phone told me. What I don’t understand is why you people got involved.” His voice was gruff.

“Your son called the rape crisis center and I was asked to go see him,” Neho said.

“Why would Chris do that?” Before Neho could answer, Silas got a knowing look in his eyes. “I want to talk to my son now.”

“I can’t stop you, but I can tell you he’s suffered a lot of pain both mentally and physically. This is the first sleep he’s had all night.”

“Fuck,” he blurted out as his face shriveled with hurt. He stormed off.

“I’m sorry to have to tell your dad all of this,” Neho said to Colton. Colton lowered his head. “How bad is my brother?”

“It’s going to take time for Chris to get better.”

“How much time?”

“I can’t answer that. All I can tell you is to keep an eye on him. He may need to talk to someone who can help him get over this.”

“You mean a shrink?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you a shrink?”

“Not yet.”

Colton put his hands in his pockets. “It’s going to be tough on the old man because Chris is his favorite. He’s the one with all the brains in the family and Dad would do anything for him.”

“You can wait in the room until he wakes up, if you want.” Neho took out a piece of paper and handed it to Colton. “This is how to get in touch with me if Chris wants to talk.”

Colton took it from him. “Thanks for all your help.”

“Good luck.” He handed Colton the room key and left.

Four days later, Chris phoned Neho and asked if they could meet. Neho agreed and they arranged a meeting at our apartment at a time when I wouldn’t be there. When Chris arrived, he was somber. They sat across from one another for several minutes before Chris spoke. He was wringing his hands nervously. “I dropped out of the university. I can’t go back there.”

“I understand,” Neho replied.

“It just keeps playing in my head, again and again. I can’t stop it. I keep asking why he did that to me. I can’t even say his name.”

“What you’re going through is a normal reaction to the trauma you experienced.”

“I’m not gay.”

Neho remained silent.

“I thought I was going to die that night,” Chris said. Those words instantly triggered a flashback in Neho’s mind, but he managed to stay in control. Chris’s voice shook. “I keep wondering what I could have done to stop them. I should have fought harder. I should have locked the door.” Tears streamed down his face and he sobbed.

“You did everything you could to defend yourself. There was nothing more you could have done.”

“I blame myself for what happened.”

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“Listen to me. You are not to blame for what happened any more than I was to blame when I was raped by my stepfather. We did everything we could to keep ourselves alive. There was nothing more we could have done. You have to believe that.”

“I’m so ashamed of myself. I feel like trash. I’m embarrassed to look at my family. I wonder what they think of me. I can hardly face Dad. I don’t know how I’m going to live with myself after this. I just want to end it.”

Neho injected as much compassion into his voice as he could muster. “I can imagine how you’re feeling, Chris. They’re horrible emotions that don’t let up. Are you sleeping at night?”

Chris rubbed his nose on his shirtsleeve then shook his head slightly.

“Are you eating?” Neho asked.

“I don’t get hungry.”

“You’re strong and you will recover from this. With time you’ll get your life back. The shame and guilt and regret will lose its hold on you. You’ll come out of this stronger than you ever thought possible. But you need to talk to somebody that can help you, Chris.”

“That’s why I came to you.”

There was no way Neho was going to do this. He lacked the tools and skill level, and wasn’t licensed yet. “I’m not a therapist.”

Chris arched forward in his chair. “But you’re studying to be one.”

“I’m sorry but I don’t know how to help you with what you need.”

He opened his palms to convey his trust in Neho. “You know better than anybody.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because you were raped.”

Neho’s forehead furrowed. “What would you want me to do for you?”

“I want you to show me how to live with these awful thoughts and feelings. I want you to show me how to be me again.”

“Are you going to drive four hours just so we can talk?”

“I guess so. I mean, yeah. You’re the only one I’ve been able to talk to. I really need this.”

“I’m gay, Chris, and I’m in a relationship. I live here with my boyfriend. Are you all right with that?” As those words came out of his mouth, he recognized that he was agreeing to take on the job. What

could he say to back out now?

“I don’t care about that.”

Neho thought for a few moments. “I’ll meet with you on two conditions. One, that it doesn’t interfere with my school or work, and two, that if you ever seriously consider taking your life, you’ll reach out to me first. I need you to promise me you’ll do that.”

“What if I can’t get a hold of you?”

“You need to keep trying. That’s the only way I’ll agree to help you.”

“Okay, I promise.”

With no way to back out, Neho felt outwitted. A sudden rush of apprehension thrust through him. Could he deliver what Chris expected?

Chris became Neho’s first therapy client, although he never liked to refer to their relationship in that way. He characterized it as doing for someone what Ashlyn did for him. They began seeing one another weekly at first. Chris was working his family’s farm, which gave him flexibility to get away. He borrowed his dad’s truck to drive the ninety-six miles into Albuquerque. The maximum highway speed at that time was fifty-five, which made for a long drive.

During the first two weeks they met at our apartment, Chris talked about the intensity of his memories of the rape and how certain music or loud noise or arguments triggered them. He talked about how helpless he felt and how difficult it was to sleep. The anxiety was crushing. He had fits of anger and lashed out at his family for little or no reason. He talked about how he spent his evenings alone in his bedroom and rarely came out. He refused to eat dinner at the table with his family and instead ate alone in his room. Fear enveloped him like a tight bed sheet. He was frightened that relatives or friends would find out. He feared for his safety, of being raped again. He was distressed at the lack of control of anything in his life. On the second visit, Chris showed Neho a knife with a clip-point blade he bought for protection. He had it looped through his belt and always carried it with him during the day and stored it under his pillow at night.

Neho spoke to me about how inadequate he felt counseling Chris.

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Even though he had experienced much of what this nineteen-year-old was going through, he didn't have the knowledge or skill to effectively help Chris. Neho tried being supportive by offering positive insights about his own journey, but Chris was oblivious to anything he said. Neho believed that Chris' mental state was so damaged and his condition so disabled that he was on the cusp of taking his life. To try and forestall that, Neho phoned Chris several times each week just to check up on him. The fact that Neho was thinking about him between the times they met had a remarkable impact on Chris's recovery. At first it was serious conversations, then after a time it drifted to more lighthearted and amusing chatter, mostly about working at his dad's farm. Like the time when his dad spit chaw black into a milk carton and his brother mistook it for his own drink and tipped it back.

The following week, Neho suggested meeting at a coffee shop. Chris was initially conflicted about making any changes to their meeting place, but finally agreed when Neho mentioned that I would be home, so they wouldn't be alone.

When Neho arrived at the coffee shop, he waited outside for Chris and they went in together. This was the first public place Chris had been to since his assault and it was obvious that he was tense and uneasy. There were few customers in the late afternoon, and they found a table that gave them privacy. After getting their drinks and settling in, Chris began the conversation in an unexpected direction. His questions were in typical nineteen-year-old bluntness. "When you told me that you were raped by your stepdad, I remembered reading the newspaper story about you."

"I'm not surprised," Neho replied.

"Do you hate him?" Chris asked.

"Hate who?"

"Your stepdad."

Neho pondered the question. "I hate what he did to me."

"I know, but do you hate him?"

Neho kept his hands under the table to nervously flex them. "I don't know, Chris. I try never to think about him. I don't want to see him or have any contact with him, ever again."

"But you two were having sex before weren't you?"

"Before he raped me?"

“Yeah.”

Neho wondered how far Chris planned to take this. He didn't like the questions and he could refuse to answer them, but he knew he had to be open if they were to build a relationship. “We had sex for almost two years. He always assaulted me when he was drunk. ”

“How did you feel when you were having sex?”

“I was just coming out. I had never had gay sex before. In the beginning, I think I had feelings of curiosity. After that I grew indifferent to sex with him.”

“Did you enjoy doing it with him?”

“I never enjoyed it. I tolerated it.”

“What changed?”

“I fell in love with someone.”

“Is that when you decided to stop having sex with him?”

“That's when I discovered what he was doing to me was wrong.”

“Do you ever regret having sex with your stepdad?”

“Every time it comes to mind.”

“Are you always so honest, Neho?”

He smiled. “It acts like a magnet for me. Honesty fosters honesty.”

“You know, you're going to be a great therapist when you finish school.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

When the semester ended and I graduated, I was fortunate enough to land an accounting job in Albuquerque with the Federal Energy Administration, a government agency. The FEA wanted me to start two weeks after graduation, so Neho and I decided to take advantage of that time and vacation in San Diego. It was a long drive and we stopped in Yuma for the night. The following morning we drove into the city.

We were amazed by the beauty of San Diego with its rich history, plethora of attractions and active gay community. We spent our four days sightseeing, partying and relaxing on the beach, including a clothing optional one in La Jolla. Neho and I were having sex so often that it reminded me of when we had first gotten together. Regrettably, our time passed too fast. As we got on the freeway and headed back home, we decided to forget Sedona and relocate to San Diego if the opportunity ever arose.

It was hard leaving my part-time job at the restaurant. I had met so many good people there. I couldn't imagine my evenings would be free again. Neho and I were still seeing Sal and Carlos often, and I was glad about that. Above everything else, saying goodbye to Greg, who'd been accepted at Emory University Law School, was the most difficult. On our last day of work, we went out to a bar afterward and celebrated until the early morning. We ended up in my car doing one last joint together and promising to stay in touch. Fourteen years would pass before I would speak to Greg again. By then, he would be living in Atlanta, married with three kids and the CEO of an aerospace manufacturing company.

I reported to my new job early Monday morning, dressed in a suit

and tie. George Abbott directed the audit and accounting department. I had interviewed months earlier with Abbott and Rick Hill, the human resource director, and as I left their office afterward, I was convinced no job offer would be forthcoming because I didn't have the right credentials. That is, I wasn't Anglo, I wasn't married, and I didn't play golf. So it came as a shock when I received Hill's phone call offering me the position at a wage one grade higher than the customary starting salary. The fact that I graduated *cum laude* and was bilingual warranted the increase, he said. I would be classified as a probationary employee for one year, during which time I could be removed at the agency's discretion.

A big hurdle would be to pass a background investigation for the required security clearance. That wouldn't happen until after I began the job. I was certain they would discover that I was gay and in a relationship, which would likely put an end to my employment.

Neho and I had had long conversations about whether I should accept the coveted job in light of the background check. He showed me an article about an employee that had been fired by the Department of Agriculture in 1973 for being gay, and how a judge in San Francisco then challenged the federal governments' policies on discharging gay employees. He reminded me that it was 1976 and the gay rights movement was alive and strong. He said it was unlikely I'd find a better job with so many benefits, and even if I did, I'd run into the same issue. Anyway, what was so wrong with being honest about our relationship, he asked. The most important people in our lives knew about us, so who was left to hide it from? He convinced me to go for it.

Abbott assigned me to work with Stan Sorensen, a seasoned accountant who had more than two decades tenure with the federal government. Stan was a personable, easy-going character with a joking personality, but his dedication and commitment to the work was evident. On the first day, he introduced me to the cadre of accountants and analysts who worked under him. He took me into his office and explained the agency's mission and what my job would entail. I would be collecting, analyzing and auditing data that they received from energy producers and consumers situated within the agency's regional area. He mentioned that it was likely that before the end of the year, the FEA would be subsumed by a new agency called the Department of Energy. When I

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asked what that meant for my job, he joked that it would just be a change of acronyms.

Just as Stan had predicted, three months later DOE came into being and consolidated FEA and several other government agencies under its umbrella. While the integration had the greatest impact on the various agencies top brass, I saw few changes to my job.

The work was challenging. There was so much to learn about the programs, policies, processes and procedures. The FEA maintained regular contact with an attaché attached to the Mexican Consulate, so my bilingual skills became essential. Since I was the only new hire in the department that year, all eyes were on my performance. It was a relief that upon my six-month evaluation, Stan rated me above average. As for the security clearance, it had not yet been completed.

Neho returned to college in September. He was still meeting with Chris about once a month. Chris continued to have random bouts of depression and anxiety, particularly when he came across triggers that would evoke memories of the assault. For Chris, the triggers came in many different forms that Neho was helping him to identify and cope with. Seeing a dark blue color, such as the color of the sweatshirt Tyson wore the night of the assault, triggered a reaction. The smell of alcohol cued a reaction. Chris couldn't sleep with a pillowcase on his pillow as it was a reminder of the rape. He positioned his bed so it directly faced the door. Certain scents, sounds and tastes triggered memories that elicited symptoms of panic and fear.

Against his dad's advice, Chris dropped the charges he had brought against his three former friends. He was too embarrassed to testify at trial and he didn't want to relive the horror of that night. Steve Harper, Tyson LeBeau and Russ Ames continued attending the university. All of the records, documents and photographs attesting to Chris's rape were filed away in a secure university police cabinet that remained closed to public scrutiny.

To a large degree, Chris's meetings with Neho had managed to quell his anxiety and assuage his depression. But there was one occasion that created an uncomfortable predicament for Neho, and challenged him as a budding therapist. Since I was working during the daytime, Neho and Chris continued meeting at our apartment. On that day Chris brought a small bag and handed it to Neho as soon as he

came inside. "This is for you."

Neho smiled. "What is it?"

"I just thought you'd like it."

Inside was a small box. Neho opened it to find a silver signet ring with his initials. His mouth fell open. "Why did you do this?"

"Do you like it?"

"Yes, it's nice, but why?"

"I just wanted to show how much I appreciate everything you've done for me."

"Chris, you didn't have to do this. In the time we've spent together, I've gotten just as much out of it as you have."

They sat down opposite one another. Chris always took the same chair that backed against the wall and faced the front door. "You mean you've enjoyed me crying on your shoulder?"

"Yeah, even that."

"Try it on! The store said we can get it sized if it doesn't fit."

Neho slipped it on and partly lifted his right hand to show it to Chris. "The fit's perfect."

"I think I'm gay," Chris uttered.

Neho jerked his head back. "Why would you say that?"

"Why else would Tyson rape me?"

"We've talked about this before, Chris. Rape isn't about sex. Rape is about resentment and anger. It's about asserting power."

His eyes started wandering around the room as if he was trying to find the right words. "Maybe you've persuaded me that I'm gay."

Neho's mouth fell open. "I don't understand. How have I done that?"

"You're so different from what I thought gays were like."

"How many gay men have you known besides me?"

Chris thought for a few seconds. "Why does that matter?"

"You're stereotyping. What makes you think you're gay?"

"Because I'm liking you a lot."

Neho tried to remain unmoved. "What do you mean?"

"The other night I got hard thinking about you."

"That doesn't mean you're gay, Chris."

"I haven't gotten a bone like that since the rape."

"In psychoanalysis there's a theory called transference. It's the idea that a client can project feelings that they've had for someone else onto

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their therapist. I know we're not in a formal professional relationship, but everything we've done together—"

Chris interrupted as if he wasn't listening. "I beat off to you, Neho. Doesn't that mean something?"

Neho was neither flattered nor offended by what he heard. He knew he couldn't take it personally. He had to maintain a professional demeanor. "What does it mean to you, Chris?"

"That I really like you and I want to have sex with you."

"That will never happen."

"Why not?"

"For two reasons. First, I'm acting as a pseudo therapist to you and that would go against the ethics of therapy. Second, I'm in a monogamous relationship with someone I love very much."

"He doesn't have to know."

"But I would."

"You don't like me?"

"I like you a lot, Chris, but not in that way."

He put his head down as if he was deliberating, then rose and made for the door. "I need to go."

It was obvious that Chris was embarrassed and upset. "Don't go," Neho said as he stood up and blocked his path. "Can we talk about this?"

"What's there to talk about?"

"I'm glad you brought up your feelings to me. It's telling me you're healing."

"I feel like an idiot."

"Listen to me, Chris. This is the first time you've been able to speak so openly about sex since the rape. When I tell you that you're healing, those aren't just hollow words. You are getting closer to being yourself again. Isn't that what you want?"

Chris grew thoughtful and returned to his chair.

Throughout that year and into the next Neho and Chris continued meeting, but less often. Sometimes two months would pass before they saw one another. Chris was recovering. His memories of the assault became less frequent and his emotional balance, manageable. He was sharing dinner with his family most evenings and joining them for social gatherings. He had even started hanging out with old high school friends and started dating a girl he met at a pizza parlor one evening. Inspired

by Neho's story of having changed college major midstream of his program and all the time and work involved, Chris decided to go back to school. The memories were still too fresh to return to the university in Albuquerque, so he applied to several neighboring colleges and was accepted at the Colorado Institute of Engineering and Design.

Eighteen months after the assault, Chris began the fall semester.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Our wine glasses are empty and I face Em. “Have you heard enough?” I ask.

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“I want to hear all of it. But if you’re tired, Marty, I understand. Perhaps we can continue the story another time.”

I bend my head backward to relax my neck muscles, then shut my eyes and massage them with my thumb and index finger. “There is more, Em, but I need a break,” I say. “I’m going outside to get some air. I’ll be back in a minute.” I stand up and head through the French doors to the backyard.

There is a thin crescent moon on the horizon. As I pace up two steps to get a night view of the city, I think about how Neho had always been unwilling to reveal anything about his past abuse to anyone other than me. On several occasions, he had been approached by journalists and authors to tell his story. The first time was a writer working for the New York Times who was doing a feature story on male sexual abuse. She had read all of the archived newspaper articles concerning Neho’s charges against Lev and took a plane to Las Vegas to interview him. He refused to speak about it even when she offered to use a fictitious name. In her efforts to convince Neho that his story would help others, he promised to give it some thought and get back to her. Several days later he called to say he wouldn’t do it. After that, any other inquiries for his story were met with firm refusals.

When I took up creative writing and considered a story based on

Neho's past, he discouraged me. Of course it was my decision, but he threatened never to give me advice nor read a word of the manuscript. Neho was ashamed, embarrassed and emotionally scarred from the abuse. He would never recount it to anyone. Yet, he managed to treat male patients with sexual trauma so successfully.

Am I dishonoring my husband by revealing his story to Em? Like a Catholic priest subject to excommunication for disclosing a confessor's sins even after they've died, as a surviving spouse am I held to a similar standard? Perhaps I should have considered this question earlier in the evening. But then it occurs to me the story is no longer Neho's to tell. It is mine. And I am feeling a sense of comfort and relief talking about it.

I head back into the house and get two bottles of water out of the refrigerator. I go into the room, hand one to my friend and sit back down. "The rest of the story takes place many years later, Em."

In the Spring of 1978, Neho graduated with a degree in psychology. Maddie insisted on throwing him a party, which she hosted at her townhouse and had it catered by my former employer. Sal was invaluable in getting a good price on the food and wine. On our way back from the commencement exercise, I stopped to pick up my elderly friend, Tia Sarita. My parents came and met Maddie for the first time. They got along well. Bernie and her flame, Jude, were there. So was Ashlyn and her fiancé, Isaac. Ashlyn was working as a counselor at a private clinic. Chris and his girlfriend, Sage, a sweet spirited young girl with an outgoing personality, attended. They looked happy together. Candice brought Jayden, who was starting to walk and talk. He had the same handsome features as his father. Even Tsosie showed up with Shasta, her girlfriend. Until that moment I would have never guessed Tsosie was lesbian, which made her even more endearing to us. The gathering was sprinkled with a heavy measure of our gay friends. There were Sal and Carlos, Brian and Nat, Cree and Baylor, and Sterling, a part-time model and full-time hair stylist who lived across from us. He had an outrageously funny personality that kept everybody laughing. It turned out to be a wonderful celebration of a milestone for Neho. Later in the year Neho would be starting school, once again, to pursue a master's in

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clinical mental health counseling. But this time it would be in Las Vegas, Nevada.

My security clearance with the federal government didn't come through until well after a year of my employment. When I'd been interviewed by the government agent, a blue-nosed, stony-faced figure, I came clean and admitted I was gay and in a relationship. I was told later by Stan, my boss, that if I'd been untruthful with that detail, the agency would have fired me not for lying, but for being a security risk; someone who could have been blackmailed or otherwise compromised.

The role of my department had gradually expanded since going under DOE. We were tasked with projects that involved gathering data and compiling statistics on environmental and nuclear projects. Stan broke the news to me that my job was being moved to Las Vegas. The saving grace was that it wasn't scheduled to happen for at least six months. Neho researched whether the university in Las Vegas offered any programs that would satisfy his aspirations, and discovered that it had a program similar to Albuquerque. Fortunately, there was enough time to apply. Two months before our scheduled move, Neho received a letter of acceptance.

When the time came to make our move, it was a mixed emotional experience. It was sad to be leaving our family and friends, but exciting to course out new challenges. Maddie was taking it particularly hard because she had become accustomed to having us at her townhome so often. I was going to miss Bernie, who was now engaged to Jude. We promised to return for their wedding, which was planned for early spring the following year. Mom and Dad wished us well and promised to visit after we settled in.

We sold both cars before the move and raised enough for a down payment on a 1975 coupe. We managed to fit all our belongings between the trunk and the backseat. After spending our last night at Maddie's, we left before the sun came up the following morning. With stops along the way for bathroom breaks and lunch, we made it into Las Vegas by mid-afternoon.

It was August and the temperature was a sweltering one hundred and four degrees. Our new car had no air conditioning. With all the windows down, it only let in a hot breeze that just compounded the sweat dripping down our faces. As I stopped at a traffic light and glanced at a young

lady driving a blue Thunderbird with her long blond hair whisking to the breeze of her air conditioner, I shrunk at our first taste of Las Vegas. Now I knew what it was like to be in the throes of hell. We drove down the strip until we found the Starburst Hotel and Casino, where we had a reservation. We pulled in under the portico of the Starburst, got out and made our way into the lobby to register. As soon as we crossed the double glass doors, there was instant relief of the cool air flowing inside. That's when we started getting excited by the noise from the slot machines, the masses of people, the placards advertising the celebrities in their showrooms, the all-you-can eat buffet, and the flash and glitter everywhere. This was truly an adult playground and it felt intimidating to two tenderfoots with a net worth of nine hundred and thirty-four dollars, excluding a car that lacked air conditioning.

Our room was located in the older section of the property. It was plain with two double beds separated by a single nightstand and was opposite a small table with two bamboo chairs. The room smelled moldy and the air conditioner, loud. We spent most of the afternoon lying out by the pool and in the evening, we feasted at their buffet then walked the strip.

With a map of the city, the following morning we drove east until we found the university and began our apartment search from there. On our drive, we passed several apartment buildings until we came across the Flamingo Palms. It was a large compound located less than a mile from the university. We parked, went into the office and spoke with Maxine, the leasing agent. She showed us an unfurnished two-bedroom unit. Our preference would have been a one-bedroom, but properties didn't rent those units to two unmarried men. When we asked to see a furnished unit, we followed her down the hall to another apartment with the same layout, but with nice furnishings. It had coral shag carpet, a brown velour couch, two light brown fabric chairs, and matching walnut tables. The light wood kitchen table had four chairs. Each of the bedrooms had a double bed with identical light wood headboards and a dresser with large mirrors. The rent and deposit were reasonable. We took it.

My office building was located across the Strip and about ten minutes from our apartment. But within a few months, my work site moved from Las Vegas to the Nevada Test Site, located more than eighty miles northwest of the city. That's when we decided we needed another

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car. We considered going into debt on a new car, but then one of my co-workers offered us a high mileage AMC Gremlin for four hundred dollars.

We took the Gremlin.

Cleon Theriot was southern handsome with redneck charm. His light brown hair blended well with his sandy cream complexion. He was in his late twenties and was the head maintenance man for the Flamingo Palms. Several weeks after moving in, we called the front office to have Cleon repair our stove. Two burners were not producing heat. The following day he appeared at our door with his tool belt affixed low on his waist. Neho was alone in the apartment and let him inside. After showing him the problem, Cleon began taking the burners apart.

“You boys just moved in?” he asked.

“Yeah, we did.”

“What’s your roomie’s name?”

“Martín.”

“Where you boys from?” Cleon asked.

“Albuquerque.”

“Never been there. I’m from Alabama.”

“You’re a long way from home.”

“Ain’t my home no more. No jobs there.”

“That’s too bad.”

“So, you boys queer?”

Neho’s eyes widened as he jumped back. “What?”

“Just askin’,” he said as if it was normal conversation.

“Why would it matter if we’re queer?”

He turned his face to Neho. “You know it ain’t natural. You read the Bible?”

“I’m not religious and I don’t like anybody proselytizing to me.”

“I don’t know about Nevada but in Alabama they throw queers in jail.”

“Are you done yet?” Neho asked.

Cleon formed a sneer across his face. “I’m gonna need a new element for this one. You or Martín gonna be home tomorrow about the

same time? If not, I can use my passkey and get it done.”

“Is there anybody else that can fix it besides you?”

“You can call a repairman, but you gotta pay for it.”

“Let’s get one thing straight, Cleon. I don’t want you in this apartment unless we’re home.”

“You better read your contract or talk to the front desk about that.”

“Let’s keep it short when you come tomorrow.”

“Have a good day,” he said as he left the apartment.

That was just the beginning of our extraordinary relationship with Cleon.

Chapter Forty

In early spring, we took a trip back to Albuquerque for Bernie's wedding. It was an elegant affair at an upscale hotel. She looked stunning and happy. As for Jude, he embraced us like family and introduced Neho and me to his parents as his favorite brothers-in-law. Both of them were being transferred to Phoenix and would be moving before the end of the month. Grandma Diaz was still crushing on Neho when we stopped in to see her at the group home where she was living. A month earlier she had fallen in her home and had been unable to get up. Dad found her the next morning during his daily visit. That's when he spoke with the other relatives and decided she could no longer live alone. As feisty as ever, she didn't care for the arrangement, but she knew there was no alternative. At least she had one good friend living there, Tia Sarita, who had been brought back to Santa Fe and placed in the home when she developed signs of dementia.

Maddie had found a love interest. His name was Bill Strahan and he lived in the same townhome complex. She was adamant that there would be no marriage and they would maintain their own residences. They visited with one another daily and enjoyed their afternoon cocktails together. She was happy to have a companion for plays, concerts and restaurants. As for romantic intimacy, she left that to our imagination.

Mom and Dad got a small dog that they spoiled. Bean was a three-year-old Jack Russell terrier that was given to them by a widowed neighbor who was moving away to live with her son and his wife in Tucson. They fed Bean a scrambled egg for breakfast and a boiled chicken breast at dinnertime. The pantry was full of doggie treats. Dad

took Bean for a walk every day and pampered her as if she were a child. Her comfy bed was placed next to theirs in the bedroom. It was clear to us who the alpha honcho was in my parents' household. Bean lived in the lap of doggie luxury.

Neho was studying hard and making friends at school. He finished the year with outstanding grades. However, the debt on his student loans was accumulating rapidly. Fortunately he could now start claiming in-state tuition. At the start of the following year, he found a part-time job at a coffee shop not far from the university. His workday began at four in the afternoon until eight o'clock, which was closing time.

One late afternoon, Neho left the apartment for work. He got into the Gremlin and turned the ignition, but it wouldn't start. He got out, opened the hood and checked the cable connections at the battery.

Cleon was driving by at that moment and stopped. He rolled down his window. "You having trouble?" he asked.

"It won't turn over," Neho replied.

Cleon turned off his ignition, and got out.

"It's probably the battery," Neho said, despite knowing no more about cars than Grandma Diaz.

"It looks fairly new. Cables don't look bad either." Cleon got inside the car and tried taking the key out of the ignition, but it was stuck. He looked up at Neho. "You have this problem often?"

"Yeah, but you just need to jiggle it."

"That means you got a bad ignition switch. That's why it ain't startin'."

"Oh, no."

"You need to be some place?"

"My job."

"I'll drive you. Let's go."

Neho thought about whether he wanted to do that, but decided it was either Cleon or a taxi. After a moment's hesitation, he locked the Gremlin and got into Cleon's car. "Where you need to be?"

"Charleston Coffee & Tea."

"That where you work?" Cleon asked as he drove off.

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“Yeah, part-time.”

“When I first got to Vegas, I worked at a restaurant in a casino. But I never liked that kind of work. I like using my hands to fix things. My dad’s a welder back home in Alabama, but he can fix anything. He’s the one that taught me.”

“The work’s okay for now until I graduate. It helps pay the bills,” Neho said.

There were a few moments of silence before Cleon spoke. “So do you and your roomie sleep in the same bed?”

Neho thought about how to respond to the question and decided to match his crass manner. “Yeah, we sleep naked with his cock usually touching my ass.”

Cleon’s expression never altered. He kept steering straight ahead. “You ever done it with a girl?”

“Nope. Not interested.”

“How do you know if you’ve never tried it?”

“Have you ever done it with a guy?”

Cleon clenched his jaw and cleared his throat. “Like I told you, it ain’t natural.”

“I’m curious, Cleon, why are you so interested in us?”

“It’s just that I’ve never met queers before. I was just wondering that if you two are like a regular man and wife couple, which one of you does the grocery shopping or the cooking and cleaning or the washing and ironing.”

Neho chuckled. “Martín and I share the chores.”

Cleon laughed. “Back home, Mom did all of that. I couldn’t ever imagine Dad doing any of it. He wouldn’t know where to start. Where did you guys learn to do that stuff?”

“Trial and error.”

“So are you a good cook?”

“I think so.”

“How about your roomie?”

Neho let out a barking laugh. “He needs a lot more practice!”

Cleon pulled into the café parking lot and Neho got out. “Thanks for the ride.”

“If you want, I’ll pick up an ignition switch and install it for you tomorrow.”

“How much?” Neho asked.

“Whatever the part costs. I won’t charge you nothin’. Like I said, I like working with my hands.”

“That would be great!” said Neho. “Thanks again.”

Cleon was odd, but maybe not as bad as his questions suggested.

At noon the following day, Cleon knocked on the door. He was on his lunch break and had the ignition part in his hand. Neho led the way to the Gremlin. It took him less than twenty minutes to install the switch and get the car running again. Afterward, Neho invited Cleon back to the apartment for sandwiches, which he readily accepted.

On Monday evening of the following week, Neho was sitting in front of the TV getting ready to watch the NCAA basketball playoff game. The match was between Louisville and UCLA. I had only a passing interest in it and was sitting at the kitchen table reading the newspaper when we heard a knock. Neho opened the door to find Cleon with a six-pack of beer in his hand. “I thought we could watch the game together,” he said.

Neho smiled. “Sure. Come in.”

From that time on, a friendship evolved between Cleon and us. Saturday evenings during the summer we would drive down to Fremont Street, have dinner and maybe take in a lounge show. Neither Neho nor I gambled, but Cleon liked playing the slot machines. When the lounge show was done, we’d go out to the casino floor and look for him. He always boasted about his winnings but rarely mentioned his losses. One weekend we talked him into going with us to a gay bar. Once inside, and after we had our beers in hand, Cleon meandered to the pool table and put some coins down on the foot rail to challenge the winner. He was a pool shark and ended up hustling drinks from players for most of the night. Aside from his pool skills, he charmed the other players with his good looks, southern drawl and clever wit. Cleon was oblivious to all the cruising eyes and gay flirtations that he incited. He enjoyed himself so much that he asked to tag along with us next time we hit that bar.

When fall arrived, Cleon became a fixture at our apartment on Sunday afternoons. We had a great time drinking beer, eating pizza and watching football. My interest in the sport was growing because of all

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the fun we were having.

In October, Neho quit his job to take an internship position and satisfy Nevada's requirements for a clinical professional counselor license. He was hired by Bellhouse Behavioral Health Clinic, which specialized in individual, couples, family, and teen counseling. While all his client meetings would be supervised, he was thrilled to finally begin working in mental health counseling. In the ensuing months, he couldn't stop talking about all he was learning from the supervisory clinicians and particularly from his clients. It was as if his thoughts were on them constantly. What I recognized in Neho was his passion for what he was doing. There was no doubt in my mind that he had found his calling.

The year whizzed by and in order to grow our savings, we decided not to return home for the winter holidays. For Thanksgiving, the staff at Flamingo Palms decorated the clubhouse and invited all the residents for a dinner get-together. All the food was provided by management and catered by a local restaurant. The residents brought the soda, wine and beer, which we shared. The food was delicious and everyone was in a festive mood that made for a good time.

Christmas turned out to be special that year for reasons we could never have predicted. We welcomed the break from our busy schedules and made reservations at a nice restaurant for Christmas Eve. Sometime in the morning, we met up with Cleon and invited him to join us for dinner, but he made a feeble excuse. When we insisted, he finally agreed.

Cleon arrived a few minutes early, dressed like we had never seen him before. He was always in his drab blue maintenance uniform or old Levis and a tee. But that night he had on a light brown knit sweater and dark trousers. His belt defined his thin waist. Even though his hair was unkempt, he looked striking.

"You clean up good," Neho joked.

"It ain't easy competing with two queers."

"That's right, so don't even try," Neho replied.

"Here, this is for both of you." He handed Neho a wrapped gift.

"We got yours under the tree," I said. "After dinner we can come back here, have a drink and open them."

Cleon and I sat down while Neho went to the kitchen and poured us a shot of Seagram's 7 from a bottle he had bought that morning. Cleon seemed mesmerized by the lights and commented that was the first time

he'd seen a live tree since being back home. Neho returned with three shots and we toasted before heading out.

Christmas Eve dinner was amazing. Everyone at the restaurant was in a happy mood and the cheery ambience brought that out in us, as well. By the time we finished the meal, we were feeling the effects of the two bottles of wine we shared and decided to head back to the apartment.

Once back home, we sat on the floor in front of the tree and opened the gifts we had exchanged with Cleon. He bought us a set of blue His and His embroidered bath towels. We got him a New Orleans Saints jersey, the team he always rooted for. I put on some radio music and Neho wandered into the kitchen. A few seconds later he appeared with three glasses and the Seagram's 7 bottle. He poured the drinks and we sipped on them while recounting holidays from our past. My back was anchored against the wall and Neho had laid his head on my legs. Sometime after midnight we began nodding off.

"You're staying tonight," I told Cleon. "You can have the extra bedroom." He protested mildly, but I knew he was enjoying being in our company too much to leave. We turned off the radio and the tree and retreated to our bedrooms.

No sooner had we shed our clothes and gotten into bed when Neho got on top of me and kissed me. We threw off the covers and slowly Neho playfully bit my nipples. My eyes closed as I enjoyed the sensation of him tonguing his way down my belly to my cock, which he took into his mouth and rhythmically bobbed up and down. I put my hands on his head to stop him from making me cum too fast. My eyes opened and from the thin ray of light through the curtains, I saw a shadow standing in front of our bed. I gasped. It startled Neho who raised his head and eyed me, then turned around. Cleon was standing in front of us naked with his cock at full mast. We weren't in the habit of closing our door and perhaps the alcohol had lessened his inhibitions.

"Can I join you?"

We had never experienced sex with a third before. Neho looked back at me searching for an answer. I smiled and that's all the encouragement he needed as he extended his hand to Cleon. He joined us in bed, and we began a carnal triangle.

Cleon's scent was titillating and sexually arousing; an instant turn-on. His skin was velvety soft and smooth. He kissed us and touched us with

the intensity and passion of a winsome lover. Cleon was circumcised, long and girthy with a slight bend. But his want was to take each of us inside of him. This was Cleon's first experience at sex with men, but he was intent on fulfilling that anal fantasy. We cautioned him that the first time was usually painful and uncomfortable, but he wouldn't be dissuaded. We used copious amounts of lube and let him take the lead as he mounted Neho. He slowly eased down on Neho's cock, his face wincing until he adjusted and took pleasure in it. His pace increased and before long both of them were galloping in unison. Cleon had to stop several times, so as not to ejaculate too soon. After Neho climaxed, they slowly uncoupled and Cleon glanced over to me.

"You don't have to do this, Cleon. I'm alright."

He sneered. "You'll be better when I'm done with you."

He moved over and mounted me. His sexual passion was voracious. We went at it for some time until we finally climaxed together, then he collapsed on top of me. I tried pulling out, but he wouldn't let me. Neho scooted over as close as he could get and we savored the afterglow. Then we talked until the early morning, baring our human frailties.

When we woke up the following morning, Cleon had slipped into the other bedroom and was soundly sleeping. He joined us in the kitchen not long after. We talked about the weather and home and family and routine, but never mentioned the events of that night. Neho made eggs, waffles and bacon for breakfast, and we sat down to eat close to noon. Shortly after that, Cleon decided he needed to leave. We got up and hugged. It was a long, warm embrace that gave some meaning to our night. He took his Christmas present, gave us his usual shifty grin, thanked us, and left. When we saw Cleon days later, however, it was as if nothing had ever happened. His voice and manner were cold and distant. When we invited him over for a beer one night, he refused with a flimsy excuse. It became obvious to us that he was avoiding our company and the only time we saw him was when our apartment needed maintenance. On those few occasions his manner was very professional and despite our attempts at conversation, his responses were short. We missed him a lot. It wasn't until years later we'd learn the reason.

Chapter Forty-One

Neho graduated in May, and we had a small gathering for him at the Flamingo Palms' clubhouse. Cleon made an appearance and that meant so much to both of us. He opened up much like before. That silly grin made it seem like some things never changed.

After Neho became licensed, Bellhouse hired him full-time. With two incomes, we could now afford to trade in the Gremlin for a car with air-conditioning. Then a friend from work told me about a government program that helped veterans buy a home. One weekend, Neho and I visited a new housing development located in the extreme west side of Las Vegas. The sales agent, Eduardo, confirmed what I had been told, which was that veterans could buy with no money down. He invited us to take a tour of their five models. Neho and I couldn't believe what we were hearing and began snaking our way through their inventory. We spent several hours comparing the models and finally decided on the one that we liked the best. Eduardo then drove us to available lots of land that would accommodate that home. Before the end of the day, we had selected the model and the lot, and signed a purchase agreement.

At the beginning of the following year, we had moved into our newly built home that had a monthly mortgage less than our rental. Neho and I were also celebrating the start of our eighth year together, and our commitment to one another couldn't be stronger. With a second car that had air conditioning, and a new home, we were beginning to realize the American dream.

Our workdays were hectic. I was still having to travel to the Nevada test site several days each week and wouldn't get home until late evening.

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Neho's workday was dictated by his appointments. He would typically go into work in the late morning and be home anywhere between five and eight o'clock. It wasn't uncommon to be sitting down to dinner at nine, bed at eleven and getting up the following day to begin the routine again.

As time went on, we made friends with our neighbors and hosted birthdays, holidays and special occasions at each of our houses. The only exception was the Mendoza family that lived at the end of the street, as Stan, the husband, appeared uncomfortable around gay people. Stan and his wife, Margie, both worked with his father who owned a stone and tile shop. Stan was a tile setter and Margie was the bookkeeper. Their two teenage kids, Stevie and Melinda, were enrolled in parochial school. One weekday afternoon, when I managed to get off work early, I was outside getting ready to mow the lawn when Stevie passed by on his skateboard and stopped. "Hey, Mr. D, how goes it?"

"Not bad, Stevie. How's life going for you?"

"Pretty much sucks."

"Sorry to hear that."

"If you want, I can do that for you." Stevie pointed to the lawnmower. "I could use some cash."

"Three bucks," I said.

"Deal." He took the lawnmower from me and began mowing.

Stevie was about sixteen and short like his father. Hispanic with dark, handsome features, he was slightly awkward in the way he moved. When he was done, I invited him to sit on the porch to cool down with a glass of iced tea. Other than an occasional greeting, Stevie and I had never talked much.

"You guys going to see E.T.?" he asked.

"Not until the crowds thin out. How about you?"

"I'm going with friends this weekend."

"You're not taking your sister?"

"Nope. We don't hang out together."

"How's school?" I asked.

Stevie thought for a moment and his face crumpled. "Do you think it's normal to jerk off every day?"

I almost dropped my glass. "Don't you think that's a question for your dad?"

“Are you kidding? He’s a prude!”

“So you think I’m not a prude?”

“You’re gay, Mr. D.”

I didn’t know where this conversation might be heading so I tried to cut off the topic. “Normal is different for everybody, Stevie.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

After that occasion, Stevie would come around almost weekly to mow our lawn and stay for iced tea and a chat with Neho and me. His banter was mostly safe and about typical teenager subjects like school, friends, movies and food. He rarely talked about his parents. Sometimes he’d tell us about the most recent girl he liked or his performance on the basketball team. He enjoyed talking with Neho about sports. During one of our conversations on a Saturday afternoon, Neho asked Stevie if there were other adults in the neighborhood that he talked with.

“No. Nobody’s as cool as you guys.”

“Why do you think we’re cool?” Neho asked.

“Because you’re gay, I guess.”

“What do your parents think about you hanging out here?”

“They never say anything to me about it.”

“Do you think it bothers them?”

Stevie gave Neho a thoughtful gaze. “Maybe Dad, but he’s, like, old school. My best friend, Rahel, is gay. I’ve known him since grade school.”

“He came out to you?” Neho asked.

“Nope, not yet.”

“How do you know he’s gay?”

“I saw him kiss another dude one time.” It surprised us how casual Stevie sounded when he said that.

“What did you think when you saw that?” I asked.

Stevie shrugged his shoulders. “Like I said, Rahel and I have hung out forever and I had already suspected he was gay. To me it wasn’t a big deal.”

“Does he know you saw him?” asked Neho.

“Nuh uh.”

“So are you going to keep it a secret?”

“Yeah, for now. We’re pretty solid so I suspect he’ll come around and earwig me sometime.”

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We remained friends with Stevie long after he graduated high school and went off to college in Phoenix. For the next three years, he would always stop and visit with us when he was home on break. His visits were usually in the late afternoon when he knew we would ask him to stay for dinner. Neho had become an exceptional cook, and Stevie was always hankering for a good meal. Stevie had a wry sense of humor and every Christmas Eve, without fail, we'd find a wrapped present from him at our doorstep—a fruitcake.

Late one evening, Neho and I were watching TV when the doorbell rang. I got up to get it. Standing on the threshold was Stevie. He had made the five-hour trip from Phoenix and looked exhausted and upset. As soon as he crossed into our foyer, he broke down in tears. In all the time I had known Stevie, I had never seen him so distraught. I hugged him to try and bring some comfort. Neho heard the commotion and ran into the room. “What’s going on?” he asked.

Through his tears and anguish Stevie could hardly speak. His voice was shaking. “Rahel died today.”

We had only met Rahel once but heard so many stories from Stevie of their close friendship.

“What happened?” I asked.

“He got AIDS.”

Although we didn’t know Rahel well, we attended his funeral to support Stevie. It was a heart-wrenching, somber affair. The church was packed with relatives and friends. Afterward, we joined the procession of cars to the cemetery. When the interment service was through and we were headed to our car, Stevie met up with us and invited us to the family reception. It was being held at a private club. We tried to graciously decline, but he was insistent.

The reception was a catered affair with a variety of food items for the large gathering. Stevie and his family were seated at the table closest to Rahel’s parents and relatives. Neho and I found two empty seats at a table toward the center of the large hall. That was where we met Gene Wells and Skylar Bogle.

Gene was a volunteer for a newly formed Acquired Immune

Deficiency Syndrome Organization and Skylar was their executive director. After we introduced ourselves and asked about their work, we never expected to hear how serious the AIDS plight was in Nevada. They told us about the desperate needs of patients who had contracted the disease and been disowned by their families, thrown out of their homes and lost their jobs. Without insurance, they were unable to afford medical care and without income, they became homeless. Private hospitals and doctors were reluctant to treat AIDS patients because of the stigma they presented. The means to help people with AIDS was daunting and the needs, acute and critical. Before we left the reception, we exchanged contact information with them. On our drive home we thought about becoming volunteers, but amid the bustle of our work, that notion soon faded, only to resurface the following year.

It had been five years since we had moved out of the apartment and into our home. We still saw Cleon on occasion when we went socializing at the gay bar. He apparently went there often and was usually around the pool table or at the bar laughing, joking and carrying on with other men. We always stopped to chat with him and catch up. Our relationship with him had returned to what it was before, but we never got together outside the bar until we invited him to my birthday party, and he came. Although we had a crowd of people, I managed to corner him and have a conversation. We talked about the friends we knew at Flamingo Palms, our jobs and our lives. But when I casually mentioned the Christmas Eve we spent together, he made an excuse to leave.

In early February of the following year, I was grocery shopping and happened to run into Mary Hayden, a neighbor we knew when we lived at Flamingo Palms. She told me that Cleon was no longer working at the apartment complex. He had just stopped coming in one day and management had replaced him. Neho and I decided to phone him that evening. I placed the call and an unfamiliar male voice answered. I asked for Cleon, and he was reluctant to put him on, asking my reason for calling. I identified myself, mentioned that we were good friends and that I was checking to see if he was okay. He asked for my phone number and said he would call me back. The call didn't come until the following day. The man's name was Quinton and he told us that Cleon wasn't able to talk on the phone. Quinton was initially unwilling to let us visit, but after I explained our long friendship and concern for Cleon, he

agreed. On Saturday afternoon, Neho and I drove to Cleon's apartment.

Cleon lived in North Las Vegas. His apartment was situated along a row of others that had paved parking spots directly in front of each unit. The exterior facades were simple and plain. Each apartment had a picture window and a door leading inside. There was nothing appealing about the property. We parked, exited our car, and made our way to the door. Quinton opened it and greeted us. We had to take a second look because his resemblance to Cleon was uncanny. He invited us inside.

A figure was sitting on an overstuffed chair appearing to sink into it. It was Cleon. He was so thin that it was hard to recognize him but for his distinctive brown hair and blue eyes. He formed a weak smile when he saw us. I couldn't help staring, wondering how this could be. We moved slowly into the room, trying to take in our shock.

"What are you queers doing here?" Cleon's voice was frail.

"Checking on a friend," Neho replied.

"You meet Quin, my twin brother?"

We glanced back at him. "We did a minute ago," I said.

"Turn that down, would you?" Cleon asked Quin as he pointed to the television.

Quin lowered the volume on the set. "I need to head out and get a few things. You need anything?" he asked Cleon.

"Nah, I'm good."

"See you boys later," Quinton said as he headed out the door.

The apartment was sparse and we took a seat on the couch. The TV was tuned to an old movie. It was difficult seeing our friend looking so sick. My mind was reeling at his emaciated frame while also trying to make conversation. Goosebumps rose on the back of my neck.

"How you doing?" I asked.

"Just need to get over this bug and I'll be all right. Quin drove down from Alabama two days ago. He's taking me back home to see the folks. We're going to load everything in his truck and head out on Monday."

"You're going to be staying with your folks?" Neho asked.

"Quin wants me to stay with him and Celia, his wife. They got a big house."

"How do you feel about that?" I asked.

"It'll be okay. Him and I have always been close. He went to school and became a college teacher. Celia's a nurse. They live in Auburn,

about an hour from Montgomery where my folks live.”

We talked about mutual friends and fun times we’d had, avoiding any conversation about his illness. After about twenty minutes it became apparent that Cleon was getting tired. I looked at Neho and he gave me an eye signal that it was time to leave. We stood up and approached Cleon. He put on his oddball smile. “You know, the best time I ever had was that Christmas Eve with you guys. Afterwards, it took a while to get myself back together, so I’m sorry about that.” His eyes teared up. “I love you guys.”

Hearing that, it took everything I had to keep from falling apart. We each hugged his fragile body, expressed our love and wished him well on his trip back home. As soon as we got inside the car, I broke down and cried.

We later learned from a mutual friend that Cleon had withdrawn from us because he’d begun experiencing panic attacks over the fear of being gay. It had taken time for him to finally come to terms with his sexuality.

Two months later we received a small package with a return address from Auburn, Alabama. Inside was the New Orleans Saints jersey we had given Cleon that Christmas. A note attached said he wanted us to have it. It went on to say that Cleon had passed peacefully with his family at his bedside.

Days later we decided to honor Cleon’s memory by volunteering for the Nevada AIDS Project.

Chapter Forty-Two

We contacted Skylar who helped us sign up for training. The AIDS training was held in the evenings, twice a week for four weeks. Both Neho and I altered our work schedules to attend. We met so many amazing volunteers with whom we instantly connected. After our training was completed, Neho offered free counseling sessions to some of the organization's clients, and I started delivering food and running errands. It was good for our spirits to know that our efforts were making a difference in the lives of others.

Twice monthly, on Saturday mornings, I drove my car to the food storehouse and loaded it up with boxes of groceries. I was given a list of names, usually a single initial and surname, and addresses. I knew most of the clients on the list, as I made bimonthly deliveries to them. At each delivery, I would greet the client and carry the box into the kitchen. Sometimes I would put the perishables in the refrigerator and the other goods in the pantry. Most of the clients lived alone and received few visitors, so my visit was always welcomed. I made it a point to take my time and stay for a few minutes to chat with them. They were so appreciative of that small gesture and it felt great getting to know them.

Three months after I had begun my delivery runs, something unexpected happened. I had a route that I usually followed to get the boxes to the clients as quickly and efficiently as possible. One of the new clients had a street address I didn't recognize, so I brought out my city map and pinpointed it. I decided it would be my fifth stop that day.

By late morning, I had arrived at the new client's apartment, located on the west side. It was an easy find, a two-story brick building with

zigzag stairwells leading up to the second floor. Fortunately, this one was on the first floor. I carried the box of groceries to the door and managed to free one hand and knock. When the client opened the door, my jaw dropped.

Aside from looking older, shorter and thinner, and with most of his hair gone, I would know him anywhere. It was Lev. But how could that be? His name wasn't on the list.

"You can put it in the kitchen," he said in his guttural voice as he moved aside for me to pass him. The apartment looked messy and smelled stale. As I plodded through the room, I noticed a walker in the corner. I put the box down on the kitchen table and turned to him. I was at a loss for words, and when I finally introduced myself, I was stuttering. "I-I'm Marty."

He looked down at the box for a second and gave me a nod. "Will you be the one bringing my groceries?"

"Pretty much."

"Can I count on you to be here about this time every second Saturday?"

My mind was reeling. "Yeah, maybe...more or less."

"What's your name, again?"

"Marty."

"Okay."

Since we had previously met only once, I was convinced that he didn't recognize me. "What do I call you?" I asked.

"Mr. Kazlov."

I took the delivery list out of my back pocket and glanced at it. "They have your name spelled wrong. They have you as Calzov. I'll get it corrected."

"Yeah, you do that," he said, not in a demanding voice but more out of agreement.

"Do you want help putting your groceries away?" I routinely asked all my clients this question and it came instinctively. What I really wanted to do was get out as quickly as I could.

He thought for a few seconds. "Yes."

I hurriedly separated the meats, cans, fruits and veggies.

He monitored my every move and directed where everything should go. When I finished, I faced him and said, "All done. I'm outta here."

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“Here,” he said.

I looked down and he had some bills in his hand. “I can’t take it.”

“Why?”

“It’s policy.”

There was no more conversation exchanged between us and I race-walked out of his apartment. When I got into my car, I pounded my fist on the seat out of anger at being blindsided by the delivery. Lev was the last person in the world I ever wanted to see again. I hated him for so many reasons, above all the pain and hurt he caused Neho. At that moment, I hated myself for being so nice to him. I couldn’t continue delivering to Lev. I needed to come up with a reason for the storehouse supervisor to reassign that delivery.

And what about Neho? Should I tell him? It had been fourteen years since that horrible time at university. Lev and Zaria were far from our minds and, to my recollection, their names had never been spoken since we left Albuquerque. We had a happy home, a good life and lots of friends. Now this! Neho would be shocked to learn Lev was living in Las Vegas. It was likely he would become depressed, having to recall those horrible memories. We never kept secrets from each other. Would it be a breach of trust keeping this from him? While my gut told me to come clean, my mind said otherwise. If I never delivered to Lev again, I could put this occurrence behind me and forget about it.

I drove back to the storehouse after my last delivery to speak with Nicky, the manager, but she had already left. Nicky was the only paid storehouse employee. Aside from supervising volunteers who received the food trucks and filled the boxes, she also prepared the delivery lists. Managing the storehouse was a complex process which she expertly coordinated.

Throughout the next two weeks, the secret I was keeping from Neho kept gnawing at me. I called Bernie and asked her advice. She said to tell Neho and let him decide what to do with the information, reminding me that things have a way of coming back and biting us in the ass. I decided to take her advice, but when the time came, I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

On Saturday, I arrived early and asked Nicky if she could reassign Lev’s delivery to someone else. She wanted to know the nature of the problem. I didn’t want to make it too harsh because the agency had a

strict policy of cutting off services to clients who abused volunteers. I told her that he reminded me of an awful person from my past. She didn't have anyone else available that day and pleaded with me to make the delivery, promising to place it on another volunteer list the following week.

Lev's delivery that Saturday was almost a repeat of the first time. The stale smell hit me as I crossed the threshold and more closely took in the state of the apartment. The front room was small and had a low-weave, light brown textured carpet. It was dirty and probably hadn't been vacuumed in months. In one corner facing the front window was a recliner with a small table and lamp next to it. On top of the table was a stack of books. The television sat below the front window and an old couch and coffee table were backed against the adjacent wall. There were stacks of sports magazines scattered on the coffee table. A thick layer of dust was everywhere. Above the couch was a framed and signed poster of McEnroe and Connors at the 1984 Wimbledon finals. There were no photographs, knick-knacks or house plants. Just like the last time, my conversation with Lev was minimal, but after I finished putting his groceries away and as I was leaving the apartment he thanked me. I raced to my car and drove off. My stomach was in knots. I hated what I was doing.

When I arrived at the storehouse for the usual food delivery two weeks later, Nicky wasn't there. She had taken a vacation and left Ross, a long-term volunteer, in charge. I got my delivery list and noticed Lev was still on it. Ross was busy supervising other volunteers who were filling food boxes when I approached and asked to speak to him. He gave me half his attention while continuing to oversee the operation. He spoke rapidly. "What do you need, Marty? Make it quick."

"Nicky was supposed to take the delivery to Lev Kazlov off my list."

"Sorry, don't know anything about that. She'll be back next week—"

"I can't deliver to him."

He gave me a forced smile. "Look, Marty, I don't have anybody else. Do it today and take it up with her when she gets back." Before I could answer, he walked off.

My bad luck continued because a different client had been taken off my list, resulting in me arriving at Lev's apartment earlier than usual.

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When he opened the door, he did a double-take. “Marty, you’re early.” He was holding a coffee cup. That was the first time he called me by my name.

“I’m making good time today,” I replied.

He backed up to allow me to pass.

The minute I stepped inside I noticed the room had been cleaned. There was no more stale smell. I carried the box into the kitchen and noticed that all the dirty dishes had been washed and put away. As I separated the food items, Lev asked if I drank coffee.

“Yeah.”

He put his cup on the table, went to the cabinet, removed a cup and poured coffee from the percolator. “Cream or sugar?”

It happened so fast that I didn’t have time to say anything to stop him. I looked down at the cup he held. “No, black’s good.”

After handing it to me, he scooted a chair out from under the table and sat down. “They came to clean my apartment yesterday,” he said.

I took a sip and set the cup down. “Yeah.”

“Thanks for getting that done for me.”

That wasn’t my doing. I wrote about the condition of his apartment in my report that I was required to submit to the storehouse. Somebody read it and acted on it. “No problem.” I didn’t want to take credit, but neither did I want to carry a conversation with him.

“Are you married, Marty?”

“I’m gay. I can’t.” ”

“Semantics.” He continued to eye my every movement. “What kind of work do you do when you’re not delivering groceries?”

“I’m an accountant.”

“I was a lawyer.”

“You want this in the refrigerator or on the counter?” I asked as I picked up the loaf of bread.

“Put it up there,” he said, pointing to the top of the fridge. He got up to refill his cup. “You look Italian.”

“I’m done, Mr. Kazlov.”

“Call me Lev,” he said.

I headed to the door.

“Thanks again, Marty.”

“Sure.” My tone was abrupt.

As I walked to my car, I knew this had gone on too long. I had to tell Neho.

Chapter Forty-Three

That evening when we sat down to dinner, I broached the reveal with a forewarning that what I was about to say might be distressing. Neho smiled, as if nothing I said could disturb his peace. When I mentioned it had to do with Lev, he stiffened and his face reddened. He remained silent.

I told him that Lev was living in Las Vegas in an apartment on the west side. He asked how I knew, and I confessed that I'd been delivering groceries to him just short of two months, although I had tried to get out of the assignment.

He glared at me. His jaw tightened. The veins on his neck were protruding. "Why are you only telling me this now?"

"I was afraid of how it might affect you."

His voice hardened. "I don't understand why you waited two months to tell me. Is there more you're not sharing?"

"Why would I hold back anything from you?" The minute that came out of my mouth, I knew I was in trouble.

"You tell me!" he yelled.

"I think your anger's misplaced, Neho."

He jumped up and crossed his arms. "I'm confused. Did you think that your deliveries to him were somehow going to stop, and it would all go away?"

"I did what I thought was right at the time."

"You mean, keeping it from me?"

"Until now."

He released his arms and they hung down tightly. His voice was

shaking. "I don't understand you. How could you keep something like this from me?" He stomped out of the room. The food on his plate remained untouched.

When Neho came to bed that night, he slept as far away from me as he could get. In the morning, he avoided me. After having coffee in the kitchen alone, I grabbed my things and headed to work. Most often we called one another during the day just to check in, but we exchanged no calls that day.

I gave a lot of thought to his accusation and couldn't decide whether I owed him an apology. I reasoned that it would have made no difference if he had found out the first week or later. Moreover, my purpose for the delay in telling him was not deceptive or dishonest, but out of a real concern. But then it occurred to me that I had, indeed, breached Neho's trust. We never kept secrets from each other and it was wrong for me to have waited so long to tell him, regardless of my reasons. I recalled Sal's advice about trust between lovers. Fear suddenly gripped my chest. My body grew weak. I had to apologize to Neho and hope for the best.

I got home before him that evening and started warming our dinner. I was unsure when he would arrive or even if he would be joining me at the dinner table. I made myself a drink, turned on some music and sat at the kitchen counter anxious about the rest of the evening.

About thirty minutes later, Neho came in. He glanced my way. "Hey."

"Hey." I stood up and reached for his hand. "Sit down," I said as I pulled out the stool for him with my free hand.

His eyes rolled up. "What now?"

"I want to apologize. You were right. I should have told you the first time I made that delivery. I'm so sorry."

He pursed his lips and took a second for my apology to sink in. "I was in shock when you told me. I never expected that." He reached for my drink and took a sip. "So, what now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Eventually he's going to find out who you are."

"I told them that I don't want to deliver to Lev anymore. Nicky's trying to find somebody else."

Neho's eyes narrowed and his voice grew sharp. "I don't want anything to do with him."

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“Okay.” We stayed quiet and in our thoughts for a minute, then we kissed, as if to seal that pledge.

“What’s for dinner?” he asked.

“Yesterday’s roast and potatoes.”

We spoke no more about Lev that night. I knew that Neho was processing the news. He usually took a lot of time to consider and reflect on matters of substance. That happened most often with client issues he dealt with. I knew him well enough to know that his initial reaction might be a dismissive expression usually meant to ease his mind, but as time passed, he would grow far more thoughtful and contemplative. He wouldn’t let this die.

Two days later, as I was getting out of the shower and drying off, Neho came into the bathroom to pee. “What does he look like?” he asked.

“Older, thin, bald and sickly.”

He flushed the toilet and stepped out.

On Friday of the following week, Neho and I met after work for dinner at one of our favorite spots. Toscano’s was a popular local Italian eatery. As we sipped on the wine and waited for our entrée, we talked about work and our weekend plans to attend a friend’s birthday party. Out of the blue, Neho asked if Lev ever mentioned Zaria. The abruptness of his question took me by surprise.

I shook my head. “No.”

“Does he have visitors?”

“None that I know of.”

“Are you going to tell him?”

“Tell him what?”

“About us.”

I reminded Neho that I had requested to be relieved from delivering to Lev, so it was possible that I would never see him again.

Our entrees came and as abruptly as our fitful conversation about Lev started, it ended.

Several days later I came home and found Neho’s car in the garage. It was rare for Neho to beat me home. I entered through the kitchen door and found the house completely dark. Instinctively, I reached for the light switch and the kitchen light came on. Everything was eerily quiet. Making my way into the living room, I barely made out a shadow sitting

on the high-back chair that looked out to the back yard. I knew that shadow only too well, having seen it when I would get up in the middle of the night to find Neho ruminating over his patients. Just as I was ready to switch on the living room table lamp, I heard his voice. "Don't do that." He sounded irate.

Surprised by his tone, I was about to open my mouth to snap back, but then I paused to collect my thoughts. "What's going on?" I asked. "Are you okay?"

"I went to see him today."

My head did a double take. "You what?"

"Yeah."

I sat down on the chair opposite him. "Why would you do that?"

"To tell him how loathsome and perverted he is. To tell him that he's a worthless piece of garbage and that I hope he suffers and dies soon. I want him to feel some of the emotional crap he's put me through all these years." His voice started shaking. "I want to remind him that despite trying to ruin my life, I survived." Neho broke down and cried, "I want to finally feel free from that shitbag!" He dropped his head.

In all our time together, I had never heard Neho so angry and upset. His cry was wrenching. I went over and tried to hold him. He stood up, put his arms around me and wouldn't let go. After a few minutes he started to recover and sat back down. I held his hand.

"Did you see him?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Just as I got there, the paramedics were wheeling him out of the apartment. They had an oxygen mask on him and took him away."

"How did you get his address?"

"From your delivery list."

"What are you going to do now?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out."

Chapter Forty-Four

Neho phoned Skylar to ask if she was aware that Lev had been taken to the hospital.

“You know Mr. Kazlov?” Her voice rose in surprise. Without waiting for an answer, she asked, “How well do you know him?”

“We have history,” said Neho, trying to avoid the truth.

“Enough history to know his family?”

Neho’s breathing became shallow. “Why?”

“We’re trying to locate them,” said Skylar. “It’s urgent. I wouldn’t normally share information like this, but yesterday he was admitted to the AIDS ward at the county hospital with pneumocystis pneumonia.”

“Is he going to die?” Neho asked.

She ignored his question. “We need to locate his family. We contacted a brother in Houston, but as soon as we told him who we were, he said he wanted nothing to do with Lev. He asked us not to call again. We think he has a daughter, but we have no contact information. Is there any way you can help us out with this?”

“Uhh, I don’t think so.”

“Well, if you should come up with anything helpful, please get back to us soon. You know how fast conditions change.”

“Don’t count on it, but we’ll see.”

During dinner the following evening, Neho announced he planned to visit Lev in the hospital. We discussed the most likely reaction from Lev

to his visit, which in all likelihood would not be pleasant. Once again, Neho expressed his anger and said he didn't care, so long as he got what he wanted to say off his chest. To him, that was all that mattered. After that, he planned to walk away and never see Lev again. I didn't try to discourage Neho if that was how he had chosen to deal with the matter. My only wish was that he wouldn't go back to that dark place that had stolen his mental balance so many years ago. If this was his way of ending the fear and pain he still felt, I wouldn't stop him, but stand by him.

The county hospital had a dedicated AIDS ward, and most of the care was administered by clinicians who had volunteered to be assigned there. The ward had no set visiting hours. Neho arrived in the early afternoon and checked in with the ward clerk at the nurse's station to get Lev's room number. The room was at the end of the ward. Neho stared down the corridor, his heart racing. He could feel his mouth drying and his palms sweating as his mind replayed what he was there to do. Maybe he should just let it be and walk away; after all he had managed to survive all these years. But a time like this may never happen again, and he knew he would live to regret it. He stepped slowly down the corridor, and when he reached Lev's room, he didn't pause but walked through the door, into an empty bed and a half-closed curtain that cloaked the patient on the other side. Steadily, he went past the bed and when he got beyond the curtain, he saw Lev. He was lying on his back with his eyes closed. The thin sheet covering his body outlined his skeletal frame. His white powdery thin hair and bony ancient face was appalling. To see his former stepfather so emaciated was grotesque.

Lev opened his eyes and flinched. "What are you doing here?" His voice had a weak staccato pause.

Neho froze. He never expected such an awful sight. He could only stare, but then, out of nowhere, blurted out, "You look like shit!" The words rolled out without a care for Lev's feelings.

"Fuck you. Get out of my room."

Neho sneered. "Is that your new lawyer-speak?"

"Why are you here? To harass me?" He began coughing.

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Neho could see that Lev had picked up the call button, but hadn't yet pressed it. A hundred thoughts raced through Neho's mind at that moment. Now he could attack Lev just as he had planned to do. Maybe say what he came to say, then leave.

But what kind of self-obsessed monster would assault someone on death's doorstep? How would he feel afterward? Would that really free him of Lev's hold? "That's not why I came," Neho said. He knew it was a lie.

"If you think you surprised me, you didn't. I know it's your Mexican boyfriend that delivers my groceries."

"His name's Martín."

"It's Marty." He began coughing again. It took him a few seconds to recover.

"They want to get in touch with Zaria."

"Who does?" Lev asked.

"The AIDS program. I volunteer with them."

Lev smirked. "We haven't spoken in years. Why do they want to talk to her?"

"They think she needs to know."

"Know that I'm in the hospital dying of AIDS? She wouldn't care."

"Don't you think she should decide that for herself?"

The cough returned. This time it was more relentless. When he recovered, he took some deep breaths and released the call button. "When you're not harassing dying people, what else do you do?" he asked.

"I'm a psychotherapist."

Lev tried to laugh but the cough reemerged. "Is this how you treat all your patients?"

"I need to go." As Neho turned and raced out of the room, he could hear Lev still coughing and gasping for air.

Neho called me at work to tell me about his hospital visit with Lev. He asked if I still kept in touch with Greg, and wondered if he had mutual friends with Zaria who might have information on her whereabouts.

Greg and I had exchanged a few letters during the years, and it wasn't hard to find his current phone number. It was great catching up with him. He'd moved to Atlanta, Georgia, and had a family of his own. Unfortunately, there were no mutual friends and the information he had

about Zaria was old. The last he'd heard, she had enrolled in a graduate program for art and design at a university in Los Angeles.

Several days later, Neho paid Lev a second visit. This time someone occupied the first bed. He was young and handsome. Neho nodded and said hello as he walked across the room. The curtain was fully extended between the beds. When he looked in, Lev was staring out the window.

"Hey," Neho said.

"You're back. Didn't you get enough the first time?"

Neho ignored the comment. "I brought you these." He handed Lev several tennis and sport magazines. Lev took them and shuffled through the magazine covers.

"Are you trying to mess with my head, Mr. Psychotherapist?"

"I thought you might enjoy the reads."

Lev laid them on his bedside table. "Are you any good at what you do?"

"I think so."

"Then why are you here taking shit from a dying asshole instead of getting paid to listen to crazy people on a couch?"

Neho chuckled. "I did that this morning. Anyway, I thought you might like a visit."

"I have visits all day from the doctors and nurses and orderlies. But they're all pain-in-the-ass visits."

"Well I'm glad mine's not a pain-in-the-ass visit."

"I didn't say that."

"You're not coughing as much today."

"I'm saving it for later."

"I don't remember you being such a comedian."

"It's not comedy, Neho. It's sarcasm."

"Yeah, well, I remember lots of that."

"You talk to your mom?" Lev asked.

"Yeah, she's good."

"How did you and your boyfriend end up here?"

"I was about to ask you the same question," said Neho.

"Work."

"Martín got a government job after he graduated and was transferred here."

An orderly appeared with a wheelchair. "I need to take you down

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and get you X-rayed again, Mr. Kazlov. I'll help you get in the chair.”

Neho stepped out of the way while Lev scooted out of his bed and into the seat. “So where can I find Zaria?”

Lev shook his head. “Tell Marty not to give my groceries away.” Without another word, he was wheeled off.

Neho spent the rest of his visit with Jacob, the new admission. He was a twenty-four-year-old New Yorker who followed his boyfriend to Las Vegas, only to be abandoned when he was diagnosed with AIDS. Jacob had esophageal thrush.

After that, Neho's visits became more frequent. One Saturday morning as he was walking through the ward, he reached for a wheelchair and took it into Lev's room.

“What's that for?” Lev asked when he came in. Are you taking me out to the street to get run over?

“Let's go outside. It's a nice day.”

Lev thought for a second. “Can I trust you?”

“I'm a reputable shrink.”

“That's what worries me.”

Neho put Lev's slippers on his feet and helped him into the seat. He weighed about a hundred pounds and was fragile. After folding the blanket and putting it over Lev's legs, they started their trek. Neho steered him to the cafeteria to get them cans of soda, and then headed to the grassy area separating the hospital from the medical offices. He parked the chair beside an unoccupied bench and sat down so they could enjoy the beauty of the surroundings. He faced Lev. “Can I ask you something?”

“Will it fuck up my day?”

“Probably.”

“Ask.”

“Why do you hate Mexicans so much?”

Lev began a hacking cough, again. He took a sip of his drink and the coughing receded. He sat silent for a time catching his breath. “It's not hate. It's resentment.”

Neho's eyes narrowed. “I don't understand.”

“I wouldn't expect you to understand unless you knew the story.”

“What story?”

“I'm dying. None of that matters anymore.”

“It matters to me,” Neho said. “I’d like to know your story.”

For a few seconds Lev seemed to get lost in his thoughts. Then the hacking cough came back and Neho grabbed the soda can to keep it from spilling. Lev reached for tissues from the box he had brought. When he finally got the cough under control, he began his story. “I was about twenty at the time and had started college. I was living at home and working at the laundry when I wasn’t at school or studying. His name was Miguel. He was smart and picked up fast, so Dad made him a supervisor at the laundry even though he was only about twenty-two. He worked in a different area from me, but when we spotted one another, there was an instant connection. After that, we exchanged glances and smiles when we passed one another. Oftentimes our run-ins were intentional, but we never spoke.

“Only a few people had keys to the storage room which was located in a separate building from the main laundry. Miguel was one of them. He was working in there one afternoon and I decided to grow some balls. I slipped away from what I was doing and headed in the direction of the bathroom, veered off to an exit, went outside and made my way to the storage room. As soon as Miguel saw me, he stopped working and stared at me. I was daring. I could afford to be because I was the owner’s son. I walked up to him. He stayed perfectly still and waited for me to make the move. I kissed him. He kissed me back. We stayed making out for a few minutes before I had to get back to the laundry. I was so excited that I creamed without touching myself. I had to go clean up in the bathroom.

“Miguel usually left work two hours before me. The gossip among the workers was vicious, so I couldn’t risk anyone associating me with Miguel. The next day I managed to slip him a note asking him to meet me at a park near the Jewish cemetery that night.

“When I got there, I saw him in the shadow of the streetlight. I wandered up to where he was, and we talked for a minute. I don’t remember what we said. He spoke in broken English, but I understood him. We hiked into the park and found a dark, hidden spot. We made out again, and we fucked. That was my first time having sex with another man. Something happened that night because I knew I wanted him more than anything. We met there again a few nights later and after we finished fucking, we talked. The more I got to know him, the more attracted to

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him I became.

“Miguel lived with his mother and sister in an apartment. His mother also worked at the laundry. He was born in Mexico and had lived in the U.S. most of his life. He still had family in León in the state of Guanajuato. I’ll never forget the stories he told me about his family in Mexico.

“We continued meeting at the park late at night. Sometimes we would fuck and sometimes we would just sit and talk. I hated when our nights ended. Miguel is the only person—” Lev had another coughing fit and when he recovered, he failed to finish his sentence.

“You fell in love with Miguel?” Neho asked.

“If that’s what you want to call it.”

“What would you call it?”

“Insanity, recklessness, stupidity. Take your pick.”

“Why would you say that?”

“This was the fifties where two men caught fucking could be sent to prison for life, or worse.”

“What could be worse?”

Lev smirked which resulted in another coughing fit. His face reddened.

Neho rose from the bench. “Maybe we should get you back to your room.”

Lev managed to croak out, “If you want me to finish the story, sit down.”

Neho sat back down on the bench. It took some time for Lev to recover.

“One day Miguel was in the storage room and I made my way there again. His back was to the door and I sneaked up on him. As soon as he turned around, I planted a kiss. He pushed me away and his eyes looked beyond me. I turned around to see Viktor, my brother, on the other side of the room. He had a look of shock on his face and sprinted out of the room.

“I tried to speak to Viktor later that day, but he ignored me. I knew that he would not keep what he had seen to himself. My family was already suspicious of what I was doing when I went out late at night, and now they would know. In the eyes of my family, gay fucking was worse than murder. That evening at dinner I could feel the tension, but nobody

spoke about it. Viktor wouldn't look at me.

"The following day I went to work in the afternoon as usual. I noticed that Miguel was still working after the time he normally clocked out. It wasn't uncommon for employees to work overtime, so I didn't give it much thought. When I got off work, I clocked out and was headed out the door when Dad asked me to follow him. He had a serious look on his face. He led me to his car and ordered me to get inside. When I did, he took off. He wouldn't tell me where we were going.

"It was starting to get dark outside. He drove for about forty minutes, and we ended up on a gravel road that led to one of the inlets into Sheldon Lake. I saw Viktor's car there as we drove up. As soon as we got out, Dad threw me against the hood of his car and held me down while Ivan, my other brother, tied my hands. Dad grabbed me by my hair and dragged me to the grassy knoll. That's where I saw Miguel on the ground. His hands and feet were tied, and his mouth gagged. I'll never forget the scared look on his face. My dad and brothers beat and kicked him. I yelled at them to stop and hurled myself at them. Dad got me up and punched me in the face. I fell on the ground. When I tried to get up, the three of them attacked me like wild dogs. When they were done, they went back to Miguel who was barely conscious. They untied his feet and took his pants down. Ivan took a hunting knife he had brought and reached down to slice off Miguel's penis. They took the gag off, forced his mouth open and stuck it inside. They lifted Miguel off the ground and threw him into the lake. Ivan had blood on his hands and rubbed it on my face. He got me up and threw me in the back of Viktor's car. One block from home, Viktor stopped the car and Ivan untied my hands and forced me out. They wanted to humiliate me by making me walk the rest of the way home beaten up and bloodied.

Lev's voice became almost a whisper. "It took me a few days to recover. When I got back to the laundry, I found out Dad had fired Miguel's mom. Nobody ever spoke about what they did."

Neho studied Lev's reactions, trying to make sense of what he was hearing. Now he understood so much more about Lev's nature and character. He shook his head slowly in astonishment that his stepfather's life had been duplicitous. Perhaps if things had turned out differently, Lev could have experienced the goodness in the world. As it was, his existence had been a complete waste, and Neho felt sad. "Did the cops

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ever find Miguel's body?"

"There was an article hidden in the middle of the newspaper about a Mexican drowning at Sheldon Lake. In those days neither the police nor the public had any concern for the welfare of Mexicans."

As Lev told his story, his voice would break and he would constantly stare down at the hands holding his soda can. His eyes had a mournful gaze. Neho had never seen Lev so emotionally distressed. They remained silent as they wheeled back into the hospital, down the corridor and into his room. Once Lev was in bed, he looked up at Neho and whispered, "Francis Petron can tell you where Zaria's living."

"Who's that?"

"Our neighbor in Albuquerque."

Chapter Forty-Five

“How did you find me?” Zaria asked when Neho identified himself. Her voice was surly.

“Your neighbor gave me your number.”

“What do you want?”

“It’s about your dad.”

“I don’t speak to my dad.”

“He’s in the hospital. He’s dying, Zaria.” The line was silent. “Are you still there?”

“Where is he?”

“Las Vegas County Hospital.”

“So the two of you got together again?” Her voice was sarcastic.

“Not in the way you might think. Marty and I are together, have been since college. Our contact with Lev was purely accidental.”

“What’s wrong with Dad?”

“He has AIDS.”

“I’m not surprised!”

“Don’t you think you’re being judgmental?”

“Don’t you think I have that right? Anyway, what makes you so sanctimonious? You’re the one that caused Dad to lose his license and his job.”

“I didn’t call you to argue. I just thought you might want to know that your dad probably doesn’t have much time left.”

Zaria sighed. “I’ll make some calls and take a flight out there tomorrow.”



After an early dinner that evening, Neho and I drove to the hospital to visit Lev. He was sitting on a chair talking with Jacob. Lev was in rare form, joking, laughing and carrying on like he was well again. Neho and I looked at one another with surprised expressions, as if perhaps the call to Zaria was premature. The four of us continued the fun for close to an hour until the nurse came in to dole out their nighttime medications. Lev rose and shuffled his way back to bed. After the nurse came out of the room, Lev motioned to Neho. They had a whispered exchange, and then Neho drew the curtain between the beds and remained with Lev on the other side. I stayed talking to Jacob until Neho emerged and raced out of the room. I said good-bye to Jacob and hurried out. Neho was by the elevator with tears streaming down his face.

I rushed up and hugged him. “Are you all right? What did that son-of-a-bitch do now? I was afraid something like this would happen.”

Neho’s voice quaked as he slowly pulled away and eyed me. “Lev apologized. He asked me to forgive him.”

My jaw dropped.

The following morning, Lev’s condition deteriorated significantly. Zaria arrived at the hospital at one-thirty. By then, Lev had lapsed into periods of consciousness and unconsciousness. When she made her way to his bedside, Lev was semi-conscious. He opened his eyes briefly when she spoke to him, but he couldn’t respond. When she took his hand and held it, she felt a slight squeeze. She stayed at his bedside throughout the afternoon until Neho arrived after work. They exchanged nervous stares as she stood up.

“Hey, Zaria.”

She gave a slight nod. “Hey, Neho.” She was still thin and attractive.

“How is he?”

“I didn’t expect this. The nurse tells me his organs are shutting down.”

Neho’s eyes widened. “I don’t understand. Yesterday evening it was as if he wasn’t sick at all.”

“He hasn’t been awake the entire afternoon.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“He’s so skinny, I hardly recognize him.” Zaria spoke in a soft voice as if she was afraid of waking him.

“He’s been sick for a while.”

They sat down and talked about Lev’s treatment and prognosis. Zaria’s manner was far more open and pleasant than she’d been on the phone, and Neho suggested they both go down to the cafeteria for dinner.

“Won’t Marty be expecting you home?” she asked.

“He knows where I am.”

There were few people in the cafeteria. It didn’t take long to order food at the grill, pour drinks and find a table.

“What do you do in L.A.?” Neho asked.

“I’m a graphic designer. I do mostly freelance work. How about you?”

“Psychotherapist.”

Her head drew back quickly. “You’re kidding me!”

“Nuh uh.”

“That would never have occurred to me. What happened to your plan to be a drifter and travel?”

“That was a pipe dream.”

There were a few seconds of silence before Zaria spoke. “I knew that you and Dad were getting together late at night. One night I got up from bed, went into the kitchen and didn’t bother turning on the light. That’s the first time I saw Dad walk out of his office and head downstairs to your room. He went in and closed the door. I followed him and listened but couldn’t hear anything. I didn’t know what to think. There was another time when I came home late and saw him at the top of the stairs leading to your bedroom. He froze when he saw me. I could tell he’d been drinking. He went back to his office. It was hard to believe Dad was having sex with you, but I knew it was true.”

Neho said nothing and let Zaria continue.

“When you accused Dad of rape, I couldn’t understand that. Dad claimed that there had never been any sex between you, and I knew that wasn’t true. When the police handcuffed you and took you to jail, I cried for you, Neho. Afterward, I lied to the police when they questioned me about the relationship between you and Dad.

“After the divorce, Dad quit the firm. He didn’t have a choice—they took away his license. He managed to keep the house until after

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I graduated and left for Los Angeles, then he sold it and moved out of New Mexico.”

“Why did you stop talking to him?”

“Because all we did was fight. It got too exhausting.”

“Yeah, I can understand. He was battling with his demons back then.” Neho sighed before continuing. “Lev and I made our peace.”

“Who initiated it?”

“Your dad asked me to forgive him.”

“No, I mean who initiated the sex between you two?”

Neho flinched. Her question caught him by surprise. “I don’t know what you mean?”

“The first time you and Dad had sex, who initiated it?”

He looked at her, completely baffled. “Isn’t that obvious, knowing what you know about your dad?”

She didn’t respond.

They got back to the room just before seven. Lev’s condition hadn’t changed. Zaria asked for alone-time with her father, and Neho left to phone me. I was glad he was getting along with Zaria but alarmed to hear Lev was deteriorating so quickly. I wanted to drive to the hospital to be with Neho and offer some emotional support, but he said no. It was important to Neho that only he and Zaria be at Lev’s bedside to sort out their complicated emotions, grieve together and give closure to a painful part of their lives.

When the nurse came in to take Lev’s vitals, she confirmed that the time was getting close. Neho and Zaria sat at his bedside and waited. They occasionally exchanged conversation, then went back to their thoughts. Shortly after one-thirty in the morning, Neho noticed a change to Lev’s breathing. There were long pauses between breaths which were becoming more obvious. Zaria had nodded off and Neho woke her. They stood together by his bedside as Zaria cupped her father’s hand. Not long after there was a slight rattle in his throat and then his chest collapsed as he expelled his last breath.

Zaria hugged her stepbrother and they wept when Lev was pronounced dead.

Chapter Forty-Six

The clock shows the midnight hour approaching quickly. Em is still rapt in my story.

“We didn’t hear from Zaria until Christmas when we received a card from her,” I say. “Three months later, we got an invitation to her wedding. We attended the celebration, which was held in a ritzy Los Angeles hotel. Her husband, Stephen, worked as a music producer for one of the big movie studios. After the wedding, Neho and Zaria formed a friendship. They stayed in touch by telephone, and their conversations sometimes lasted an hour or more. The first time we visited them in Los Angeles, Zaria had a two-year old son and was pregnant with a second. They had a lovely home in Santa Monica, not far from her work. Zaria was just getting her graphic design and advertising business off the ground. Several years later, they came to Las Vegas and stayed with us for two days. Stephen, who I’d pegged as a blowhard, spent most of his time in casinos playing in card tournaments. That gave us a chance to visit with Zaria and get acquainted with Sebastian and Benjamin, their two sons. She had bought a small building near Pasadena and employed a small cadre of workers. Zaria’s business was thriving.”

I stand up, go to the sofa table and pick up a framed picture of Neho and Zaria. I hand it to Em. “This was taken about four months before Neho died. Zaria came for a visit after Neho went under hospice care. She had just turned sixty-seven and was in the process of selling her business and retiring. Zaria was wealthy, drank copious amounts of wine and loved to travel. She lived alone after her divorce from Stephen. Sebastian, her oldest son, was married, living in Phoenix and worked

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as a travel writer for a national magazine. Benjamin was a civil rights attorney in Seattle and lived with his boyfriend.

“Neho was still able to get around, so we took Zaria on short day trips. As you know, he had undergone a laryngectomy and used a prosthesis to speak. His voice quality was good, but speaking for long periods would tire him out. When we’d get home, he’d take a nap on the couch.

“Zaria would open her first bottle of wine just about the time I’d start cooking. Neho would fix himself a weak whiskey and coke and they’d sit outside talking. Because of the medication he was taking, Neho limited his alcohol to a single drink. We’d usually eat on the patio and afterward Zaria would help me clean up. By that time, she was pouring her wine from the second bottle. One evening, I asked her why she had befriended Neho after so many years of estrangement. She beamed a huge smile. ‘Because he was the only person I ever trusted.’

“She felt terrible when she received my text that Neho had passed away. She was on a cruise in the Mediterranean at the time and left the ship at Dubrovnic, Croatia to catch a flight back to the U.S. Zaria arrived minutes before the start of the memorial service. If you remember, Em, I insisted she sit next to me. She stayed with me for a week and was such a comfort.” I stand up and stretch. “And that’s it, Em. The whole story.”

“Not quite.” Em waggles her finger. “You’ve never told me his secret for that terrific risotto he made.”

I laugh. “Neho was a wonderful cook and rarely used a recipe. Sorry to say, but he took his culinary secrets to the grave.”

“I’m curious about something else. Was Neho already enrolled in his PhD program when he visited Lev in the hospital?”

“Neho didn’t start on his PhD until one year later.”

“From what I recall, aside from his private practice, Neho taught at the university for several years before he founded the Institute on Justice, Violence and Sexual Assault.”

“Actually, he co-founded the Institute with Dr. Genette Coleman,” I say. “But, unfortunately, after Neho left, the institute lost much of its funding and had to resort to primarily a volunteer staff. It’s now known as the Institute of Family Violence and Sexual Assault.”

“That’s too bad. How did you two end up moving back here?”

“Maddie couldn’t care for herself any longer. We thought about

moving her to Las Vegas to live with us, but she refused to leave Albuquerque. We had both recently retired, and there was nothing keeping us from moving back to be closer to our families. Neho found a nice, assisted living facility for his mom and visited her every day until she passed away.”

Em stands up and puts her arms around me. “Marty, there are no words to express how grateful I am to you for sharing Neho’s story. He was an incredibly successful and wonderful man.”

“We had an amazing forty-five years together, Em. I couldn’t imagine a more perfect husband.”

“I have one last question before I head out. Did Neho ever get to Spain, Morocco or Portugal like he planned?”

My eyes began dancing. My smile lit up the room. “Yeah, he did. After we officially married in 2015, we toured the three countries to celebrate the event. We were sitting in an outdoor bistro in Casablanca, having a glass of wine one evening, when I asked Neho if he had any regrets about forgoing his dream of becoming a drifter. He smiled at me and shook his head. ‘Your grandfather’s *creencia* took hold of my life. Since then I’ve never lost *aclaración*.’”

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About the Author

Born in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Michael is the author of several books including CREED, Walking the Camino Sagrado and Haze. Retired from public service, he volunteers as Ombudsman, advocating for the rights of vulnerable adults. Michael lives in Albuquerque with Bart, his terrier companion.

Author's Note

We read about rape in newspapers or hear about it in television news features and instinctively think about a male perpetrator assaulting a female victim. This regard likely stems from statistics reported by reputable sources pointing to a preponderance of rapes and sexual assaults on women. Based on this data, governmental and public policies and financial contributions are generally directed to agencies supporting these victims of abuse. While I strongly back those policies and resources, unfortunately many of the statistics are inaccurate in their reporting of male sexual assaults due to outdated definitions and imprecise categories. Indeed, a 2014 study on Sexual Victimization of Men in America found "...a high prevalence of sexual victimization among men—in many circumstances similar to the prevalence found among women."

An April 8, 2020 article authored by Dr. Joan M. Cook, and Dr. Amy E. Ellis which appeared in *Psychiatric Times*, a trade journal, asserted that sexual abuse occurs in at least 1 in 6 boys before their 18th birthday. Moreover, 1 in 4 men will have an unwanted sexual event in their lifetime. The article goes on to illustrate these statistics by imagining a football stadium with 100,000 seats filled with male spectators, 25,000 of these men have been or will be "...sexually assaulted." The crisis of male rape and sexual abuse remains largely unreported, underfunded and untreated.

The fates of Necho, Julian and Chris's sexual assaults in Aclarción which take place in the mid-1970's, are no different than what happens every day to other male victims. Yet, in the four and one-half decades since, movement in recognizing this scourge in the United States has progressed only incrementally. The firing of Kevin Spacey from

Netflix's House of Cards gave some traction to the concept of male rape and abuse. The policy change over sexual assault reporting in the military was a welcome advance. The #MeToo movement has given a voice to male sexual assault. But the harmful myths that minimize and rationalize these crimes keep this crisis out of public discourse.

Men can't be raped! Only gay men rape other men! He asked for it! Enjoy it, after all you're a man! These are a modicum of the many myths that keep men from talking about sexual assault, reporting it or seeking help for the mental or physical trauma they experience. Men can, indeed, get sexually assaulted and raped not only by male but also female perpetrators. Most male perpetrators are straight. Everyone has the right to say NO at any time regardless of the circumstance. Even if the victim ejaculates during a sexual assault, it is the natural response that occurs and doesn't make the victim complicit in the act.

A study published by the American Journal of Men's Health found that only 17.6% of male sexual abuse victims sought help. The majority of victims never seek help. It's also disturbing that male victims don't disclose their sexual assault until twenty to thirty years later. Many victims experience biopsychosocial disturbances that manifest in depression, flashbacks and PTSD. Sadly, the triggering effects of PTSD may last decades. Suicide ideations are common. Marital relationships are oftentimes disrupted, and familial and friendship bonds are fragmented or severed. Some victims tend to self-medicate with alcohol or illegal drugs. The struggle to deal with the trauma in isolation becomes excruciating.

Raising awareness and combating myths about male rape and sexual assault is a start to greater understanding, support and care for those male victims suffering in silence and those innocent souls whose lives will be sabotaged.

If you are a male victim of rape or sexual assault, the organization, RAINN (Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network) has a national hotline 800-656-HOPE. In partnership with over one-thousand service care providers, they operate 24/7 and their mission is to prevent sexual violence, help survivors and ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice. You can access their website at www.rainn.org.

Be well and live a happy, productive life,

–Michael

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