

A movie poster featuring two young men in a dynamic pose against a dark red background with sparkling light effects. The man on the left is shirtless and muscular, wearing blue jeans, looking intensely at the camera. The man on the right is wearing a white tank top and dark purple jeans, captured in a mid-air dance move with one leg extended forward. The title 'DANCING DIRTY' is prominently displayed in the center, with 'DANCING' in yellow and 'DIRTY' in red. At the bottom, the 'ravenous romance' logo is visible, featuring a stylized heart shape.

RYAN FIELD

DANCING  
DIRTY

ra♥enous  
romance

***Dancing Dirty***

A Ravenous Romance™ Original Publication

**Ryan Field**

A Ravenous Romance™ Original Publication  
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This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

## Chapter One

In the summer of 1978, everyone still called him Junior. His real name was Maxwell—the same as his father, Dr. Maxwell Edgar. He was eighteen years old and heading into his freshman year at Yale that fall. Jimmy Carter was president and Johnny Carson was hosting *The Tonight Show*. This was before anyone knew about AIDS, before there was a national discussion about legalizing gay marriage, and before famous actors and actresses openly admitted they were gay.

Junior's father was a well-respected general practitioner, in an upscale community in Philadelphia's Main Line section, and it was the first full summer his father had taken off in more than twenty years. Junior's mother was a housewife who changed the living room draperies from white damask to beige moiré every five years and helped organize charitable events in the community. Junior had never known anyone quite like his mother. She had the ability to look perpetually busy by doing absolutely nothing at all.

The entire family was going away that summer. Junior's parents had bought a summer home in Northeastern Pennsylvania the previous winter. It was located on the highest elevation of the Pocono Mountains, in a private gated community called *Pocono Mountain Farms*. Junior's mother had been bugging his father to take time off since before Junior was born and she'd finally won.

So on a warm morning in June, they packed the trunk of Dr. Edgar's brand-new navy blue Lincoln Town Car and headed north. Junior's mother, Elaine, sat up front; Junior was in the back seat with his younger sister, Laney. Though the car was a barge,

Junior sat bunched up against the door behind the driver's seat and Laney sat close to the door behind the front passenger seat with her knees pressed together. The wide armrest in the middle of the enormous back seat was up, and there was an empty space between them. But the seat wasn't really empty at all. Laney's best friend, a large invisible dog named Elmer, was resting quietly. Supposedly, Elmer was a black mongrel, with pale blue eyes, long ears that pointed up, and the ability to speak. He went everywhere with them.

Elmer had been around for three years, since Laney had turned thirteen. The entire family had been sitting around the dinner table one Wednesday night, just like any other normal weeknight, when Laney announced that she wanted to introduce them to her new friend, Elmer. She smiled and gestured to an empty space beside her chair. Dr. Edgar coughed on a brussels sprout; Elaine Edgar dropped her fork with a clank. Junior just sat there, staring at the empty space next to his sister's chair with wide eyes.

A month later, after three therapists and a battery of medical exams that came up with nothing, Junior's parents struck a deal with Laney. If she promised not to mention Elmer in public, to anyone, they'd allow Elmer to be part of the family without any arguments or questions. Laney agreed. After that, Dr. Edgar smiled and said Laney had a great imagination and that she was just going through a harmless adolescent stage. Elaine even did some research about creatures like Elmer at the public library and discovered the word *Puca* (pronounced pooka), which she learned was typically a harmless shapeshifter of Irish folklore that brought humans good luck.

Only Junior's family wasn't Irish, and neither Junior nor Laney were allowed to mention their good luck charm—Elmer—in public. Not even when Elmer said something important. And according to Laney, he spoke fluent English all the time.

When they finally reached their exit on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, Dr. Edgar asked Junior's mother for toll money and Junior sat up to look out the window. He'd been reading Kahlil Gibran all the way up, trying hard to make the two-hour trip go by faster. Gibran's writing on spiritual love comforted Junior and gave him hope. Junior's teenage years were almost behind him and he'd never experienced romance or love with anyone. He was still a virgin. In those days young men like Junior, those attracted to other men, kept their feelings just as quiet as a teenage girl with an invisible black dog named Elmer.

When Junior lurched forward to look out the window, Laney gave him a dead stare and pointed to the empty space between them. She shook her index finger and said, "You're sitting on Elmer's tail." Her eyebrows knitted together and her lips tightened.

"Ah well," Junior said. His mouth was half open and he edged closer to the door. "Tell Elmer I'm sorry." What else could he say? This had become a way of life by then; there was no use arguing with her.

"You tell him yourself," Laney said. Then she gazed down at the empty seat and smiled. "He didn't mean it, Elmer. He's just a klutz."

Junior blinked.

His mother turned her head and gave Junior one of her famous raised-eyebrow looks.

So Junior shrugged his shoulders and said, “Sorry, Elmer, it was an accident,” to the blank space on the seat. Then he looked over at his sister and rolled his eyes. Laney had pulled a pocket mirror out of her purse and she wasn’t paying attention to him anymore. She was checking her hair, picking at it with the tail end of a long pink comb. She’d just had her hair cut like Farrah Fawcett for the summer, with thick wispy curls and streaks of blond that made her look older than she really was.

Twenty minutes later, Junior saw a green sign with bright gold letters that read *Pocono Mountain Farms* and his father hit the left turn signal. He pulled up to the security gate and handed the guard a small identification card. The guard handed it back, smiled, and said, “Welcome, Dr. Edgar. You can drive right up to the main clubhouse and pick up your beach passes, pool passes, and everything else you’ll need for the summer.”

Then a long wooden pole lifted and they drove onto a smooth, dark road lined with tall leafy trees and low, flat shrubbery. On the way to the main clubhouse, they passed hidden driveways that led to newly built high-end chalets and log cabins. The man who had developed *The Farms* had envisioned it to resemble a Swiss resort, with every amenity available to the residents. The small private colony had been built around the former estate home of a very wealthy woman who had been the heiress to a banana fortune. Each home was at least three thousand square feet, and each had been situated on a two-acre lot.

The clubhouse, as it was referred to by everyone, turned out to be a sprawling stone mansion with an east wing and a west wing. There was a swimming pool, formal gardens, a private lake, and a professional golf course. The clubhouse had several dining rooms, a professional gym, a spa, and practically every other amenity a five-star hotel

had. Though no one in Junior's family cared much for skiing or winter sports, this was also a year-round resort community. Dr. Edgar was planning to rent his house out during the winter months, hoping to make a little extra money on the side.

When the car pulled up in front of the main clubhouse, a round, portly man threw his arms forward and shouted, "Welcome to *The Farms*, Dr. Edgar!" His name was Ben Timberlake. He was the developer and the man who now ran the clubhouse and oversaw all the activities. He was a huge fan of Dr. Edgar's. He claimed Dr. Edgar had saved his life during a routine appendectomy. Ben had been given a drug that had caused a severe allergic reaction, and Dr. Edgar had been the only one who'd been able to diagnose it correctly. Ben had been the one who had talked Dr. Edgar into buying a summer place there, at a huge discount. And because Ben was so thankful to Dr. Edgar for saving his life, he'd given Dr. Edgar one full year there without paying any community association dues. This included everything from clubhouse activities, to dancing lessons, to weekly trash pickup.

Dr. Edgar stepped out of the car and smoothed his slacks. He crossed toward Ben and reached for his hand.

"Welcome," Ben said. "It's so good to see the man who saved my life. How was your trip?"

"Wonderful," Dr. Edgar said. Whenever Ben mentioned that Dr. Edgar had saved his life, Dr. Edgar smiled so widely, his gums showed.

Elaine stepped up behind her husband and shook Ben's hand. Then Laney opened her door, slowly rose from the car, and waited a minute too long to close the door. She stood there staring at the empty back seat, smiling at nothing. Junior's parents and Ben



were facing Laney. While Laney hesitated and stared at the back seat, she nodded and made a gesture with her arm. As far as Ben Timberlake knew, Dr. Edgar only had two children. So he tipped his head to the side and leaned forward to see if there was anyone else getting out of the car. When he saw the back seat was empty, he blinked and pressed his palm to his throat.

Junior looked at Dr. Edgar and smiled. Dr. Edgar cleared his throat and gave Elaine a nod. Junior knew his parents didn't want Ben to know about Laney's imaginary Puca friend, Elmer. So Dr. Edgar quickly looped his arm through Ben's and turned him around. Elaine grabbed Ben's other arm. Ben tried to look back, but Dr. Edgar kept talking fast. And without giving poor Ben a chance to speak, Dr. Edgar and Elaine carted him off the main dining room, where they were handing out resident passes and identification tags.

Laney slammed the back door shut and followed them to the clubhouse, taking slow steps, stopping to look down at Elmer every so often. Junior smiled and shook his head, leaning back against the Lincoln's wide trunk lid. Though Junior would never have admitted this to anyone aloud, he didn't mind having Elmer around. There had been times when he'd thought that he'd actually seen Elmer, too. It always happened fast, while he was turning his head or reading something. He'd sense a distinct presence and out of the corner of his eye, in a flash, he'd see a dark image that resembled a dog. But when he turned to face it head on, there was nothing there.

While Junior was watching Laney, he heard deep, loud voices. He turned to the right and stared down toward the bottom of a well-trimmed grassy ravine. A men's soccer team was jogging onto an athletic field. They were hooting and yelling, passing a

soccer ball back and forth. From where Junior was standing, he could see their strong, hairy legs bouncing up and down. They were wearing skimpy white shorts, white athletic socks, and oversized red jerseys. He was too far away to see any bulges between their legs, but his imagination didn't let him down. When he started to picture all those thick, floppy penises jerking around in tight sweaty jock straps, his brand-new designer jeans began to tighten. He'd always had a thing for soccer players.

He squared his shoulders and turned around fast so his erection would be against the trunk lid. He clenched his fists and willed his dick to go down again. He thought about foods he hated and the time he'd received a D on a final exam. His dick had a mind of its own, and thinking about bad things always seemed to do the trick. But just when his erection started to subside, two good-looking young guys walked by and smiled at him. They were carrying tennis rackets and they were both wearing white tennis shorts. The one on the left had dark hairy legs, and the one on the right had enormous thigh muscles covered with a thin layer of blond fleece.

Junior smiled back and nodded, but he was picturing himself going down on his knees in front of them. He'd pull down their zippers with his teeth and take turns pressing his face between their legs. He had a thing for tennis players, too.

Then he shook his head fast and tried to focus on bad things again, willing his erection to disappear. He was wearing a white polo shirt that day, with black horizontal stripes across the middle, and it only came down to the top of his waist. If he'd known there would have been this many hot-looking guys in *The Farms* he would have worn the green polo that covered his entire crotch.

He felt trapped. Back home he would have run to his bedroom and pulled his collection of porn magazines out from under his bed. Sometimes jerking off was the only way to relieve the tension. But Junior had left all his magazines at home, knowing it wasn't safe to travel with magazines of nude men and a nosy little sister.

Then he felt a tap on his shoulder. Before he even had a chance to turn his head, someone said, "Hey, I'm Valerie Timberlake, Ben's daughter. Your mom and dad said you'd be out here. They told me to come out and introduce myself."

The second he heard Valerie's high-pitched nasal voice, his erection started to shrink. He made a mental note to remember her the next time he needed to control himself.

He turned all the way around and reached for her small puffy hand. "It's nice to meet you," he said, silently thanking her for saving him from what could have been an awkward erection moment.

Valerie wasn't a bad-looking young woman. She had long, bushy black curls, sharp angular features, and long, thin arms. She was wearing a blousy peasant dress that afternoon, with a white off-the-shoulder top and beige earth shoes. Her eyeglasses were large round discs with thick lenses. She mentioned she was also entering her freshman year of college, then looked him up and down and smiled.

Immediately, Junior crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back into the car as far away from Valerie as he could get. He knew that look in Valerie's eyes. He recognized that soft, sultry tone in her voice. This had happened to him before. Aggressive girls like Valerie were always looking him up and down, staring into his eyes with that painful come-hither expression on their faces. Her head was tilted to the side

and her chin was pointed down. She gave him a half smile and her eyelashes started to flutter when she looked at his lips.

“You have such thick sandy blond hair,” she said, moving closer. “And such large blue eyes.”

“Ah well,” he said, “you have nice hair too.” Her hair reminded him of steel wool dipped in black paint. And her skin was too soft and milky for his taste.

“Do you like to dance?” she asked. “There’s a band tonight in the main dance hall and everyone’s going to be there.” She took a small step toward him. Her cheap flowery perfume turned his stomach and made his nose itch.

Junior edged to the side of the car, making sure he didn’t rub against her bare arm, and stepped away from the car.

“Ah well,” he said. “I’m not much of a dancer, to be honest. I have two left feet.”

Then he heard Laney’s familiar voice near the front end of the car. “Come on, Elmer,” she said. She was walking toward the car and Dr. and Mrs. Edgar were coming up in the distance. When poor Laney realized she’d said Elmer’s name out loud in public, she pressed her palms over her mouth and gasped.

“Hey,” Junior shouted, rushing to Laney’s rescue and saving himself from Valerie at the same time. “There she is.”

He left Valerie standing in the street alone and ran over to Laney. He threw his arms around her and hugged her as tightly as he could. “I was wondering where you were, kid.”

“Who is *Elmer*?” Valerie asked. She put her hands on her hips. She looked around, but it was only the three of them.

Laney's mouth opened wide and her head fell back. Junior hadn't hugged her this way since they'd been toddlers.

"Elmer is a little nickname that Laney uses for me," he said. He looked down at Laney and smiled. "Right?"

Laney nodded yes.

"Well. I love that. It's so nice. To see a brother who is close to his sister is refreshing," Valerie said. Then she wiggled her fingers and smiled. "I hope I'll see you tonight at the dance. Everyone's going to be there. We'll have bunches and bunches of fun."

"Yes. The dance. We'll see."

"I have to run now," Valerie said. "I'm off for my tennis lesson."

"Bye now," Junior said, forcing a smile.

As Valerie turned to leave, Junior opened the back door for Laney and Elmer. He patted Laney's shoulder and smiled. Laney didn't say anything to him. She was still worried about talking to Elmer in public. He waited for Elmer to get into the car first, then Laney climbed inside and he shut the door. Then looked up at the sky and took a deep breath, wondering how he was going to get through the entire summer with Valerie Timberlake on his heels.

## Chapter Two

The new summer house was off the golf course, within walking distance of the main clubhouse. And it was better than Junior had imagined it would be. The exterior resembled a classic A-frame chalet, with walls of glass, cedar siding, and a chunky six-foot stone foundation. Every window looked out to a heavily wooded landscape layered in multiple shades of green. There was a massive stone fireplace in the main living room and a wood-burning stove in the family room. All together there were three floors of living space. The master bedroom was on the second floor, the main floor of the house. Laney and Elmer chose a wide square bedroom on the first floor—so Laney would be more easily able to let him outside to relieve himself—off the family room. Junior chose one of the two bedrooms, up a long narrow flight of stairs, on the third floor. He knew it would be private there. He could lock the door, lie down on his bed naked, and masturbate below a wide open window, and no one would ever be able to see him. He had urges so strong he wasn't sure if he'd ever be able to control them.

He knew he'd be masturbating alone a lot that summer. He was surrounded by good looking men in short pants, bathing suits, and athletic gear. And none of them seemed to be gay. Even the word gay in reference to homosexuals was still only catching on in 1978 and most people in the mainstream were not comfortable using it unless they were whispering.

After everyone was settled and unpacked, the entire family went down to the main clubhouse for a dance lesson in an outdoor pavilion overlooking the lake. His mother was

excited; she didn't want to miss anything. The woman who ran the affair introduced herself as Stella. She spoke with a slight New York accent, chewed bubble gum, and reminded Junior of Olivia Newton-John in *Grease*—after the transformation, when Olivia becomes a voluptuous blond temptress. Stella's makeup was thick, her flouncy leopard-print dress was too short, and she had a six-inch line of cleavage. Junior couldn't decide whether or not he liked her crystal chandelier earrings better than her towering black stilettos. And when he saw the way her long red fingernails curved downward, he pressed his palm to his heart and sighed.

Stella wasn't like his mother, or the rest of the staid women at *The Farms*. She had style and sophistication; she knew how to make men weak with just one look. He'd overheard his mother and father speaking about someone who worked in the clubhouse who used to be a Rockette. Now he knew it had to be Stella. He wanted to walk up to her, introduce himself, and tell her how much he loved her shoes.

While Stella was organizing the group into a dance line, Valerie Timberlake sidled up next to Junior and poked him in the ribs with her elbow. She was wearing another peasant-type skirt and blouse, and flat white sandals with those large loops for her big toes. This time the skirt was black and the blouse was white. The only makeup on her face was a thin layer of neutral lip gloss. He guessed she was going for that natural look. But he thought she could have at least had her unibrow waxed. He looked down at her and smiled, then looked back up at Stella and listened closely to the dance instructions.

"I was hoping you'd be here," Valerie said, speaking over Stella's smooth voice. "I rushed all the way over from my riding lesson so we could dance together."

“Ah well,” Junior said. “Isn’t that nice of you?” He didn’t know what else to say. For the life of him, he could never understand what it took for some young girls to get the hint. Clearly, he wasn’t responding to her obvious sexual overtures. And if she thought he was just being shy, she was clearly mistaken. This, for Junior, was one of the hardest parts about being a young gay man. He wanted to just smile and tell her the truth, that no matter what she did he’d never be interested in her romantically, and that it had nothing to do with her on a personal level. But all he could do was smile and pretend to be polite, while she continued to prod and poke and shove her way into his life without his permission.

Thankfully, the music began to play and Stella started dancing. Her long legs flew up, her body jiggled, and her arms dangled above her head. She danced back and forth, shaking her hips to the rhythm of the reggae music, and everyone in the group tried to follow her steps. She explained a few classic dance techniques, then showed a few that were more complicated. The older guy standing in front of Junior gazed at Stella’s long legs with his glasses on the end of his nose and his mouth half open. Junior’s father had a similar expression, until Junior’s mother poked him in the ribs. When Stella finally shouted, “Everyone follow me in a round-robin circle,” Valerie placed her small hands on Junior’s hips and he marched forward. His hands were on his mother’s hips, and his mother was holding his father’s hips. Laney was in front of his father. Junior had a feeling that Elmer was sitting this one out on the sidelines with a grin on his face.

The group formed a line and danced in a connected circle. When Stella finally shouted, “Okay, when the music changes, you’ll be dancing with the man of your dreams,” she threw her arms up and grabbed the older gentleman who had been gawking



at her legs. The music switched from reggae to a slow ballad. Junior found himself holding Valerie Timberlake. Valerie batted her eyelashes and snuggled into his body. Junior's mother and father were dancing next to them. His mother gave his father a look, then gave Junior a wink. Junior rolled his eyes and looked up at the pavilion's ceiling. Evidently, his mother liked the idea of him dancing so closely with Valerie Timberlake.

This didn't surprise him. After all, he was twenty years old and he'd never even brought a young woman home to meet his family. His mother kept saying, in that knowing way she claimed to have, "He just has to meet the right girl and he'll be just fine."

\* \* \* \*

Ben Timberlake personally escorted Junior and his family to the best table in the dining room that night. When they were seated, he called the waiter over and said, "These people are my special guests, and I want them to have whatever they want." Then he smiled and introduced the waiter. "This is Marvin Epstein," he said. "He's entering Princeton this fall."

Marvin was tall and dark and lanky, with a Roman nose and slight cleft in his chin. The minute Marvin smiled, Junior noticed Laney sit up straight in her chair. For the first time since they'd entered the dining room, she wasn't looking down at the empty space beside her chair where Elmer was resting.

"It's nice to meet you, Marvin," Dr. Edgar said. "What will you be majoring in at Princeton?"

Marvin nodded at Dr. Edgar, and flashed Laney a quick smile. "I'll be pre-med."

“Excellent,” Dr. Edgar said. “Junior here will be going into pre-med at Yale this fall.”

“Isn’t that nice?” Elaine said. “I’m sure you two young fellas will have a lot in common this summer.”

Junior smiled at Marvin. But he was clenching the white cloth napkin on his lap, wondering why she still used the word “fella” in 1978. This was another thing his mother always did that annoyed him. She was constantly trying to make new friends for him, without taking into consideration the fact that he didn’t need her help and he preferred to choose his own friends.

Ben Timberlake walked up to Laney’s chair and said, “And what are your plans?”

Laney tossed her head back and flipped a blond curl. “I’m going to become a beauty expert,” she said. “I’d like to own a chain of beauty salons.” Then she looked down to the right of her chair and frowned. She said to Ben, “Could you please step to the left a few inches?” Evidently, fat Ben Timberlake was standing on Elmer’s tail.

Dr. and Mrs. Edgar froze.

Junior looked up at the ceiling and smiled.

Poor Ben Timberlake looked down at the empty space beside Laney’s chair, pressed his palm to his barrel stomach, and took two gentle steps to the left.

“Yes, yes,” Dr. Edgar said, “Laney is a regular beauty expert already.” He spoke fast and loud; he knew it was time to change the subject so no one would wonder about Elmer.

“I’ll say she is,” Marvin said. Then he smiled at Laney. “I’ll be right back with rolls. Then I’ll take your orders.”

Dr. and Mrs. Edgar were too busy worrying about whether or not Ben Timberlake thought it was odd that Laney had asked him to move away from the chair to notice what was happening. But Junior was watching Laney and Marvin. He saw the way her eyes followed Marvin to the other side of the restaurant. It was the same way Valerie Timberlake looked at him earlier that day. The only difference was that this time Marvin looked back when he thought no one was watching and he winked at Laney a couple of times.

After dinner, they went outside to a large veranda off the main dining room where people were dancing to slow music. It reminded Junior of one of those wedding bands, where the lead singer is too loud and usually off pitch. They were playing a Sinatra song and couples of all ages were swaying back and forth. Valerie Timberlake walked up to where Junior was standing beside his mother and asked him to dance.

“He’d love to dance,” Elaine said. Then she smiled at Junior and added, “You two young people go and have some fun.”

Valerie was strong. She grabbed his hand and yanked him onto the dance floor. Junior looked back at his mother and raised an eyebrow. He felt as if he’d been ambushed.

While they danced, Valerie bragged about how she was going to get her degree in business management and then get a real-estate license. She had that air of superiority that some small-town people acquired when they haven’t been exposed to anything better than what they already knew. Valerie said she wanted to follow in her father’s footsteps, and that they were already looking at other sites in the Pocono Mountains to start another gated community just like *The Farms*.

When she hinted that both resort communities would need a good full-time doctor, Junior smiled and said, "I'm going to specialize in infectious diseases. And I'd like to spend a good deal of my time working in third world countries, where doctors are scarce."

This third world country thing had only been a thought and he hadn't worked out all the details yet. Actually, Junior hadn't decided on any specialization. But he wanted Valerie to know, in no uncertain terms, that he had no intention of becoming a general practitioner who spent his time putting Band-Aids on tourists in a second-rate resort community in the middle of nowhere.

"Do you have any hobbies?" Valerie asked.

"I jog and I lift weights," he said. He also spent a good deal of his spare time with all-male porn magazines. But he didn't mention that.

"I like to throw pottery," she said.

"Throw it *where*?"

She tapped his chest and laughed. "Be serious," she said, with a giddy flirtatious lilt. "You know what I mean."

He didn't have a clue. Junior knew nothing, and could not have cared less, about pottery.

"I also like to blow glass," she said. "I find the control aspect of blowing very satisfying."

Junior took a quick breath and rolled his eyes. This time he knew exactly what she meant. He felt like blowing every young guy in the room that night, especially the cute young cocktail waiter circling the dance floor. The guy had been looking over his

shoulder in Junior's direction, giving him quick dead stares, with his large brown eyes. He had short sandy hair, a small compact body, and droopy eyelids. He wore a fitted white shirt and tight black pants. When he crossed the dance floor carrying a tray of cocktails, his puffy ass rounds seemed to be following him. He had that look about him that suggested he'd be very exciting in bed.

A minute later, the band stopped playing Sinatra and kicked up the beat with a newer disco song. Junior had never actually been to a real disco club, and in 1978 this wasn't something people his age admitted out loud. Disco music was everywhere, especially gay bars. Junior was dying to go to a disco club, but he still wasn't of legal age. He could have slipped into a straight disco with straight friends without being carded, except for him that would have been futile. And he didn't have any openly gay friends to take him out. So he kept a copy of the infamous *Gay Yellow Pages* under his bed with his stack of male porn, waiting for his twenty-first birthday. This little book, back then before the Internet was even a dream, was the gay man's companion and lifeline to gay civilization. The *Gay Yellow Pages* listed every bar, restaurant, disco, nightclub, and bathhouse that had ever existed. And the minute Junior turned twenty-one, he was going to start investigating as many as he could.

Valerie jerked to the right and moved faster. She had more power and strength than he'd imagined. Her thick ankles bounced and her body rocked and swayed to the even, pounding disco beat. He wasn't exactly sure what she was doing, but he tried to follow her steps anyway. Before Junior even knew what was happening, Valerie was leading him around the edge of the dance floor, throwing him forward and pulling him back to her bosom. He didn't put up much of a fight. Compared to the older couples

trying hard to do the jitterbug to disco music, Valerie wasn't half bad. One older woman, wearing a chicky-chicky pale pink sweater dress and white poppit pearls, looked like she was doing the Irish jig. Ben Timberlake was dancing with Junior's mother, and they looked like as if they were doing a waltz in double time.

The band was playing a well-known disco song from the movie *Saturday Night Fever* that almost sounded like the original version. As a matter of fact, the band was so good that Stella, the slinky blond dance instructor from earlier that day, strutted out in a black mini-dress and silver high heels. An attractive guy in dark glasses followed her onto the dance floor and took her in his arms. The people on the dance floor hopped to the sidelines, leaving the center of the floor open for Stella and the guy with the dark glasses. For one dramatic second, Stella and the guy stood dead still in the middle of the dance floor and stared into each other's eyes. Then their legs began to gyrate in unison as if they'd been rehearsing their moves for weeks. And while everyone else on the dance floor watched Stella twirl and spin, Junior couldn't take his eyes off the magnificent man with the dark glasses.

Besides dark glasses, the guy was wearing a black T-shirt, skintight black pants that flared slightly at his ankles, and pointy shoes with two-inch Cuban heels. His ass was round and solid, and the bulge between his legs jutted forward into a neat puffy mound. He had wavy light brown hair that was medium length and slicked back with something shiny. When he grabbed Stella and twirled her, his biceps popped and his pecs jiggled. When Stella pressed her body close to his and he ran his palm down the side of her body, he bucked his slim hips into Stella's pelvis as if he were preparing to mount her.

This guy knew how to move his hips with the disco beat, and without moving any other part of his body. At one point, the bulge between his legs vibrated so fast, Junior could see the outline of his dick. It felt as if he were on the verge of crossing the line from PG-rated dancing to R-rated dancing. The woman beside Junior pressed her palm to her open mouth. People gasped and murmured to each other. Across the dance floor, Ben Timberlake furrowed his eyebrows in disapproval. Ben ran a family environment at *The Farms* and he didn't like distasteful actions of any sort.

"Who is that guy Stella is dancing with?" Junior asked. He and Valerie were still dancing on the sidelines with the rest of the crowd. She'd stopped pushing him forward, but she held his hand so hard the tips of his fingers were going numb.

"That's Carlo Pagano," Valerie said. "He's a professional dancer and instructor here every summer. He comes from Newark, New Jersey. We call him Nickie Newarker."

"He's very good," Junior said. He couldn't take his eyes off Carlo Pagano. He'd never seen such a handsome, rugged man dance so well. Though Junior was still holding Valerie's hand, he was imagining backing into Carlo's strong solid body, while Carlo ran his hand down Junior's side instead of Stella's. Junior would arch his back and spread his legs for Carlo. Carlo would place his hands on Junior's waist and Junior would nod yes, letting Carlo know he was willing to do anything to please him.

Then the song changed and Junior saw Ben Timberlake nod at Valerie from the other side of the dance floor. Valerie nodded back and said, "Excuse me, Junior. I have to ask them to stop now. Carlo and Stella will dance like this all night long, stealing the

show, and my father wants them dancing with the guests, not themselves. They don't get paid to have fun."

"I see," Junior said. But he didn't see at all. From what he could really see, the people watching Stella and Carlo dance were enjoying the dance show.

When Valerie left him there, she crossed the dance floor and tugged on Carlo's T-shirt. Valerie whispered something to them, they frowned and nodded, then stepped away from each other. Carlo looked back at Ben Timberlake for a moment. He scanned the room fast to see if anyone else had seen Valerie chastise him. Then he turned and reached for the hand of a middle-aged woman with big hair and large breasts. The woman smiled at Carlo and started dancing with him. Stella turned in the other direction and started dancing with an older gentleman who had been standing there alone.

And while Valerie still had her back to Junior, Junior turned around in the opposite direction and slipped off the dance floor without being noticed by anyone. The only thing he wanted to do that night was go back to the house alone, take off all his clothes, and fantasize about Carlo Pagano bending him over the deck railing and nailing as hard as he could.



### Chapter Three

The next night, Valerie cornered Junior in the dining room and ambushed him into helping her out with game night. She purposely did this in front of Junior's mother and the rest of the family to put Junior on the spot. Junior was more interested in getting to know the bar back in the dining room. It was the same cute guy he'd noticed carrying cocktails on the dance floor the night before. The guy had been secretly smiling in Junior's direction since Junior and his family had arrived for dinner. At one point, Junior even thought he'd seen the guy wink in his direction. Junior had been smiling at him, trying to figure out a way to lose his parents and Laney and Elmer so he could find out more about this guy. He wasn't Junior's dream man, but he wasn't bad looking either.

Valerie, however, had other plans. She pointed at Junior, smiled, and said, "You're helping me out with bingo tonight, and that's that. We'll have bunches of fun."

"You two young people go have fun," Junior's mother said. "We'll be in to play as soon as we finish our desserts." Then she raised an eyebrow and gave Junior a look.

Junior was starting to get annoyed every time Valerie said "bunches of fun." It sounded as if she were talking to a pre-schooler. He glared back at his mother and tossed his napkin on the table, wishing he had the courage to just cross the room, grab the bar back, and kiss him right on the lips in front of everyone.

When he turned to leave the table, he was so mad at his mother he almost stepped on Elmer's hindquarters. But Laney grabbed his knee just in time. She looked at him cross-eyed, with pinched lips, and shoved his knee backward. While Valerie tilted her

head in confusion, Junior lifted his arms in surrender and gently turned in the opposite direction, avoiding Elmer completely.

After four hours of helping Valerie call bingo numbers, Junior finally said good night. It felt like an escape. He told Valerie he was going home alone because he had a bad headache. He told his parents he was going out for a long walk with Valerie after bingo. Then he quietly slipped out the side door and took a walk down a narrow gravel path that lead to the cabins where the summer help lived. He was still curious about the cute bar back; he figured the bar back had to live in one of the cabins.

It was dark and warm that night. The air was still, the cicadas were screaming, and the owls were hooting. In the distance, Junior heard the sound of a loud disco beat, but he wasn't sure where it was coming from. He knew it wasn't the clubhouse dance band. They'd stopped playing for the night, and they didn't play that loud to begin with. This sounded like a bar or nightclub on the other side of the cabins where the summer help lived.

As he crossed a narrow wooden bridge that led to a flight of stone steps where the cabins were located, Junior heard footsteps. When he turned, he saw the cute bar back with the short sandy blond hair walking in his direction. He must have just come off of his shift; his white shirt was open to his waist and he was carrying three six-packs of beer. One under his arm, two in his hands.

"Can I help?" Junior asked, reaching out to take hold of the six-pack under his arm.

"You can help me out anytime you like," the guy said. He lifted his arm so Junior could take the beer and then looked Junior up and down. "What are you doing all the way

back here?”

Junior took the beer and shrugged. He wasn't sure himself. "I just wanted to go for a walk, is all," he said. "I heard music and I wanted to see where it was coming from." He nodded toward the cabins, making reference to the loud disco beat.

"Ah well, *honey*," the cute guy said. "That's Lavender Hall."

"Lavender Hall?"

"The only gay disco in the Poconos," he said. Then he put his hand on his hip. "I'm Gary. This is my first summer working here."

At first, Junior's heart sank. Gary wasn't at all what he'd expected him to be. To look at him at a glance, anyone would have thought he was the masculine, athletic type, ready to toss a football to his teammates. He wasn't tall, but his body was muscular and stocky, with a wide sturdy neck. He even had a thick sexy patch of blond hair on his chest. But when Gary opened his mouth to speak, he sounded more like a girl than most girls sounded. He made fluffy Valerie Timberlake look butch. Even his physical gestures were effeminate and overly dramatic. When he wasn't dangling a limp wrist, he had both hands on his hips and one foot pointed out.

"Everyone calls me Junior. It's nice to meet you." Junior took care to keep his face blank and his voice even. He wasn't sure where this was leading.

"It's nice to meet you, Junior," Gary said. "It's not every night a big, strong, handsome guy like *yourself* helps me back to my cabin."

"Ah well," Junior said. "I don't mind."

Junior followed him back to his cabin in silence, the last cabin on the right. But he wasn't excited anymore. He just wanted to help Gary carry the beer and get out of there

as fast as he could. The one thing that turned Junior off more than women like Valerie Timberlake were effeminate men like Gary. Not on a personal level. Junior knew he could be friendly with Gary without a problem; it wasn't a matter of discrimination. It was that Junior had always been attracted to strong men: real men with rough beards, deep throaty voices, and big strong hands. Junior didn't want to swap recipes and decorating tips. He wanted to be thrown down on a bed and manhandled until he begged for mercy.

But when they reached the cabin, Gary didn't waste any time in getting what he wanted. He put the beer down on a small table, crossed to where Junior was standing near the door, and reached for Junior's zipper. Before Junior had a chance to say anything, Gary was reaching inside Junior's pants and pulling his dick out. He pulled Junior's dick and his balls out at the same time with his small fingers, then pressed his face into Junior's crotch and took a long, deep breath. He mumbled something incoherent and said, "Mmmmm."

Junior pressed his fingertips to his chest and looked down in shock. This wasn't what he'd expected. There hadn't been any warning; it was so blatant and casual. He wasn't even sure he wanted to do this, but he didn't want to hurt Gary's feelings. He watched Gary lick his lips and swallow his entire dick in one gulp. No one had ever sucked Junior's dick before. When he'd fantasized about being with other men he'd always been the one down on his knees sucking someone else's dick. But this wasn't bad at all. Gary had a soft, wet mouth and he sucked with gentle pressure. As long as Gary didn't expect Junior to reciprocate, he wasn't going to put up a fight.

Within minutes, Junior's dick was fully erect and Gary's head was bobbing up and down. Gary's eyes were closed and there were soft moans coming from his mouth. He slurped and sucked without stopping for air; his jaw never seemed to grow tired. He went down so hard that Junior's legs started to tremble and he had to reach for the door frame to keep his balance. Junior leaned back and closed his eyes. Each suck and gulp brought him closer to the edge. He squeezed the door frame and wondered if he should warn Gary about the fact that he was ready to come. He'd read in a short erotic story once that it was impolite to come in someone's mouth without asking for permission first. A lot of guys didn't like the taste of come. Junior didn't want to be rude.

Junior, however, could barely open his mouth to speak. "I'm c-c-close," he whispered.

When Gary heard this, he started sucking even harder, rolling his head in quarter turns. He nodded up and down, giving Junior the permission he needed.

Junior took a deep breath and grunted. He grabbed the other side of the door frame with his other hand. His head went back and his mouth opened wide. When he blew his load into Gary's tight mouth, he felt the orgasm all the way down to the tips of his toes. This was the first time he'd ever come without the help of his hand. He suspected that if he hadn't shot his load into Gary's mouth, it would have landed on the other side of the room.

After Junior came, Gary continued to suck. Gary didn't pull his own dick out of his pants. He made no attempt to get himself off and didn't care whether or not Junior wanted to reciprocate. This, Junior would learn in time, wasn't as unusual as it looked.

Gary was a submissive gay man and the pleasure he received from this experience was solely due to watching Junior receive pleasure.

Junior's dick was sensitive and he wanted to step back, pull out, and zip up his pants. After climax, his first instinct was to flee. But Gary grabbed his legs and held him firmly in place. Gary had swallowed his entire load, and now he was squeezing and milking the last few drops for good measure.

When he finally did release Junior's dick from his mouth, he looked up at Junior and said, "Thanks."

Junior blinked. Shouldn't he be thanking Gary? Gary had done all the work.

"I really needed that," Gary said.

"Ah well," Junior said, putting his dick back into his pants and pulling up his zipper. "You're welcome." He couldn't wait to get home and jump into the shower to remove Gary's saliva from his body.

Gary stood up and wiped his chin. His lips were red and puffy from sucking. "I hope we can be friends."

"Friends?"

Gary smiled. "Look, I have a boyfriend. He works at Lavender Hall and lives with his family about five miles from here."

"You have a *boyfriend*?" Up until that moment, it hadn't officially occurred to Junior that guys could have boyfriends. All of this was still so new to him.

"Yes," Gary said, "And what happened here tonight is our little secret. Okay? My boyfriend is the jealous type, and he'd kill me if he knew about what I just did."

“Why did you do it then?” Junior asked. He was curious. If Gary had a boyfriend, why was he sucking Junior’s cock? If Junior had had a boyfriend, he wouldn’t have been sucking anyone else’s dick.

“You looked so cute the other night,” Gary said. “I had a feeling you had a nice dick. When I saw you outside tonight, I couldn’t help myself. But I don’t do this often, and I’m not going to do it again. So don’t get the wrong idea. And no one fucks me but my boyfriend.”

“I won’t get the wrong idea,” Junior said. “I’m fine.” The last thing he wanted to do was fuck him. But he didn’t say this out loud.

“So this is our little secret, handsome?”

Junior took a deep breath and sighed. He had no intention of getting involved in a sordid love triangle between two gay guys he didn’t know or care about, and he had no intention of pursuing a relationship with effeminate, cheating Gary. So he smiled and said, “It’s our secret.”

## Chapter Four

The next morning, Junior woke early thinking about the blow job he'd received from Gary. Not the actual blow job itself as a memorable, romantic sexual act. There was nothing romantic about what had happened between them. He was thinking more along the lines of practical theory, wondering if blow jobs, in a general sense, were considered as sexually significant as intercourse. He also wondered if he was still technically considered a virgin. He crawled out of bed and pulled on his running clothes, then crept downstairs on his tiptoes so he wouldn't wake anyone. On the first floor, when he passed Laney's room, he was especially careful not to wake Elmer. Laney claimed that Elmer was a light sleeper and he heard every twist and snap in the house.

When he jogged out of the driveway, he crossed the small lane where he lived and headed out to a main road that ran along the north side of *The Farms*. It was only referred to as a gated community because there was huge impressive gate at the main entrance. But there were a few small side roads that led out of the community that weren't gated. He wanted to jog over to the gay disco Gary had told him about, Lavender Hall. He figured it would be empty that early in the morning and he wanted to scope out the territory to see what it looked like in daylight; just in case he decided to go there one night on his own.

It was a cool morning—mornings were always cool in The Pocono Mountains—and he was only wearing a pair of skimpy running shorts and a T-shirt. His hands were freezing and he wished he'd at least had the sense to wear a sweatshirt so he could have



pulled the sleeves down over his hands. He jogged faster, hoping the pace would warm his body. A white plumbing truck appeared in the distance and swerved to the right so he wouldn't get too close to Junior. Junior waved at his considerate gesture, wishing all motorists would act that way when they saw a jogger. The guy in the truck popped his horn twice and gave Junior a thumbs-up signal.

Even though this was considered one of the main roads that led to a little village, it was virtually empty. And about a half mile after the truck passed him, Junior made a left turn down a narrower road that bordered the back end of *The Farms*. From what he could figure, this had to be the road where Lavender Hall was located. He passed an old 1950s ranch house, with a front yard littered with old cars, piles of ancient rusted tools, and a broken toilet bowl. Next to that, he passed a rusted mobile home perched on cinderblocks, tipping slightly downward on the left end. He was running too fast to get actual details, but he couldn't help notice the differences. They were shocking. To Junior's left, beyond a heavily wooded area, was one of the wealthiest gated communities in the region. And to the right, it looked as if he'd slipped into a vast wasteland of ruin and decay.

A mile after that, he noticed an open section on the right, where the woods seemed to part, making way for a dirt and gravel parking lot. He looked back and crossed the road. When he approached the gravel lot, he slowed down and looked to his right. There was a low, flat clapboard building in the middle of the lot. The clapboards were painted pale purple and the trim was a darker shade of aubergine. The windows were boarded shut to keep out the light and the roof was one of those metal affairs with vertical slats and indentations. There were no shrubs, trees, or distractions. Just the building and a

door situated dead center, with a sign over the door that read “Lavender Hall” in bold black print.

Junior didn’t see any cars in the parking lot, so he stepped onto the gravel and jogged around back to see what was there. Just like the front, the back windows had been boarded up and sealed, and there was one small door with a long stack of trash cans to the right. He jogged in place for a few seconds and stared down at the gravel. He was perspiring by then and his T-shirt was soaked.

Then he heard a dog bark in the distance, followed by the sound of a car rushing into the parking lot. The tires crunched on the gravel and he saw a cloud of dust rise up over the roof of the low building. He turned fast and jogged back toward the front, hoping it was just someone turning around in the parking lot. He didn’t want to get caught lurking behind a gay bar in skimpy running shorts and a wet T-shirt.

When he reached the front of the building, he saw a large dark green car with New Jersey license plates. It was a late-model Buick Riviera with flashy chrome wheels and thick tires, custom pin-striping that wrapped around the entire body, and two large squares of dice dangling from the rearview mirror. And it was spotless. The paint glistened, the wheels sparkled, and the windows resembled mirrors.

Junior figured it was best to just keep jogging and ignore the car. If he acted casual, no one would think twice. But when the driver’s door opened and Junior turned to look, he lost his footing and tripped on a large piece of gravel. As a runner, this wasn’t the first time he’d fallen. He experienced that awkward moment, the second his foot hit the piece of gravel, when he knew he was going down and there was nothing he could do

about it. He threw out his right arm to brace himself for the fall, turning his head to the side so he wouldn't land flat on his face and break his nose.

He skidded into the dirt on his left side, scraping his knee, but avoiding his face at the same time. He'd been prepared for the fall; he knew he hadn't broken any bones and he knew he'd be fine. The only thing he cared about was the person in the car. He was hoping and praying no one had seen him fall. He despised the idea of falling in front of anyone, and he hated looking foolish in public.

But when he looked up, he saw a pair of pointy black shoes in front of his face. They were shiny and had two-inch Cuban heels. His stomach turned and his heart began to pound. He closed his eyes for a second and grimaced, hoping it wasn't who he thought it was.

"You okay, buddy?" a deep voice asked.

Junior rose to his knees and brushed sand off his T-shirt. He didn't look him in the eye. There was a lump in his throat and he couldn't find his voice. Of all the times he had to fall, why did it have to be in front of Carlo Pagano, the best-looking man he'd ever met?

"You took some fall," Carlo said, then reached for Junior's hand and helped him to his feet.

"I'm fine," Junior said. "I didn't break anything. It looked worse than it was." He bent his legs and stretched his arms. "See, nothing broken. I'll live."

Carlo pointed to Junior's knee. It wasn't dripping with blood, but there were bloody sections from where he'd scraped it on the stones. "You sure? Are you from around here? I could give you a lift home."

Junior felt no pain. Even if he had hurt himself, he wouldn't have known. His endorphins were already rushing because he'd been running, and being so close to Carlo made him feel the sensation even stronger. He clenched his fists and gritted his teeth. He didn't want Carlo to know he was so intimidated he could barely speak without stammering. He had to act normal; he had to force himself to be cool and calm.

"I live close by," Junior said. "In *The Farms*." It wasn't that he didn't want to give details about his life. He didn't want to sound stupid and immature, so he figured the less said, the better he'd look. Then he looked at Carlo's face for the first time. Carlo was wearing sunglasses and Junior couldn't look into his eyes. But he was even better looking up close, in the daylight. His nose was the perfect length, his strong chin had a small cleft, and his skin was an unusual shade of olive and bronze. He reminded Junior of the gorgeous men he'd seen on those TV dance shows, those guys with the cool outfits, perfect haircuts, and strong confident expressions on their faces.

"I'm a dance instructor at *The Farms*," Carlo said. "My name is Carlo Pagano."

"I'm Junior," Junior said, hating the way his name sounded coming from his mouth. He should have said his name was Maxwell. Junior was the name of a little boy, or a forty-year-old fat guy who still lived at home with his mother and father.

Carlo reached for his hand and shook it hard. "Nice to meet you, Junior. Are you new? I haven't seen you around before."

Junior shrugged. "This is my first summer here," he said. "My father knows Ben Timberlake."

Carlo laughed and rubbed his jaw. "Good old Ben," he said. It was hard to tell whether he was being sarcastic or faithful to his boss.

“I’d better get back to my run,” Junior said. The scrape on his leg was beginning to burn and he had a long run back to the house. Not to mention the fact that he was standing next to the best-looking man he’d ever met and his hair was soaked with sweat, his shirt was covered with dirt, and his knee was scraped and bleeding.

“Maybe I should give you a lift back,” Carlo said. “I don’t mind. I was only stopping by here to pick up my wallet. Someone found it last night and the manager told me he’d leave it in the mailbox.”

Junior smiled and started jogging in place. “I’m fine,” he said. “But thanks for asking.” Carlo looked mean and rough, but sounded nice and polite.

As Junior turned to leave, Carlo shouted, “Nice meeting you, Junior. I’ll see you around.”

Junior lifted his arm and waved it back and forth. His leg was killing him, but he focused hard on running smoothly so Carlo wouldn’t think he was awkward and uncoordinated. Junior had seen those gangly types jogging down the road, with their knees knocking together, their unsightly arms jerking in all directions, and their thighs jiggling.

When he reached the edge of the parking lot to cross back onto the road, he looked back quickly to see what Carlo was doing. Carlo was standing in the same spot where Junior had left him, with his legs spread wide and his hands shoved into his pockets, watching Junior jog down the road. Junior didn’t take a full relaxed breath until he was around the corner and completely out of Carlo’s sight.

\* \* \* \*

After dinner that night, Junior and his family played a game of miniature golf. Junior's leg was still sore from his fall earlier that morning and he would have rather remained at home that night. But his mother had begged him. "Please come," she'd said. "If you don't come then it will be just the three of us, and Elmer." Junior had replied, "Can't she just leave Elmer home for one night?" His mother shook her head. "Laney says he'll feel left out." Junior closed his eyes and pressed his fingers to his temples. "I'll go," he'd said. "But we both still know that Elmer isn't real, right?" That's when his mother rolled her eyes and said, "Sometimes I almost forget myself."

Playing miniature gold with Elmer wasn't easy either. Though Elmer didn't actually play ("Dogs don't play golf," Laney had informed them), he was there with them, chasing the ball and foraging in and out of the little miniature golf fixtures all night. They had to wait fifteen minutes for Laney to coax a playful Elmer out of a small white castle, and another ten for him to climb over a curved wooden bridge (Elmer wasn't fond of heights). Junior even offered to carry him over the bridge, but Dr. Edgar gave Junior a look and said, "Son, I think we'd better let him cross alone." All this, while Junior's mother smiled and made polite excuses to the people standing in line behind them so they wouldn't think the Edgar family were all a bunch of loons.

After golf, it was too late to do anything else so they went back home and watched TV. By ten o'clock, Junior was restless; he told them he was going to take a walk down to the clubhouse to see what Valerie Timberlake was doing. He lied. He told them Valerie was helping out with karaoke night. He said he wanted to go down and listen to the other singers and joke around with Valerie about how bad they were.

When Elaine heard that Junior was going to meet Valerie, she poked Dr. Edgar in the arm and said, “We’ll leave the back door unlocked for you. Have fun.” They were so thrilled he was going to meet Valerie they didn’t even give him a curfew.

Laney gave Elaine a dirty look and said, “How come he gets to go out for as long as he wants and I have a curfew? I’m a lot safer than he is because I have Elmer with me all the time.”

“You’re younger, dear,” Elaine said, then looked down at the empty space where Elmer was and frowned.

Junior walked to the clubhouse and took the back steps behind the main dining room so he wouldn’t run into Valerie. Valerie was running the karaoke night and if she saw him she’d drag him into the room and make him spend the rest of the night with her. He skipped down the stone steps, two at a time, and headed toward the back end of the property where the summer help lived. It was a Wednesday night, and there wasn’t much going on in the clubhouse, but he heard music pounding in the distance. He passed a few people and nodded, with his hands in his pockets and his eyes focused on the path. The closer he came to the cabins, the louder the music played.

At the end of the path, beside the last cabin on the far left, he found a narrow dirt path that wound up a hill and into the woods. He carefully navigated up the dark path, crossed through a short section of woods, and came out on the narrow road where he’d been jogging earlier that day. Too bad he hadn’t known about that path earlier. He wouldn’t have had to jog all the way back to his house with a scraped knee. Across the street, he saw Lavender Hall. The parking lot was jammed with cars, the music was blaring through the old purple clapboards, and there was a short line of people at the

entrance door: men of all ages, dressed in everything from casual summer clothes, to flashy disco outfits, to faded flannel shirts.

Junior looked down at his outfit. He was wearing beige jeans, a red polo shirt, and dockside socks without socks. If it had been possible, he would have changed his clothes and worn something tighter and sexier, like the outfits Carlo Pagano wore. But if he'd done that, he wouldn't have been able to leave the house without a plausible explanation.



## Chapter Five

There was a tall, dark-haired man at the entrance of Lavender Hall. He wore a white button-down shirt and black slacks. He had one of those bushy exaggerated mustaches, like the man in the Winston cigarette advertisements, and droopy eyelids that suggested he was either drunk or tired. He was sitting on a tall barstool beside the door, taking money from people and putting it into a small metal box that was resting on his lap. The sign over his head read, “Two dollar Cover Charge.” After the people handed him the money, he handed them two tickets that resembled movie theater tickets and he stamped the backs of their hands.

The line wasn’t long. Junior walked up to three guys who appeared to have arrived together and stood behind them. While they pulled dollar bills from their tight jeans, Junior shoved his hands into his pockets, looked up at the sky, and rocked up and down on the balls of his feet. The music pounded, and he could smell the cigarette smoke pouring through the entrance. Though it wasn’t a cool night, his hands were cold and clammy and his teeth were on the verge of chattering. He kept taking quick breaths and telling himself to remain calm and casual.

When the three guys were stamped, they crossed into the bar and Junior stepped up to the man taking the money. The man stared at Junior for a moment, raised his eyebrows, and said, “Well, hello. You’re new here.”

Junior shrugged his shoulders. He opened his mouth but before he could speak, Gary, the guy who had given him the casual blow job the night before, appeared in the doorway and said, “Hey, you’re here.”

The guy taking the money raised his eyebrows. He said to Gary, “You know him?”

“He’s just a friend,” Gary said. “Don’t start spreading rumors about me.” Then Gary smiled and nodded in Junior’s direction for help.

“Ah well,” Junior said. “We’re just casual friends. I’m spending the summer in *The Farms* with my family and Gary works there.” He figured he’d better speak up and cover for Gary. He didn’t want anyone to know that Gary had blown him—he didn’t want Gary’s boyfriend coming after him in a dramatic, jealous rage.

The guy taking the money glanced at Junior, and his head went up and down several times. He stared at Junior’s legs and licked his lips in an obvious way. “We don’t get cute guys like you around here every day. Are you a model? Or a stripper?”

“A *stripper*?”

“He’s just joking around with you,” Gary said. “He has a weird sense of humor.”

Junior laughed. “No,” he said. “I’m not a model or a stripper. I’m just a college student spending the summer with his family.” Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out money. “The cover is two dollars?”

This was going well. So far, everyone thought he was over twenty-one and no one was asking him to produce an identification card. In those days the rules were more relaxed, especially in out-of-the-way places like the Poconos. And he’d already planned ahead. If they had asked Junior for his ID, he would have made up an excuse that he’d

forgotten his wallet. He figured the worst thing that could happen was he'd have to tell them he had to go home for his wallet, and he wouldn't return.

The guy taking the money waved his arm fast and said, "Just let me stamp you. No cover charge for you tonight since you're so cute and it's your first time here." Then he grabbed Junior's right hand, stamped the back, and handed him two movie theater tickets.

Junior thanked him and shoved the theater tickets into his pants. He wasn't sure what the tickets were for, and he wasn't about to make a fool of himself by asking. He figured that if they were important, he'd find out soon enough by watching other people.

Gary pulled him into the building and dragged him to a long wooden bar surrounded by men. It was dark inside, with reddish lighting, and the disco music was so loud the men were forced to lean into each other and shout. It smelled like alcohol, cigarette smoke, and aged wood. The walls were painted black and the floorboards were uneven. Junior couldn't walk two feet without rubbing against another man. When he tried to apologize for bumping into the other men, no one seemed to care. A few of them helped him pass through. One even reached down and placed his hand on the small of Junior's back and pushed him forward. Another reached down and squeezed Junior's ass a couple of times. Junior blinked and continued walking.

When they reached the end of the bar, Gary lifted a cocktail glass and finished drinking what was left inside. He gulped it down, wiped his lips with the side of his hand, and shouted, "Do you want a drink?"

Junior lifted his arms and waved his hands. He shook his head no and said, "I'll wait until later." He was underage and didn't want to get caught drinking without ID.

Sneaking into a gay bar was bad enough. And because this was all so new and peculiar, he wanted to be in full control at all times. Just standing there between all those warm, rugged male bodies made his stomach jump. The excitement that had been building within him was changing from absolute fear to slight discomfort. The guy with the plaid shirt standing behind Gary was staring at Junior and licking his lips. The guy behind Junior was gently rubbing Junior's ass. No one could see what the guy was doing; just Junior knew it. And he liked it. In a bold, unexpected move, Junior spread his legs a little and backed into the guy's hand. No one had ever felt Junior's ass up in public this way, especially not a hot guy with heavy five o'clock shadow. Junior wasn't going to let the guy do anything else to him. But the way he was grabbing Junior's ass didn't feel bad at all.

All at once, Junior felt completely at ease in his surroundings. He'd never felt that way anywhere on The Main Line where he lived. He'd never felt that way in school or with his straight friends. And though he suspected he came from a different world than everyone else in the bar, he was more interested in what their world was like than his.

But more than that, he could do whatever he wanted to do in Lavender Hall and no one would laugh at him or call him names. If he wanted to light a cigarette, throw his hand back over his shoulder, and let it dangle between the tips of his index finger and middle finger like Bette Davis, he could do it without having to worry. If he wanted to carry his schoolbooks up against his chest like a girl, instead of down below his waist like a guy, no one in Lavender Hall would give it a second thought. He could cross his legs and let his foot sway back and forth, and his wrist could hang limp and lifeless. He could

even use pretentious gay words like “nary” and “preamble” without anyone pointing at him. In Lavender Hall they wouldn’t have judged him or berated him for anything.

Junior wasn’t going to instantly transform into an effeminate gay man, and he wasn’t going to put on a dress and high heels and march around the room shaking his ass. But for someone like Junior, who had been so cautious all his life about not letting anyone know about his homosexuality, it was nice to know there was a place in the world where no one would care what he did or how he acted.

“Do you want to dance?” Gary asked.

“Yes,” Junior shouted, without thinking. He couldn’t wait to dance with a man, even it wasn’t the man of his dreams. The DJ had just put on one of his favorite disco songs of all time, and it was the faster nightclub version, not the slower top forty version. The song was called *Souvenirs*. Junior had it on cassette and he’d been playing it nonstop since it had been released.

Gary reached for his hand and pulled him through a line of men. When they passed two guys hugging and French kissing, Junior lost his footing and bumped into a guy in a wheelchair. He looked down and apologized several times, feeling like an awkward fool. The guy in the wheelchair smiled at him and continued talking to another man leaning against the railing.

*Where did they all come from?* Junior wondered. All these men were gay? They didn’t look gay. They looked like normal everyday guys he’d see anywhere on the street. And they all knew each other so well. Suddenly, Junior felt as if there was this huge gay party going on somewhere and they’d all forgotten to invite him.

The square parquet dance floor at the far end of the bar was packed with guys. Gary pulled him into the center, beneath a glittery mirrored disco ball, and started swaying to the music. Junior stood in front of him, rocking his arms and legs in a self-conscious way. The two men dancing to the right were holding each other and kissing. The two guys on his right pulled off their shirts and started swinging their arms above their heads. Junior's arm kept rubbing against one guy's naked, sweaty chest. He didn't do it on purpose; he didn't want to be rude. But there were so many men dancing at the same time that it was impossible to avoid touching them. So Junior closed his eyes and started moving his legs up and down, to the steady, pounding disco beat, feeling freer than he'd ever felt in the middle of the tightest crowd he'd ever experienced.

Gary pulled off his shirt and shoved it through his belt loop. They danced through four more songs, barely looking at each other. Junior continued doing the few comfortable dance steps he knew, confident that the dance floor was too crowded for the other men to even notice what he was doing. Though he was technically dancing with Gary, Gary had his own steps and he wasn't concerned with what Junior was doing. The energy on the dance floor was too thrilling to describe. The humdrum schoolteachers in Junior's past who had told Junior that his prom would be the most thrilling night of his life hadn't been to Lavender Hall. With each new song, the men laughed louder and danced harder. Perspiration poured from their bodies, and the aroma of spicy underarm deodorant mixed with hundreds of different masculine colognes filled Junior's nostrils. This was the first time he'd ever smelled so many men at one time. It was distinct and pleasant. Each time he inhaled, he held his breath for an extra moment.

By the end of the fourth song, the DJ put on a well-known song that had helped start the entire disco craze almost overnight. Junior had this cassette, too. It was from *The Village People* and it was one of Junior's favorite songs.

Gary grabbed his arm and pulled Junior to the side of the dance floor. The other men separated and drifted to the perimeters, leaving a wide open space in the middle of the floor. Junior looked back and forth; he didn't know what was happening or why they were all moving. Then he heard a loud siren go off and he pressed his palm to his chest. His first thought was that the place was being raided and he'd wind up being carted off to some little jailhouse in the middle of the Pocono Mountains. He'd have to call his father to come get him and he'd be shamed for the rest of his life. He looked back and forth for the policemen. He leaned forward and tried to look around a dark corner. The siren went off again and he reached for the railing with his other hand. There didn't seem to be a back entrance. There was no escape, where he could slip out into the woods.

But when the siren went off a third time, all the guys at the edge of the dance floor waved their arms above their heads and shouted. They jerked and laughed, and no one seemed worried but Junior. A second later, two other guys slid to the middle of the dance floor on the tips of their shoes and started dancing. It didn't take Junior long to see that one of the dancers was Carlo Pagano. Carlo was wearing his usual black flared pants and his pointy Cuban heels. He was naked from the waist up and the top button of his pants was unfastened. Junior didn't know who the other dancer was and he didn't care. He focused on Carlo's slick, bulging chest muscles and his narrow, rippled stomach. When Carlo moved, circling the other dancer, he seemed to glide in the air without even

touching the dance floor. Then he twisted and turned and tossed his dance partner with such ease and control it looked as if he'd attached invisible strings to his partner's body.

They danced in circles, then back and forth. Carlo made his partner spin like a toy top, and then caught him in his arms. The other dancer went down to his knees and slid between Carlo's legs. When he surfaced behind Carlo, Carlo pulled him up, held him close to his naked chest, and ran both hands down the guy's body. Carlo's hips began to buck the same way he'd made them buck when he'd danced with Stella at the clubhouse. The other dancer held Carlo's shoulders and tossed his head back, allowing Carlo to bang into his crotch multiple times. He lifted his leg and rubbed his knee up and down Carlo's hip. Carlo continued to buck and grind, pounding into the other guy with gentle slams, always keeping time with the beat of the music. This was a form of dancing Junior had never seen before. It was suggestive and yet simple, as if both Carlo and his partner were about to have sex right on the dance floor.

When the song was over, the DJ slipped right into another song without bringing the first song to a complete end. This time it was a slower song with a milder beat. Carlo gave his slinky dance partner a gentle push and shoved him away. Then Carlo turned his head to the edge of the dance floor where Junior was standing and looked into Junior's eyes.

Junior smiled to be polite. He looked back over his shoulder to see why Carlo was moving toward his end of the dance floor. He even stepped to the side so he wouldn't be in Carlo's way. By the time Junior realized that Carlo was moving toward him, Carlo had both of his hands and he was pulling him to the center of the dance floor. Junior didn't



have time to hesitate or refuse. He didn't want to do this, but Carlo didn't give him a choice about it.

Carlo took Junior's hand in his, then placed his other hand on the small of Junior's back. Junior lifted his free hand and rested it awkwardly on Carlo's naked shoulder. Then Carlo looked into Junior's eyes, pressed his chest to Junior's body, and leaned forward as if taking a full bow. Junior went back without falling. Carlo had total control. His large hand was against Junior's spine and Junior held the back of Carlo's neck for added support. Junior's eyes opened wide and he gasped for air, praying he wouldn't make an awkward move and look foolish in front of Carlo and the entire bar of gay men.

Then Carlo pulled Junior forward into an upright position and started grinding his hips in slow seductive circles. And it occurred to Junior that as long as Carlo was in control, he couldn't make a mistake. They were all looking at Carlo, not Junior. So Junior dropped all of his inhibitions and fears at his feet. They started to glide around the room in front of everyone. Junior held the back of Carlo's neck. He snuggled into Carlo's naked chest and rested his cheek on Carlo's shoulder. While Carlo's hips bucked into Junior's groin, Junior relaxed every muscle in his body and submitted to Carlo's experienced lead. Junior had never felt so safe and protected in his life. If Carlo had decided to lift him up and spin him around, Junior would have let him do it.

He could have remained in Carlo's arms forever. But when the song was over, Carlo rubbed his back a couple of times and stopped moving. Then he pulled Junior into his body and whispered, "Now get home where you belong. This place isn't for you. You're too young to be here."

The new song that pounded through the speakers was faster and louder. Carlo left Junior standing in the middle of the dance floor and he disappeared somewhere in the back of the bar. While the other guys bounced onto the dance floor to resume their positions, shaking their bodies and waving their arms, Junior just stood there, trying to look over their shoulders, wondering where Carlo had gone.

## Chapter Six

Carlo didn't return to the dance floor that night. Junior waited on the sidelines for another half hour to see if he would return, watching how the guys in the bar interacted with each other. Junior figured out that the two movie tickets they'd given him at the front door were for drinks. With the two-dollar cover charge, you received two free drinks and you had to present the tickets to the bartender to get them. If he'd been a drinker, it wouldn't have been a bad deal at all. But he didn't order anything, terrified about not being in control.

Finally, he gave up and went home. While he crossed through the woods and down the path that led to the golf course, the song he'd danced to with Carlo kept repeating in his head. He smiled and hummed, remembering Carlo's hand on his back. He couldn't stop thinking about the intense feelings he'd experienced when he'd rested his cheek in Carlo's chest. It was more than just lust; he'd felt the connection in every cell that completed his body. By the time he was home and in his room, he pulled off his clothes, grabbed his erection, and imagined Carlo pushing his legs up in the air and spreading them apart.

The next day, he went down to the beach with his family. His mother sat with a group of women near the lake, in low webbed folding chairs, with their feet in the water and their milky white knees pressed together. His father sat at a table and played cards with Ben Timberlake and a few other men on a grassy section just above the sand. Junior and Laney were up higher, on a wide flat section of grass that overlooked the lake, with a

group of other guests. Stella, the beautiful blond dancer whom Junior was so infatuated with, was teaching yoga that afternoon. Junior was so enthralled with her, he'd signed up with Laney just to take one of her classes. Stella was strong and talented and had lived and worked in New York. He would have done anything to get to know her better and to find out what her life was really like.

The class was almost over by then. Junior and Laney were next to each other, at the end of the row. Elmer was sitting beside Laney, watching the yoga class and enjoying the sunshine, according to Laney. While Stella had the group locked into a slantwise position, with their right legs twisted backwards and their arms stretched all the way out, Marvin Epstein stepped up to Laney and parked his long lanky body in front of Elmer. He got down on his haunches, smiled at Laney, and said, "This looks like fun, sweetie."

Junior's eyebrows went up. He'd never heard anyone call his little sister sweetie before. He also knew that Laney didn't like it when someone turned their back on Elmer and he couldn't wait to see her blast Marvin and tell him to move to the side.

However, Laney ignored Elmer this time. She lowered her leg and sat up, flipping her long blond hair away from her face. She smiled at Marvin and said, "I'm just a beginner. I'm not very good." Her voice was soft and breathy. She lowered her chin and fluttered her eyelashes.

"You're doing fine," Marvin said. "You look like a pro, sweetie." Then he winked at Laney and took off toward the clubhouse.

Junior rolled his eyes. He knew Laney had taken two years of yoga back home on the main line and she was more than just a beginner. And there was something about

Marvin he didn't like. No matter what Marvin said, it always sounded pompous and insincere.

"Would you cover for me tonight?" Laney asked. "Just tell mom and dad that I'm going to be with you all night if they ask."

"Where are you going?" Junior asked. This, for Laney, was a novelty.

"To play miniature golf with Marvin," she said, while she fluffed her blond curls and shook her head.

"What about Elmer?" He knew she was lying about miniature golf. She was going to meet Marvin.

"He'll be fine at home tonight," she said. "He told me he wasn't fond of miniature golf the other night. The bridge freaked him out."

Then Laney stood up, brushed off her shorts, and made a motion with her hand for Elmer to follow. While they walked down to the water where Junior's mother was sitting, Junior got up on his knees. The entire class was breaking apart. Stella was now talking to Carlo about something, staring down at a clipboard. She had a serious look on her face and Carlo was patting her back. If Carlo noticed Junior sitting there, he made no attempt to show it. He just whispered something into Stella's ear and took off in the opposite direction.

Junior slowly rose to his feet. He crossed to where Stella was standing and said, "Great class today. You're very good."

Her lips remained pinched and her eyes focused on the clipboard. "Thanks," she said. "It's not the worst way to make a buck."

“I really admire what you do,” Junior said. “You were a Rockette. You’re the best dancer I’ve ever seen.”

“I didn’t have a choice,” Stella said, rolling her yoga mat into a long tube. “I got kicked out when I was sixteen when my mother caught my stepfather flirting with me. She didn’t want me moving in on her territory. Dancing was the only thing I ever did well.”

Junior gave her a blank stare. He thought everything she did was perfect. But she wasn’t smiling and she wasn’t bragging. “Well, I wish I had the courage to live my life the way you do.”

Stella gave him a look, then shoved the yoga mat under her arm and left him standing there alone. He watched her walk up toward the main clubhouse, wondering if he’d somehow insulted her. He retraced the conversation and couldn’t find anything wrong. He’d only wanted to pay her a compliment and get to know her better, partly because she was so beautiful and partly because she was such good friends with Carlo Pagano.

\* \* \* \*

After dinner, Junior and his family went to the main clubhouse where the band was playing on the veranda. The dance floor was stippled with people of all ages, and the band was playing slower, smoother dancing music for the older crowd. Ben Timberlake spotted Dr. Edgar and walked over to where they were standing. Junior noticed Carlo was on the dance floor, wearing a formal tuxedo, dancing with one of the women who spent the summer at *The Farms*. The woman was in her mid-forties, she wore a slinky black dress that showed a long line of cleavage, and she was looking directly into Carlo’s eyes

as if she wanted to take him to bed that night. Carlo was smiling and nodding at her as if she were the only woman in the room, making her feel special. Junior felt a pang of jealousy, and he wondered about whether or not Carlo was gay or bisexual.

Ben stepped up to Dr. Edgar. He nodded and smiled at the woman dancing with Carlo, then whispered, "That's Helen Randolph. She's one of the Golf Widows."

Dr. Edgar frowned. "Golf Widows?"

Junior's mother looked down and examined her nails. She was listening, but pretending not to listen. Elaine Edgar tended to ignore the unseemly things in life that didn't affect her on a personal level. Women like Helen Randolph were at the top of that list.

Ben smiled at Helen, then waved at her and nodded. At the same time he whispered, "Her husband only comes up on weekends, and she's all alone during the week. The Golf Widows spend their time playing golf and *dancing* with good-looking young guys like Carlo." He poked Dr. Edgar in the ribs and winked as if he knew a naughty little secret.

Then Valerie Timberlake appeared from nowhere. She walked up to Carlo on the dance floor and grabbed his arm. Junior couldn't hear what Valerie was saying, but he read her lips when she asked, "Where's Stella?" It occurred to Junior that he hadn't seen Stella all evening.

Carlo frowned at Valerie and shrugged his shoulders as if he didn't know where Stella was. Carlo didn't stop dancing with Helen. He couldn't have even if he'd wanted to. Helen, the Golf Widow, had her fingers laced together at the back of Carlo's neck and

she was grinding her hips in awkward, sleazy circles. Helen wasn't about to let anyone take Carlo away from her.

Valerie stomped over to her father. She wore flat black ballerina slippers that night that made her large feet point east and west, creating a cloven-hoof look. First she said hello to Junior and his family, then told her father she couldn't find Stella anywhere. "People have been asking for her," Valerie said. "She's supposed to be dancing with the guests."

Ben smiled and rubbed his large stomach. "She's probably just taking a short break." Ben didn't like disruptions of any kind at his clubhouse. Even when things weren't perfect, he liked to pretend they were.

"We'll see," Valerie said. "I'm going to keep looking for her, though." She acted as though she were hunting for prey.

As Valerie turned and headed for the club house, Ben laughed and said, "She's a real go-getter, that girl. She's on top of everything. I don't know what I'd do without her."

Mrs. Edgar said, "I think it's very admirable. She's a lovely young girl." Then she lifted an eyebrow and gave Junior a knowing look.

Dr. Edgar said, "You're a lucky guy to have her around, Ben. She's a real gem, by golly." He also gave Junior a knowing look.

Laney yawned. She wasn't fond of Valerie and Elmer didn't trust her. Junior just looked down at his shoes. Though Valerie was conscientious and smart, there was a pushy, annoying side to her that made Junior want to run behind a tree every time he saw Valerie walking in his direction. Knowing that Valerie was on the hunt for Stella instead



of him that night, made him want to stretch his arms in the air and take a deep breath of relief.

Unfortunately, there weren't any trees nearby when he ran into Valerie an hour later down at the edge of the golf course. His mother and father were still up at the dance, and Laney was God knows where. He and Laney had left their mother and father on the veranda with a flimsy excuse about going down to the golf course to see the beautiful view. But the minute they were out of viewing distance from Dr. and Mrs. Edgar, Laney ran off on her own to meet Marvin somewhere. This was one of the first times that Junior had seen Laney on her own without Elmer, and he was amazed at how well she did without him.

Valerie shouted, "There you are! I've been looking all over for you, you sneaky little devil."

He was standing in an open area, staring out at the moonlit golf course, and there was nowhere to run. He'd been there for a while, enjoying the stars, wishing he were back on the veranda dancing with Carlo.

Valerie jogged up to his side and said, "I still can't find that damn Stella. These summer people just can't be depended on anymore. They certainly are a shifty, shady, low-end bunch, let me tell you."

Junior shrugged. He despised people who judged other people this way. "Maybe she's not feeling well."

Valerie sighed. The mean look in her eye disappeared and she said, "Let's not talk about *her*. Let's talk about us."

"*Us*?"

“We are good together,” Valerie said. “You’re going to be a doctor, and I’m going to own all this and more some day. And I think your parents really like me.”

He waited to answer. He had a feeling that his parents would have liked any girl that came along and showed interest in him. His father had said, “She’s a fine girl.” Finally, Junior said, “Yes. I think they like you.”

“I have to say, there are a lot of guys who would love to go out with me. There’s a very long line, Junior Edgar. But I turn them all down. I’m looking for someone special, with the right background, if you know what I mean.” Then she ran the tip of her tongue across her bottom lip and tapped his chest with her fingertips.

Junior gave her a half smile, then turned his head in the other direction and looked up at the stars. If he hadn’t turned when he did, he might have laughed in her face. And he couldn’t look down at her big feet. Those awful ballerina slippers made him gag.

They were interrupted by a rustle in the wooded area to the right. Junior heard voices and turned to see who it was. Laney and Marvin were stomping back to the clubhouse. Laney was ahead of Marvin, pulling her sweater up over her shoulders. Her hair was mussed and the flower on her dress was hanging lopsided. Neither of them saw Valerie and Junior. They were too concentrated on their own situation.

“Just go back to mommy and daddy,” Marvin said. “I should have known better.” He sounded whiny and childish, as if someone had taken an ice cream cone away from him.

“Go to hell, Marvin,” Laney said. “You’re a fucking asshole. I *should* have brought Elmer with me.”

“Who’s Elmer?” Marvin asked.

“None of your fucking business,” Laney said. “You’re an asshole.”

Junior covered his mouth with his palm. He wanted to laugh out loud, but he didn’t want to explain why he was laughing to Valerie.

Valerie pressed her lips together and shook her head. She grabbed Junior’s hand and said, “I’m sorry you had to see that. Some things in life aren’t very pleasant.”

Junior turned his head in the other direction again. He couldn’t believe how pompous Valerie could be.

“Are you hungry?” Valerie asked.

He nodded yes. He wasn’t really hungry. But at that point, he would have said anything to get back to a place where there were more people around him. He knew that sooner or later she might try to make a move on him, and he wasn’t sure how he was going to handle it. If anything, he wanted to avoid it altogether.

\* \* \* \*

Valerie brought him to the empty kitchen in the main dining room. The kitchen was closed and the staff had gone home for the night. The only lights were soft and dim; everything else was mostly shadows. They crossed to a wide stainless steel refrigerator and Valerie opened the door as wide as it would go. When she looked inside for food, Junior heard a noise. He turned and looked down under a stainless steel counter. The light from the refrigerator focused on the floor. He stared in shock at a pair of black high heels. Stella was under the counter, balled up in a fetal position, whimpering into her elbow.

Junior took a quick breath and reached for Valerie’s hand. “I’m not hungry anymore,” he said. “Let’s go outside now.” He didn’t want Valerie to see Stella like this.

But he knew he couldn't just let Stella hide there. Something was terribly wrong. He had to find help.

When they were out in the main dining room, Junior told Valerie that he was going home to bed. He said he was tired and that he had a slight headache. He didn't give her a chance to reply either. He just tapped her arm and took off toward the dance floor.

Then he jogged down to the veranda and saw Gary. Gary had just served drinks to a couple of guests and he was on his way back to the bar. He ran up to Gary and whispered, "I just saw Stella. She's hiding under the counter in the kitchen and she's crying. It looks bad. I think she needs help."

Gary placed his tray on a table and ran across the veranda to where Carlo was dancing with an older woman. Gary whispered something into Carlo's ear, Carlo excused himself to the woman, and they both took off down the path toward the kitchen. Junior followed, hoping maybe there was something he could do to help.

But on the way to the kitchen, Carlo looked back at Junior and asked Gary, "Why is *he* following us?" His voice was deep and stern, and he looked at Junior with unwarranted attitude and contempt.

"He's cool," Gary said. "He's the one who found her and he didn't say a word to anyone."

"Is she okay?" Junior asked, skipping over a stone. They were walking so fast it was hard to keep up with them.

"She's knocked up," Gary said.

Carlo stopped walking and stood still.

"*Gary*," Carlo shouted.

“He won’t tell anyone,” Gary said. “He’s cool.”

Junior’s mouth dropped. He looked at Carlo. “What are you going to do?”

“So you think I’m the father,” Carlo said, then clenched his fists and started walking again.

Junior shook his head. He tried to explain that he hadn’t come to any conclusions about anyone, but Carlo didn’t seem interested in anything he had to say.

\* \* \* \*

Carlo gently pulled Stella out from beneath the counter and lifted her up in his arms. Her face was wet, her eyes were swollen, and there was black mascara running down her cheeks. Then he carried her all the way back to a cabin where the summer help lived. Stella had her head buried in his shoulder the entire time. She sobbed and moaned with soft jerks. Junior was amazed at Carlo’s strength; he carried her as if she were weightless. By the time they reached the cabin, he hadn’t even broken a sweat.

Carlo placed her on a long threadbare sofa in the run down cabin. Her flashy black dress was rumpled and crushed and her black high heels were scuffed with mud. All the glitz and glamour she usually exuded looked cheap and flimsy now. When she buried her face in her hands, long locks of brassy blond hair fell forward.

Junior stood there watching, near the front door, wondering what he could do or say to help. But he could feel in his bones, down to his core, that he was the outsider and no one wanted to hear from him. The summer staff who worked in *The Farms* had a strong bond, and didn’t let anyone into their circle of trust without a fight.

Gary poured Carlo and Stella drinks, then wrapped a warm blanket around Stella’s shoulders. He patted her back and said, “It’s gonna be okay.”

“No,” Stella said, sipping her drink. “My life is ruined.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Carlo said. “I have some money saved.”

Junior knew they were talking about abortion. He didn’t have any strong political or religious convictions of his own yet, so he didn’t judge her. Plus, he’d never been exposed to anything this real in his life, and all he could do was watch and listen.

“I’m not taking your money,” Stella said. “Besides, it’s not your responsibility and you need your money.” Then she finished her drink and sobbed into her hands.

“There’s no hope. I don’t know what to do.”

Junior stepped forward. “There’s always hope.” The minute the words came out of his mouth he wanted to slap himself on the side of the head. It sounded trite and cliché, young and stupid.

Stella stopped sobbing and looked up at Junior. She tilted her head and said, “You’re the one they call Junior? Well, *Junior*, you have no idea what I’m going through right now.” Her fists were clenched; she wanted to force her anger on someone.

Gary took a deep breath and looked up at the barn board ceiling. “I told him.”

“You told him?” Stella shouted. “Why don’t you just take out an ad in *The New York Times*? ‘Stella got knocked up by Marvin the wonder boy.’ Now he’s going to tell that fucking Valerie Timberlake and we’ll all lose our jobs.”

“Marvin?” Junior said.

Carlo jumped up and pointed at Junior. He shouted, “Hey,” but didn’t get a chance to finish because Gary stood up and stopped him. Gary ran his hand down the back of his head and said, “I have a friend who knows this doctor in New Jersey. It costs five hundred bucks and it’s fast and quiet.”

Junior took a step forward. “Marvin has the money,” he said. “He should pay for it.”

Stella gave him a sarcastic smile and said, “Marvin already knows, and he’s made it clear he wants nothing to do with me anymore.”

Junior’s face lost all color and his arms fell limp to his sides. He didn’t know what to say. The thought of anyone getting a girl in trouble and ignoring it seemed incomprehensible. But more than that, the fact that he adored Stella made this even more difficult. He wanted to sit next to her, put his arms around her delicate shoulders and rock her in his arms.

But Stella wasn’t in the mood for wisdom or advice from someone named Junior, who came from a wealthy background and had never known her kind of hardship. She pointed to the door and said, “You need to go back to your perfect little world and stop worrying about me. There’s nothing you can do here.”

Junior looked in Carlo’s direction for help. But Carlo turned his back on him.

Then Gary patted Junior’s shoulder and smiled, and Junior knew it was time to leave. He nodded at Gary twice, shoved his hands into his pockets, and slipped out the door without making a sound.

## Chapter Seven

The following afternoon, Junior had a tennis lesson with Valerie Timberlake. His mother had arranged the lesson the day before, at Valerie's insistence, without telling Junior about it ahead of time. His mother mentioned this casually during breakfast, while pouring a cup of coffee. Dr. Edgar was reading *The Wall Street Journal* and Laney was slumped forward on her elbows staring into a soggy bowl of dried cereal. The only one who seemed to be in an animated mood that morning was Elmer. Laney kept pointing at him and telling him to stop tapping her knee with his paw. She told him they would go for a long walk as soon as she was good and ready.

"I'll go this time," Junior said, reaching for a glass of orange juice, "because you've already set up the date with Valerie. But from now on I'd appreciate it if you'd let me plan my own dates with people." He sipped some juice; his voice was calm and mellow. He wanted to be polite, but make a point so this sort of thing never happened again.

Dr. Edgar lowered the newspaper and gave him a look. Laney tilted her head to the side and blinked. Normally, Junior didn't speak up about these things. He tended to let people rule his life without letting them think it mattered one way or the other.

"I only did it because you and Valerie seem to have so much in common," his mother said. "And Valerie was the one who brought it up. She said the two of you had been discussing tennis earlier. She said you couldn't wait to play tennis with her." Elaine sounded defensive now, as if Junior were accusing her of something.



Laney kicked Junior in the ankle and smiled. “Sounds like Valerie Timberlake is really hot for you.” She sounded as if she were enjoying this too much.

Junior shot her a nasty look. After what he’d seen with Laney and Marvin the night before, he could have gotten even with Laney. But he decided to let it go. He kept his voice low and polite. He took a quick breath and said, “I’d just rather plan my own dates from now on, is all.”

Elaine sat down at the table and frowned. She gave them all her scorned-mother expression and started stirring her coffee in slow circles. Each time the spoon clinked against the cup, she sighed out loud.

“Your mother was only trying to help,” Dr. Edgar said. “She didn’t mean any harm. And Valerie is a very nice, fine young lady, she does seem extremely interested in you, Junior.”

“I know,” Junior said. “I’m not upset. I’d just rather plan my own events from now on.” He didn’t want to argue, but he did want to make the point clear: that Valerie Timberlake was the pushiest girl he’d ever met, and he wasn’t going to have her running his entire summer. Girls like Valerie, he knew, would stop at nothing to get what they wanted. And he wasn’t going to let Valerie use his mother to do it. If anything, he was actually protecting his mother from Valerie’s subterfuge.

But no one else seemed to agree. Laney flashed him a nasty smile and said, “I love Valerie Timberlake. I’d like to get my hands on her bushy black hair. But I think you make an adorable couple.”

Junior sat back and smoothed out the napkin on his lap. “Oh you do?” He knew she couldn’t stand Valerie; she was goading him into an argument.

“I do,” Laney said, “but Elmer’s not too fond of her.”

All three of them turned at the same time and said, “*He’s not?*”

“Elmer thinks she’s a royal pain in the ass,” Laney said, without hesitation. She looked down at the empty space next to her chair and said, “Don’t you, Elmer?”

“That’s enough, Laney,” Dr. Edgar said, staring over his reading glasses. He knew she was teasing Junior and he didn’t want it to get out of hand. He lifted the newspaper in front of his face, rustled the pages a few times, and started reading where he’d left off. If there was one thing that made Dr. Edgar frown, it was not being normal. It was bad enough he had to deal with a daughter who had an invisible dog named Elmer, let alone a son who didn’t seem interested in women at all.

Later that day, after the tennis lesson, Valerie fawned all over Junior and told him how good he was, and that he was one of the best tennis players she’d ever seen. She said she was envious of his backhand and the way he was able to bounce around without even breaking a sweat. She even lowered her eyelids and told him how she loved to watch the muscles in his thighs jump up and down while he ran around the tennis court. Right after all this flattery she invited Junior to go to a movie that night. She didn’t even pause between sentences. Once a week, there was a film in the theater of the main clubhouse and everyone went.

Junior knew he was awful at tennis, and he knew she was just blowing smoke up his ass. He didn’t even know he had a backhand. So he thanked her and said he had other plans. This time he didn’t make up an excuse and he didn’t back down to her. Valerie just smiled and told him she’d plan something else later, “something that is bunches of fun,” clearly not getting the hint that he wasn’t interested in her.

When he finally broke away from her on the tennis court, he went into the locker room to shower and change. The locker room was quiet at first—just a few older guys lacing up their golf shoes and making ball-and-chain jokes about their wives. But by the time Junior stepped out of the shower and walked back to his locker, Marvin was stuffing his clothes into the locker next to Junior's and about to put on his tennis clothes. Normally, the hired help didn't use the members' locker room, but Junior knew that because Marvin was a pre-med student, and because his family was connected to Ben Timberlake, he had special privileges in the clubhouse the rest of the summer help didn't receive.

"Hey," Marvin said. He was only wearing a pair of white sweat socks with bright red stripes at the top. He had a long, lean body covered with a light layer of black hair, and slightly bowed legs. His penis was dangling between his legs, beneath a patch of black fur, and Junior couldn't help notice that his beer-can dick had to be at least six inches in length, flaccid. It was no wonder poor little sister Laney ran out of the woods the night before.

"Hey," Junior said, wiping his naked body dry with a white towel. His fairer, almost hairless body, next to Marvin's dark hairy body, was a striking contrast. Though Junior's penis wasn't as large and floppy as Marvin's, he'd never been embarrassed of his own body. There was definitely no concern about being naked and alone with Marvin. Even before Junior knew what had happened with Stella and with his sister, Junior felt no sexual attraction to Marvin at all. He was just another guy. His arms were too long, his chin was too weak, and his nose had a bump. Even with Marvin's big dick, which was indeed his best attribute, there was something goofy and awkward and uneven about him.

Marvin pulled a jock strap out of his locker and stretched the waistband a few times. Junior reached for his socks and put them on.

“I know about Stella,” Junior said, smoothing his socks.

Marvin bent over, shoved his large feet into the jock strap and pulled it up to his waist. His dick was so big he had to grab it, squeeze it, and push it into the sock area of the jock strap. When it was beneath the stretchy fabric, he had to slip his hand down through the elastic waistband and adjust his dick to pack it into a comfortable position. He pointed it downward; the ring around his dick head popped to the surface.

Junior put on his white briefs and his shirt, waiting for Marvin to respond.

When Marvin didn’t respond to his comment about Stella, Junior said, “She needs help now. She needs someone to help her with money.” There was no need to go into detail.

Marvin shrugged his shoulders and pulled a white polo shirt from the locker. “She’s been fucking every guy at *The Farms*. I’m not taking responsibility for some whore who doesn’t know how to keep her legs together. She’s nothing to me.” Then he smiled as if he didn’t have a care in the world, and reached for his white tennis shorts.

Junior’s face turned red and he clenched his teeth. He knew Stella wasn’t a whore. He put on his pants, pulled his shirt over his head, and shoved his tennis things into his bag. Then he grabbed Marvin’s arm and looked directly into his eyes. He kept his voice low and deep. He’d never used this tone of voice with anyone. “You are one pompous sonofabitch,” he said. “You make me sick. You stay the fuck away from my little sister or I’ll personally kick the shit out of you within an inch of your life.”

\* \* \* \*

After Junior left Marvin standing in the locker room in his jock strap with his mouth hanging half open, he went out to the golf course to hunt down his father and mother. Dr. Edgar was teaching Junior's mother how to play golf that afternoon, so he walked the edges of the golf course until he found them practicing near a putting green. Elaine was on one end of the green practicing, and his father was standing with his arms folded across his chest giving her advice.

"Dad?" Junior asked. "I need to talk to you." Though he hated going to his father for something like this, he knew he didn't have a choice. Looking into his father's eyes made his stomach rumble; maintaining a blank expression, without looking guilty himself, made his upper lip quiver. For a moment, he even wondered how he could have gotten tangled up in such a sordid affair. Then he thought about the frightened expression on Stella's face when Carlo had pulled her out from beneath the counter, and the look of defeat on Carlo's face, and he remembered why he was doing this.

"What about?" Dr. Edgar was watching his wife, with furrowed eyebrows, biting his bottom lip. He didn't have a clue. He was just enjoying a warm summer day of the first vacation he'd had in years.

"I need five hundred dollars," Junior said.

Dr. Edgar turned fast and looked him in the eye. "That's a lot of money. Are you in trouble?"

"No," Junior said. "But someone I know is, and they need help. It's very important." Until that moment, Junior had never asked his father for more than twenty dollars in cash. "I can't go into details. You have to trust me."

"I always thought you kids could tell me anything," Dr. Edgar said.

“I know,” Junior said. “But I can’t tell you this. I’m sorry.”

“Is it legal?”

Junior wasn’t sure. He hadn’t thought that far in advance. He took a quick breath and said, “Yes.”

Dr. Edgar smiled. “I’m sorry I asked that question. I know you’d never do anything illegal.”

“What’s going on over there?” Junior’s mother shouted. She was standing bent over, with her legs spread apart, trying to hit the ball into the hole. “I need some help.”

“Nothing important, dear,” Dr. Edgar said. “I’ll be right over.” Then he turned to Junior, placed his hand on Junior’s shoulder and said, “I’ll have the money for you by the end of the day. Let’s keep this just between us. Your mother doesn’t have to know about it.”

Junior put his arms around his father and hugged him. “Thanks,” he said.

\* \* \* \*

Dr. Edgar gave him five hundred dollars in cash that night. He slipped it into Junior’s palm after dinner, in the main dining room at the clubhouse. Junior thanked him again and walked to Lavender Hall, where he knew Stella, Gary and Carlo would be. He’d overheard them talking and he knew this was their night off. He wanted to help Stella, and he wanted to prove to Carlo that he wasn’t like Marvin or the other summer people at *The Farms*.

This was a slower night at Lavender Hall and there wasn’t anyone taking a cover charge at the front door. Junior just stepped through the open doorway into the smoky red-lit bar, and went back to the dance floor. The moment he entered, he felt the same

calm, easy feeling he'd experienced the last time he was there. He smiled at a sixty-year-old drag queen when he walked past the bar. He nodded at a big burly guy sipping a bottle of beer. There were about ten couples on the dance floor, all men, dancing to a slow song. Junior stared at the way they held each other, with their legs intertwined and their hips pressed together, rocking back and forth to the music. In a back corner of the dance floor, Junior noticed Carlo and Stella. Stella was the only woman in the bar. They were dancing together and Gary was leaning against a rail next to them.

Junior walked up to Carlo and tapped his shoulder. Carlo and Stella stopped dancing and stared at him for a moment. They followed him to the corner where Gary was standing and Carlo put his hands on his hips. When he looked at Junior, there seemed to be contempt in his eyes.

"Here," Junior said, handing the five hundred dollars to Stella.

Her eyes grew wide. She looked down at the money, took it from him, and smiled. "This is unbelievable. You got Marvin to give you the money?"

"Not Marvin," Junior said. "You're right. He's an asshole."

"Daddy gave it to him," Carlo said. "It must be nice to just ask daddy for anything you want."

When Stella heard the money came from Junior's father, she frowned and handed the money back to him. "I can't take it. It wouldn't be right. And even if I could take it, I have to work the only night the doctor will be there."

"I don't understand," Junior said. He wanted to help. He wanted to show Carlo that he was on Carlo's side and that he truly felt sorry for Stella.

“The Leather Party is the second Saturday in August,” Gary said. “And that’s also the only time I can get appointment with the doctor in New Jersey to take care of Stella. He only does this sort of thing one day—once every three months, at this one private location.”

“What’s the leather party?” Junior asked.

“Every summer, Lavender Hall has an event called the Leather Party,” Gary said. “Gay men come from all over, dressed in leather gear, and there’s a show. It’s one of the biggest gay events of the summer in the Northeast.”

Junior was familiar with the fact that there were many gay men who loved to wear leather gear, but otherwise he knew nothing about it.

“I’m dancing with Carlo that night,” Stella said. “These shows are very professional, and I can’t let Carlo down. He needs the money just as much as I do.”

“Can’t you just go to another doctor?” Junior asked.

“We’re in the mountains,” Stella said, shrugging and looking at Junior as if he were a moron. “The doctor Gary knows is only a few miles away, just over the state line. And from what Gary says, he’s a real professional. I trust him and I’m terrified to go into one of those city clinics.” She started crying again, and she looked as if she were about to panic.

“Can’t someone else fill in for you?” Junior asked. “It’s only one night.”

Carlo stepped toward Junior. He clenched his fists and said, “Everyone else is working. People work around here so they can eat.” Then he laughed in Junior’s face and said. “What’s the matter? Do you want to do it?”



“Hey,” Gary said. “That’s not a bad idea.” He grabbed Junior’s arm and smiled at Stella.

“It was a joke,” Carlo said.

“Junior’s got great moves,” Gary said. “I saw you two dancing the other night. You weren’t bad together.”

“But I’m not a dancer,” Junior said.

“See,” Carlo said. “Even he admits it. It was just a joke.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” Stella said. “You can teach anyone the moves, Carlo. All he’ll have to do is follow your lead.”

“He can’t do it,” Carlo said. “He cannot do it.” He made a fist with one hand and punched the palm of the other.

Junior lifted his right eyebrow, reached for Carlo’s arm, and said, “I wouldn’t mind giving it a try.” Then he looked at Stella and winked. “Carlo, this is important. Please don’t be stubborn. I know you can teach me everything you know. I’ll do whatever you say. You’re the best dancer I’ve ever seen, and all I have to do is follow your lead. With you there to help me, nothing can go wrong.” Then he gently touched Carlo’s thick bicep with his fingertips, thinking to himself that Valerie Timberlake wasn’t the only one who knew how to use flattery to get a man.

## Chapter Eight

Before anyone in the house else was awake, Junior left a note on the kitchen counter that said he was starting dance lessons that morning. He didn't go into detail; just that he'd be home later that day. He knew no one would question him. The family had settled into summer and everything had fallen into place. His mother had made new friends on the beach, his father had found a group of husbands who loved playing cards, and Laney and Elmer had a regular beach routine so Laney could maintain her even tan. They were all so busy doing their own thing, he knew no one would miss him.

Junior walked to the clubhouse and toward the stone steps that led to the summer help cabins. Carlo had told Junior to meet him in Lavender Hall first thing in the morning. Carlo had permission to use the dance floor during the day when the club was empty, and he didn't want to waste a moment in getting Junior prepared for the Leather Night show.

He walked into the woods, to the road where Lavender Hall was located, and walked across the street to the entrance. When Junior walked inside, Carlo was already on the dance floor and the music was playing. He looked up at Junior and shook his head. "It's seven thirty," he said, "Where the hell have you been? You're late." His brown hair was loose and wavy that morning. It fell across his handsome face in thick shiny clumps. But his voice sounded harsh, and he refused to even look in Junior's direction.

"You said first thing in the morning," Junior replied. To him, seven thirty was first thing in the morning.

“From now on, be here at six,” Carlo said. “We don’t have any time to waste. The show will be here sooner than you think.” Then he looked Junior up and down and frowned. “Is that what you’re wearing to rehearse?”

Junior looked down at his body with his mouth half open and his arms extended. He was wearing running shoes, faded jeans, and a lime green T-shirt. He hadn’t thought about his clothes. He’d just worn what he normally would have worn anywhere else. Then he noticed Carlo was wearing black tights, black leg warmers, and a tight black T-shirt. His shoes were pointy, with a three-inch Cuban heel. Carlo looked like a real dancer in real dancing clothes. Junior found it difficult not to stare between Carlo’s legs, because there was a huge mound popping out of the black tights.

“You can’t dance in running shoes,” Carlo said. Then he tossed a black gym bag to Junior and said. “I’m glad I thought ahead. I figured you’d show up looking like this. Go in the back and change so we can get started.”

Junior caught the bag and went to the back room where there was a small, unkempt dressing room. He pulled a pair of black tights out of the bag and held them up with both hands. He looked at them with his mouth half open. They were practically see-through. Then he reached into the bag and pulled out a pair of black leather knee-high boots. The toes were pointy and the heels had to be more than three inches long. The heels tipped forward like Cuban heels, but these were thinner and looked more like those kinky high-heeled boots he’d seen in porn magazines. Junior had seen professional male dancers wear dancing shoes with higher heels, but never this high.

“Are you ready yet?” Carlo shouted from the dance floor. His voice was deep and serious.

“I’ll be out in a minute,” Junior said, pulling a black V-neck T-shirt from the bag. “Are you sure about these boots?”

There was a moment of silence. Junior pictured Carlo smacking his forehead in frustration. “I’m sure about the boots,” Carlo shouted. “This is a kinky-fun leather show. Not a beauty pageant in Iowa.”

Junior shrugged his shoulders and put the boots down on the bench. He removed all his clothes and put on the tights and T-shirt. The taut, stretchy fabric hugged his slim body and made his dick stick out. He reached into the tights and pointed his dick down, then spread his legs wide and packed things into one round shape as neatly as he could. After that, he slipped his feet into the boots and pulled the zippers up to his knees. Suddenly, he felt taller than he’d ever been in his life. The boots were a perfect fit and so soft and cushiony inside he wished he had shoes this comfortable. When he crossed to a dingy full-length mirror next to a dusty makeup table to look at himself, he squared his shoulders and took a deep breath. He looked like those gypsy dancers he’d seen in movies. He felt like a completely different person.

“Are you ready yet?” Carlo shouted.

“I’ll be right there,” Junior said, straightening his hair.

When he walked onto the dance floor, Carlo had his back to him. He was fumbling through music, biting on a pencil. Junior cleared his throat and stood in the middle of the dance floor beneath the mirrored disco ball. When Carlo turned around and saw him wearing the tights and black knee-high boots, the pencil fell from his mouth and rolled across the dance floor.

“What’s wrong?” Junior asked. “Do I look okay?” He wished he’d had time to run that morning. Whenever he perspired, he always felt tighter and thinner.

Carlo regained his composure fast. He stared at Junior’s body for a second, and then turned his head. “You look fine. Let’s get started.”

Their routine for the show was a long ballroom disco segment, choreographed around a medley of the latest top-forty disco songs. Carlo said he would have preferred doing something more classic, like a ballroom mambo, but because disco was the latest craze, he wanted to give the audience what they were dying to hear. He told Junior, without actually looking at him—he hadn’t looked directly at him since he’d seen him in the black tights—that he wasn’t fond of disco music and he thought it was only a trend that wouldn’t last longer than a few years. “Actually,” Carlo said, “I absolutely hate disco and everything about it. I’m a ballroom dancer. I listen to hard rock for enjoyment. But it is what it is, and disco is the thing right now.”

Junior remained silent. He listened and nodded his head. Carlo was the expert and he didn’t want to say or do anything that would make him look any more inexperienced than he already was. If Carlo had said his favorite music was Christmas carols, Junior would have agreed with him.

The first two hours of rehearsal didn’t go well. Learning to walk around in high heels wasn’t easy. Carlo still wouldn’t look at him, and their bodies jerked back and forth against the beat instead of with it. Junior wasn’t much better. When Carlo placed his large hand on Junior’s waist, Junior had trouble concentrating on his moves. His feet went in the wrong direction each time, he stepped on Carlo’s feet by accident, and when

Carlo went to the left, he went to the right. Junior had never felt so awkward and gangly in his life.

At one point, after he'd stepped on Carlo's right foot so hard Carlo screamed out in pain, Junior threw his arms over his head and said, "I'm just a slob. I'll never be able to do this. I'm sorry. You're such a great dancer. I'm only going to make you look bad out there. This wasn't a good idea." Then he turned and slowly crossed to the railing with his back to Carlo.

A minute later, he heard Carlo cross the dance floor and step up behind him. Carlo put his hand on the small of Junior's back and sighed. In a soft, gentle voice, he said, "Hey, you're actually walking around like a natural in those high heels. You're not that bad."

"I'm not." He was on the verge of tears, but he held back. He didn't want Carlo to think he was a complete milquetoast.

"No," Carlo said, "You're not. I was being rough on you before. I did it on purpose. But you're going to be good. Trust me. I wouldn't say this if I didn't really mean it."

"Really? Because I want to be good. I've never wanted anything so bad in my life."

Carlo laughed. "Yes, really," he said. Then, without giving Junior any warning, he lowered his hand and placed it directly in the middle of Junior's ass. He patted it and said, "And you look really hot in those tights, too."

Junior's head went up and his eyes bugged out. "I do?"

Carlo pressed harder on his ass. “Yes, you do. Let’s get back to work. We’ll go back over every step we did up until now. I’ll go easier on you this time.”

“Can I take a short break?” Junior asked. When Carlo had placed his hand on Junior’s ass, Junior’s dick started growing. He had a full erection now, and it was sticking out of the black tights and pointing to the right. He’d never had an erection in front of anyone in such a public place.

“A break?” Carlo asked. His smooth even voice was a soft hum. He lowered his hand to the bottom of Junior’s ass and cupped it.

“Just a minute or two,” Junior said, trying to will his penis to shrink. He even tried thinking about Valerie Timberlake in the nude. But even that didn’t seem to be working.

Carlo cupped his ass again and said, “Is this okay? The way I’m touching you right now?”

Junior nodded yes and stared down at the railing. His insides were pulling in all directions, his dick was ready to jump out of his tights, and his heart was beating so fast he had to concentrate on his breathing. But he liked the way Carlo was touching him. He wanted to back into Carlo’s hand and arch his back.

Carlo laughed and said, “I think I know what’s wrong. Don’t be embarrassed. It’s natural.” Then he reached down and grabbed Junior’s crotch. He squeezed Junior’s erection and said, “Just turn around and put your arms around my shoulders and press your body up against mine. We can work on the slower routine for a while, where we dance in each other’s arms. If anyone walks in, they’ll never know.”

It was perfect timing. A slower song began to play and the mood changed. Junior's head felt light and a sensation of bliss passed through his entire body. He slowly turned to face Carlo. When he put his arms around Carlo's shoulders, Carlo grabbed his waist with both hands and pulled him into his body. The minute their bodies were locked together, Junior realized Carlo was just as hard as he was. He felt Carlo's dick poke his groin. Carlo's pelvis bucked slowly to the beat of the music.

"You're adorable," Carlo said, "And even though I don't want to like you, there's something about you I can't resist. I felt it the night I pulled you onto the dance floor for the first time."

"You did?"

Carlo nodded. "I was actually pissed because a few of the guys I was with were talking about how hot you looked that night. I didn't like them talking about you that way. That's why I told you to go home."

Carlo was slowly dragging him to the middle of the dance floor with slow steps, while he continued to buck his hips into Junior's body. Junior placed one palm on Carlo's shoulder and the other at the back of Carlo's neck below his hairline. He ran his fingers through Carlo's soft brown hair and said, "I don't want to be adorable. I want to be tough and cool like you."

"That feels so good," Carlo said about the way Junior was rubbing his neck. "Don't stop. And don't worry about being like me. You're fine just the way you are. If you were anything like me, I wouldn't think you were so adorable."



“I’ve never done anything like this before,” Junior said. He didn’t want Carlo to get the wrong impression. He wanted to be honest and up front in case Carlo wanted more.

“I know,” Carlo said. “That’s why we’re only dancing.” He dipped and Junior went backward. He ran his cheek along Junior’s neck and kissed him behind the ear.

At that point, Junior couldn’t control himself any longer. For the first time in his life, he was with the man of his dreams. Carlo was the essence of his every sexual fantasy. But more than that, he was the kind of man Junior never thought he’d actually have. Carlo was strong and confident, his body was packed with muscle, and yet he was sensitive and tender at the same time. Up until that summer, Junior wasn’t sure a gay man like Carlo even existed in the world. So he placed his palm on the back of Carlo’s head and slowly guided Carlo’s face toward his. He made the first move this time, not Carlo. When he pressed his lips against Carlo’s soft mouth and they kissed for the first time, everything stopped moving. The instant his tongue reached Carlo’s tongue, his life changed forever. There would never be another day in Junior’s life when he didn’t crave the sweet taste of Carlo, the firm touch of Carlo, and the masculine scent of Carlo. He didn’t hear the music anymore; his heart began to pound in his ears. While Carlo pulled him forward to an upright position, Junior wrapped his legs around Carlo’s waist and Carlo hoisted him up as if he were weightless.

While they kissed, Carlo placed one hand on Junior’s back and the other under his ass and slowly carried him toward a long plywood counter next to the DJ’s booth at the edge of the dance floor. During the night, this section of the bar was a place where customers rested their drinks and leaned back to watch the dancers. It was long enough to

accommodate a line of at least twenty people. Carlo stopped kissing and lowered Junior onto the counter. When he placed Junior on his back, Junior released his legs from around Carlo's waist and stretched them out. Junior wasn't sure what Carlo was going to do next. But he knew he could trust him, so he didn't try to break free and he didn't tell Carlo to stop.

Carlo climbed up on the counter and straddled Junior's waist. He pulled Junior's black tights halfway down, then pulled his own tights halfway down. When both their erections were exposed, Carlo pressed the bottom of his dick to the bottom of Junior's dick and wrapped his hand around both at the same time. Junior looked down between his legs. He'd never been this close to another man's erect cock. Their dicks looked identical in length and width. Junior lifted his legs and spread them wider so Carlo could get a better grip on both dicks. He secured the high heels on the wooden counter for support and tipped his toes back. When Carlo's fist started moving back and forth, jerking both dicks off at the same time, Junior rested his head back and closed his eyes.

This was the first time anyone had ever jerked Junior off. The fact that Carlo's dick was against his dick made his balls jump up in his scrotum. But Carlo didn't jerk off the same way Junior normally jerked off. This was different. Carlo rubbed more than he stroked. The bottom of his thumb pressed against the top of his shaft and he rubbed back and forth the on the skin with slow strokes. But he didn't stop to take a break or reposition his grip. He maintained a constant rhythm, and Junior found this rubbing unique and pleasurable. It wasn't long before Junior's penis was tipped with pre-come and he had to enforce self control so he wouldn't explode too soon.

And for a moment, while Carlo was rubbing him, it occurred to him that they were in a public place and anyone could have walked inside and caught them.

But it didn't take long. Carlo's lips twisted and his face turned red. He grunted a few times and said, "I'm close, Junior." His voice was throaty now. It was the sturdy voice of a real man on the verge of climax and nothing was going to get in his way or stop him from shooting his load.

It only made it better for Junior. He left his inhibitions somewhere else and allowed the enormity of the experience to envelop him. He boldly lifted his left leg and brushed one of the high heels against Carlo's spine. He arched his back and started pinching his own nipples. (This was new, too. He'd never been able to pinch both nipples at the same time.) Then he nodded and said, "I'm close, too. Don't stop."

Carlo grunted again, rubbed a little faster, and took a few deep breaths. Junior threw his arms back behind his head and pressed a high heel into Carlo's back. Then they both blew their loads together, shooting thick streams of white liquid all over the black V-neck T-shirt Junior was wearing.

Carlo released their dicks and leaned forward. He looked into Junior's eyes and planted a gentle kiss on Junior's lips. "We'd better get back to the dance floor now," he said hastily. "We have a lot of rehearsing to." Then he pulled up his tights, climbed off Junior's body, and stepped down to the floor.

Junior sat up and pulled up his pants. He didn't want to get dressed. He wanted to remove all his clothes and roll around on the floor with Carlo on top of him. He looked down at the T-shirt and frowned. It was dotted with dark wet blotches by then. While Carlo reached for his hand to help him down, he lowered his eyes and said, "I'd better go

change my shirt.” But his tone didn’t sound embarrassed or urgent. Holding Carlo’s hand, and standing there in kinky black boots and black tights, felt dangerous and exciting.

“You don’t really need a shirt,” Carlo said. “Just take it off and throw it away. I have others.”

Junior carefully pulled off the shirt. The aroma from the wet come stains reminded him of the Clorox his mother used for the white sheets on wash day. He rolled the shirt up into a ball and placed it on the wooden counter. “I’ll take it home and wash it for you. It’s a perfectly good shirt and there’s no need to throw it away.” Then he smiled and grabbed Carlo’s bicep. “It’s only a little come.”

Carlo looked at him with a serious expression.

“What’s wrong?” Junior asked, squeezing Carlo’s bicep a few times.

“I had a feeling about you,” he said. “I knew you’d be good in bed.”

“I’m good in bed?” This was news to Junior.

Carlo laughed and said, “Yes, you are.”

Junior released Carlo’s bicep. He strutted to the middle of the dance floor in the high-heeled boots. When he was beneath the disco ball, he turned and pointed to the DJ booth. He lifted his chin and said, “Put on the music. We have a lot of work to do.”

## Chapter Nine

Carlo and Stella focused on getting Junior ready for the show. Stella was an accomplished dancer. She taught Junior the routine from her point of view, as the dancer following the Carlo's lead. She taught him how to react to Carlo's turns, and how to predict his moves, and how to trust in Carlo's strong lead even when it felt awkward. She taught him to trust and how to listen with his body.

Junior listened and watched, and he improved as each day passed. The best part was that he got to know Stella better. When they took breaks, they'd sit together and talk. He discovered that the only reason Stella had slept with Marvin was because she'd fallen in love with him. Marvin had romanced her, treated her like a queen, and he'd expressed strong feelings for her. At the time, Stella had been certain she was in a serious relationship with Marvin. She thought they were in love with each other, and when she told him she was carrying his child and he'd dumped her, she'd been devastated.

Junior wanted to ask her if she'd thought about keeping the baby. But he decided it was none of his business. He wasn't a woman and he knew he could never begin to imagine what Stella was thinking or feeling. Stella tried hard to keep up her appearance, but the expression on her face was always serious. And her eyes were always red, as if she'd cried herself to sleep at night.

One afternoon, right after they stopped rehearsing for the day, Stella turned to get her purse off a shelf and Junior heard her sniff back. He saw her wipe her eyes and take a

deep breath. Without saying anything, he walked up to her and put his arms around her shoulders.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “But I’m trying really hard to figure out a way to get through this.”

He knew there was nothing he could say that would make her feel any better, so he just stood there holding her until she was strong enough to leave the building on her own.

When Junior rehearsed with Carlo, things became more intense. They didn’t have sex again and Carlo only focused on the dancing. Junior understood without asking any questions. Carlo didn’t ignore him and it wasn’t as if he were pretending nothing had happened between them. It seemed as if Carlo didn’t want sex to get in the way of their rehearsals. If anything, he treated Junior with care, as if Junior were a delicate object that might crack into a million little pieces at any moment. He opened doors for Junior, he helped Junior carry his bag, and he went out to get food and paid for it all himself. Carlo took total control and he treated Junior better than anyone had ever treated him in his life.

The only time Carlo became frustrated was when they were rehearsing. One afternoon, while they were working on a particularly passionate move, Carlo stopped dancing and said, “You’re not feeling the music.” He clenched his fists and shook them. “You have to *feel* it deep down, Junior.”

Junior looked at him with a blank stare.

“You have to feel it in your heart,” Carlo said. Then he reached for Junior’s hand and placed it on his chest. “If you don’t feel it, it’s not going to work.”

Junior gulped when he felt Carlo's heartbeat. It pounded through the thick muscles on his chest. He looked into Carlo's eyes and nodded.

There were a few other awkward rehearsals, too. Two days before the show, while they were rehearsing the last dance step in the routine, Junior almost broke Carlo's back. The step involved spinning Junior around, then Junior had to fall into Carlo's arms and they both had to lean backwards. It was a dramatic step and it had to be done perfectly. But Junior missed a step on the way into Carlo's arms and when he went backwards he knocked Carlo right on the dance floor.

Carlo's body twisted and he shouted in pain. He reached back and placed his hand on his spine and shouted, "What the fuck are you trying to do, kill me?"

Junior's face turned red and he leaned forward. They'd been dancing nonstop for days and his entire body ached. So for the first time, he shouted back. "Yes, Carlo. Now you know. I'm trying to kill you. Forget about the fact that I'm doing this to save your ass. Or that I'm trying to learn complicated dance moves in a record amount of time, wearing knee-high boots with four-inch high heels." Then he turned around and kicked a stool with the tip of the high-heeled boot.

Carlo stood up and brushed off his pants. "Go change," he said. "We're getting out of here for a while."

\* \* \* \*

It was a warm, wet afternoon. The rain had been pouring down in sheets since early that morning. When Junior was dressed in street clothes again, Carlo opened the front door of Lavender Hall for him and escorted him out to his big Buick Riviera. Junior loved that car. It was a 1971 or '72 model and Carlo kept it in pristine condition. But

when they reached the car and Carlo tried to open the passenger door for Junior, it was locked. Carlo looked inside and pounded his fist on the window.

“What’s wrong?” Junior asked. They were both getting soaked.

“I locked the keys in the car this morning,” Carlo said.

Then Carlo clenched his fists and looked back and forth. He gritted his teeth and crossed to a row of small wooden posts in front of the bar. They were painted white and about a foot high. Carlo kicked the post a few times with his foot, then leaned down and yanked the post right out of the ground. Junior stepped back with his palm pressed to his throat, wondering what Carlo was going to do. Junior’s father would have gone back into Lavender Hall and called the auto club if he’d locked his keys in his new Lincoln Town car. But Carlo stomped back to the car, pointed the white post toward the back window, and slammed it right through the glass.

Junior jumped back and covered his face.

Carlo reached into the car and opened the passenger door. “Get in,” he said.

“Let’s roll.”

When Carlo slipped the big car into gear, he hit the gas pedal and fishtailed out of the parking lot. Junior grabbed the door handle with one hand and the seat cushion with the other. He pressed his feet to the floor and stared straight ahead. They sped down the narrow mountain road and turned left, heading in the opposite direction of *The Farms*. They swerved through a little village with a general store and a white church, and headed west. They drove past a row of run down old Victorians and onto another desolate tree-lined road. When they rounded a narrow curve and went over a stone bridge, the car almost went airborne and a small herd of wild deer ran back into the woods.



But by that time Junior wasn't gripping the door and holding his breath. Carlo was a fast driver, but strong and confident. He seemed to know where he was going and he knew the roads well. Junior sat up in his seat and smiled. "You're a wild man," he said.

Carlo laughed and made a fist. "You ain't seen nothin yet," he shouted. Then he punched Junior in the thigh and turned up the volume on the radio. The radio was playing an oldies song and Carlo started shouting the words along with the singer. Junior's heart was racing and he couldn't stop smiling. Being next to Carlo, speeding down a country road in a big powerful muscle car, was the most thrilling thing he'd ever experienced since he'd learned how to drive.

Twenty minutes later, Carlo turned left. The rain had stopped by then, but everything was still wet. He drove down a narrow, unpaved road. The thick wild shrubbery brushed against the car, and Carlo maneuvered with care to avoid holes and gullies. When the road finally ended and they couldn't go any further, Carlo hit the brakes and put the car in park.

"Where are we?" Junior asked.

"Follow me," Carlo said.

Carlo led the way, through a winding, wooded path that ended at the edge of a creek. Junior had never seen so many shades of green. The birds were chirping and the frogs were croaking. There was that fresh clean aroma that only happens after a serious downpour. He inhaled and held his breath. Carlo pulled off his shoes and socks and stepped up on a tree trunk that had fallen across the creek. Then he spread his arms out wide like a ballet dancer and carefully stepped to the middle of the tree trunk. He jumped

and did a fast turn. He landed on his feet but almost lost his balance and fell into the creek. It wasn't a steep fall, but Junior could see that Carlo was trying to prove a point.

"You're very good," Junior said. "How long have you been dancing?"

Carlo adjusted his feet; he did another fast turn. "I'm twenty-seven, so I guess about ten years. My mother was a ballet teacher. I learned from her. When she died, I got a job as an instructor at Arthur Murray Studios. I do these summer gigs because the money is good. I'm saving up."

"What are you saving for?"

"I want to open a restaurant-dance-club," Carlo said. "I'm good with food. I read cookbooks as a hobby."

"Cookbooks?" Junior had never met anyone who read cookbooks. He'd always figured that cookbooks were something you used while cooking, not something you actually sat down and read for fun.

"Right now I'm reading a cookbook that mentions a guy named Hercules Caesar." He was in the middle of the tree trunk now, with his arms spread wide, balancing his body on one foot.

"Who is *he*?"

"Hercules Caesar isn't very well known," Carlo said. "He was the White House chef to George Washington when the White House was in Philadelphia. He and Martha Washington created some spectacular meals, and he was a perfectionist. But Hercules was a slave and he didn't have his freedom. There isn't much written about him because he finally escaped and disappeared. After he ran away, no one ever heard from him again."

“I’ve never heard of him,” Junior said. He stared up at Carlo with his lips parted. It occurred to him that this was the first real conversation they’d had that didn’t include dancing or someone else’s problems.

Carlo slowly crossed back to the edge of the tree trunk where Junior was standing. He motioned with his hand and said, “Come on.”

“Ah well,” Junior said. He wasn’t sure about this. Dancing with Carlo in a show was one thing, but doing a balancing act on a tree trunk above a creek was an entirely different affair.

“Just come on,” Carlo said.

Junior hesitated for a moment, then pulled off his shoes and socks. He stepped up on the tree trunk and reached for Carlo’s hand. When they were in a dancing position and his other hand was holding Carlo’s upper arm, Carlo said, “Look into my eyes and concentrate.”

Junior looked into his eyes and Carlo pulled him with a gentle tug. They danced to the other end of the long tree trunk and back without falling into the creek. There were a couple of awkward moments where Junior almost lost his balance and pulled them both down. But he managed to stay on the tree trunk, laughing the entire time he was up there.

After that, they jumped off the tree trunk and walked down a path to a place where the creek emptied into a small lake that was surrounded by woods. There were no signs of human life. Junior felt as if he and Carlo were the only two people in the world.

“Take off your clothes,” Carlo said, unzipping his pants. “I’m going to practice lifting you up over my head and the best place to do it is in the water.”

While Carlo stripped down to a skimpy pair of black underwear, Junior looked back and forth to make sure they were alone. Then he stripped down to a pair of white briefs—Fruit of the Looms—with his name tag sewn to the inside of the waistband.

They walked into the lake fast, laughing because the water was cold. When they reached the point where the water was up to their shoulders, Carlo stood in front of Junior, placed his hands on Junior's waist, and lifted him up over his head. Carlo's hands held him up high, with strength Junior had never seen before. But Junior hadn't expected him to lift him up so fast, without warning. He lost his balance and toppled head first into the lake. Carlo helped him up to his feet. He put his hands on Carlo's shoulders and they tried it all over again. They did this about a dozen times, and each time Junior fell forward and landed head first in the water.

Then, as if a light bulb had gone off in his head, Junior finally figured out how to balance himself while Carlo held him over his head. And when he finally fell into the water that time, Carlo lifted him up, wrapped his arms around his body, and pulled him up against his chest.

"I've never danced with anyone like you," Carlo said. "It's as if I can mold you into any position I want. You never resist me."

Junior looked into Carlo's eyes and smiled. His fingers were laced around Carlo's neck and his legs were wrapped around Carlo's waist. There was an awkward, silent moment where neither one of them was sure what to say or do next.

Then Junior reached down into the water and slipped his hand into Carlo's black underwear. He wrapped his fingers around Carlo's erection and pulled it out. Junior jerked his dick slowly, rubbing the tip of Carlo's dick with his thumb just the way he

knew Carlo liked it. Carlo closed his eyes and tossed his head back, allowing Junior to fondle and stroke his cock without putting up a fight. When Junior started to kiss Carlo's neck, still jerking him off under the water, Carlo let out a soft, deep moan.

A few minutes later, Junior squeezed his cock tighter and said, "There's something I'd like to do." This was something he'd always wanted to do, and he wanted the first man he did this with to be Carlo. "Let's go to the edge of the lake."

Carlo caressed the top of Junior's head and smiled. He started backing up in the water, toward the edge of the lake, with Junior's hand still wrapped around his dick. And this was the first time Junior realized something important about his own power and strength as a gay man. Though big, rough Carlo was the leader when they danced, and he was strong one who could physically lift Junior up over his head, Junior was the one in complete control when he had his fingers wrapped around Carlo's dick.

They walked out of the water and up to a grassy section near the edge of the lake. Carlo went down on his back and rested his weight on his elbows and Junior got down on his knees and pulled off Carlo's wet underwear. He surprised himself; he'd never undressed a man before. Then he reached for Carlo's erection and pulled it forward with his right hand. It had been flat against Carlo's abdomen—the head had been touching Carlo's navel. Junior gripped the bottom half of the shaft and leaned forward, and when he opened his mouth and wrapped his lips around the head, he looked up into Carlo's eyes and started licking the head with the tip of his tongue.

Carlo's right leg jerked and his balls tightened. He spread his legs a little wider and reached down to hold the back of Junior's head with his palm.

Junior had never sucked a man's dick before, and he wasn't exactly sure about what to do. He'd masturbated to magazine photos of men sucking dicks, but that was the only visual he'd ever seen. In 1978 there were no videos or DVDs to watch male porn. There was no Internet. If you wanted to watch any kind of porn back then, you either went to an independent porn theater or an adult bookstore where they had twenty-five-cent peep shows.

In one magazine, Junior had seen a photo spread with two good-looking male models posing nude. They'd both had huge cocks and one had been sucking the other one off. The guy on his knees, from what Junior had surmised, had been sucking the top half of the guy's dick and jerking the bottom half off at the same time. So Junior figured this is what he'd do to Carlo.

But then, without even realizing it, Junior forgot about the magazine photos and his instincts took over. Carlo was better looking than any nude model he'd ever seen. Carlo's dick wasn't an image or a fantasy. From the start, Junior was amazed at how perfectly normal it felt to have a man's dick in his mouth. He sucked the top half until Carlo's toes curved forward. Carlo tasted like lake water and he smelled like damp towels with a hint of some kind of spicy body deodorant. While Junior sucked the top half, he continued to jerk the shaft with steady, aggressive strokes. Junior's head moved with the same rhythm as his fist. It looked as if the top of his fist had been fastened to his lips and they couldn't be pried apart. Each time Junior pressed his tongue to the bottom of Carlo's shaft, Carlo's chest heaved and he moaned out loud. Evidently, Carlo liked it. So Junior continued doing it.

Though he was in an unusual position, bent over Carlo's body with his legs spread wide, he didn't get tired and he didn't waver. When Junior tasted the first hint of pre-come, he reached between his own legs and pulled out his cock with his left hand. He started jerking himself off, with the same fast strokes he was using to jerk Carlo's dick. He concentrated hard on sucking and stroking at the same time. It wasn't easy to do and he didn't want Carlo to think he was awkward. Junior's own dick was ready to explode; just the thought of having Carlo in his mouth brought him to the edge. He could feel the head of Carlo's dick swelling around his lips, and he could tell by the way Carlo was moaning and moving his legs back and forth that he was close to climax.

At one point, Carlo grabbed the back of Junior's head and said in a deep, groggy voice, "I'm close. I don't think I can hold back much longer."

Junior knew Carlo was giving him a warning. He could either continue sucking Carlo off, or lift up his head and finish him off with his hand. So he looked up at Carlo, with his large blue eyes, and gave a quick nod. Then he started sucking and jerking harder, inviting Carlo to explode inside his mouth. Carlo, who was beyond all reason by then, did not make a single attempt to pry Junior's lips away from his dick.

Carlo's legs moved back and forth again. His mouth opened, his eyes rolled a few times. He pointed his toes down, then pointed them back. When he finally reached the moment of climax, he sat up fast and grabbed the back of Junior's head with both hands. His entire body jerked a few times, and then he let out a loud roaring sound. He shot his load down Junior's throat with such power, Junior actually blinked. And while Junior was swallowing Carlo's load, Junior erupted on the grass next to Carlo's leg.

After they came, Junior didn't release Carlo's dick right away. This wasn't the first time Junior had tasted come. He'd been licking his own fingers clean since he'd been thirteen years old. So it wasn't traumatic and it wasn't something he had to force himself to do. If anything, he would have felt cheated if Carlo hadn't come inside his mouth. He'd read somewhere that there were men who couldn't do this. They had to jerk themselves off in order to climax. So Junior released his hand from Carlo's shaft and went all the way down. This time he sucked the entire thing, squeezing out every last drop that was left.

Carlo lay down on the grass, stretched his arms back over his head, and closed his eyes. Junior continued to suck until Carlo went flaccid inside his mouth. When he finally did release Carlo's dick, he gently rested it above Carlo's balls and gave it a quick kiss. Then he looked up at Carlo and smiled. "Was that okay?" he asked. "I never did that before."

Carlo stared at him in amazement.

"I wanted it to be really good for you," Junior said. He waited for a reaction, but Carlo seemed to have trouble finding his voice.

Carlo yanked him by the neck and pulled him on top of his body. He wrapped his arms around him and kissed him hard on the mouth for a moment. When he stopped kissing, he grabbed a handful of Junior's ass and said, "This just might be the most wonderful thing I've ever experienced in my entire life."

But Carlo didn't thank him for the blow job. And Junior didn't thank Carlo for letting him suck his dick the way Gary had thanked Junior earlier that summer. And it was then that Junior knew in his heart that what had just happened between them was



more than just a quick encounter between two horny guys. There was something happening between them, something that had been building since the beginning of summer that neither one of them could stop.

## Chapter Ten

On the night of the Leather Show in Lavender Hall, Junior had to meet up with Stella to get his dancing outfit together. While he was walking down the path toward Stella's cabin, he ran into an older couple who were renting a house in *The Farms* for the summer. No one ever referred to them by their last name: they were Hector and Myrtle, or "the old couple from Brooklyn." And they were never seen apart.

Myrtle was down on her knees, at the foot of the stone steps that led to the summer help cabins. Hector was standing over her scratching the back of his silver-white head. Myrtle had just dropped her purse on the path and everything had fallen out. The purse was a huge bamboo affair, with thick leather straps and a gold clasp. Junior thought it was more like the size of a small briefcase than a purse.

When Junior saw this, he kneeled to help the old woman. Myrtle seemed frail and brittle and her spotted fingers reminded him of claws. It was getting late and he was in a hurry, so he grabbed a few men's wallets and a pair of sunglasses with thick black frames she couldn't reach and shoved them into the bamboo purse.

"Thank you so much," Myrtle said. Her voice was high-pitched and light. "I'm such a mess, and this old bag has too much inside."

The purse was so packed with junk, from eyeglasses cases to half full boxes of Chiclets, she could barely close it and fasten the gold clasp. It smelled of mothballs and mints. Junior wondered why she was carrying all those men's wallets around like that,

but he figured it wouldn't have been polite to ask. Old people, he knew, had peculiar habits.

When everything was back inside the purse, he lifted it off the path and helped the old woman up to her feet. He handed her the heavy purse and smiled.

"I can't thank you enough," she said.

"You're a very nice young man," Hector added. He was looking up at the sky, as if he were avoiding Junior's face.

"You're welcome," Junior said, walking backward to the steps. He didn't want to talk. He wanted to get ready for the show that night. "Well, I'll see you later," he said, then turned around fast and jogged up the steps.

When he reached Stella's cabin, she was waiting for him near the bed. She wasn't wearing any makeup that afternoon and her blond hair was up in a neat French twist. This was the first time Junior had ever seen her in casual short pants, sneakers, and a simple white blouse. She had smooth clear skin and soft green eyes. Without makeup, he thought she looked much younger. His outfit for the show was neatly resting on the mattress, and the knee-high black leather boots with the four-inch high heels were on the floor at the foot of the bed.

Junior looked down at the bed and stared. He pressed his palm to his mouth and said, "This is what I'm wearing tonight?" There was a black leather vest above a pair of black leather chaps. The chaps were open in the front and back, and there were thick silver zippers on the sides of legs that ran from the hems all the way up to the hips. "That's obscene," he said. "Please tell me I'll be wearing those chaps over a pair of jeans."

Stella tilted her head to the side and shook it left to right. Then she reached down and lifted a black G-string from the bed he hadn't noticed yet. "You'll be wearing this under the chaps."

He took the G-string from her hand and gaped at it for a moment. There was enough fabric to cover his dick and balls, but the back was only a thin shoe string that would run up the crack of his ass. "My entire ass is going to be exposed," he said, holding the G-string up sideways, tugging the thin string.

Stella shrugged. "It's a leather show," she said. "I would have been wearing the same thing if I were dancing with Carlo tonight. Don't worry. Once you start dancing, you forget all about the costume. Trust me on this. It's all about the dancing."

"What will Carlo be wearing?" he asked.

"A black biker jacket, heavy black boots, and ripped faded jeans," she said.

"So his ass won't be exposed. Just mine."

Stella nodded and smiled. "That's because he's the rough and dominant lead dancer," she said, "and you're the pretty little submissive boy dancer who follows him. This leather crowd takes this stuff seriously. It wouldn't work if you both looked dominant. There has to be a balance between dominant and submissive."

Then Junior noticed something else on the bed, to the right of the leather vest. He pointed and said, "Tell me that's not what I think it is," and then he lifted a black leather dog leash and collar up and looked it over. "Am I supposed to wear a dog leash, too?"

She nodded yes and looked the other way. "It's all in fun," she said. "The leather guys love it when the submissive wears a leash. And, actually, this whole dance number is going to be much better with you than it would have been with me...because you're a

guy. The only reason I was doing it with Carlo was because there wasn't another guy who could dance well enough. This dance is the most important part of the show."

"I'm really worried about this," Junior said. "I thought we'd be wearing formal tuxes, or slinky ballroom dance clothes. I was picturing *Dance Fever*, not *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*."

Stella crossed to where he was standing and said, "You're going to be wonderful. Don't take the outfit too seriously. Just concentrate on the dancing and you'll be fine."

He took a deep breath and sighed. "I suppose you're right," he said. He put the collar around his neck and laughed. "It might even be fun."

When he turned to look at Stella, she was staring down at her feet, with her lips pressed together and her arms folded across her chest. This is when he remembered that while he and Carlo would be dancing that night, Gary would be driving her to New Jersey for her appointment with the doctor.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"You know," she said, "I really loved Marvin. I even thought he might be the one for me. I thought we had something special going on. I don't sleep around, Junior. I've never been easy. Marvin was only the second guy I've ever been with. Now look at where I am."

"Marvin's an idiot," Junior said. "He's not worth the time or the effort."

"You're right," Stella said. "I know that now. But I'm so scared. I've never been this scared in my life."

Junior reached out and wrapped his arms around her small body. When he placed his palm on the back of her neck to cradle her, she put her arms around his waist and held

him so tightly, it felt as if he were keeping her anchored to the room. “You’re going to be fine,” he whispered. “Everything is going to be okay.” Then he closed his eyes and rested his chin on top of her head.

\* \* \* \*

Junior told Carlo he’d meet him at Lavender Hall an hour before show time. Due to the nature of his revealing costume, and the fact that he didn’t want his family knowing where he was going or what he was doing that night, he shoved the costume into a gym bag and left the house in jeans and a T-shirt. His mother and father had already left to meet friends in the main dining room. Laney and Elmer walked out the door a few minutes after his parents. Junior wanted to catch up with Laney before she went inside. So he grabbed the gym bag and ran all the way up to the clubhouse, hoping to find Laney on the way.

Junior was hoping he wouldn’t run into Valerie Timberlake, though. He hadn’t seen her in a while, and he knew she was probably looking for him that night. There was a band that night on the veranda, and Ben Timberlake was throwing one of his formal dances again. When he spotted Laney, he took a quick breath and sighed. She was about to enter the side entrance of the main dining room. Laney was wearing a slinky red dress with revealing halter top. Her Farrah Fawcett hairstyle was puffed and lacquered, and she was wearing red high heels to match the dress. Junior shouted to her from the bottom of the path. As she stopped and turned in his direction, Marvin opened the door and pulled on the back of her halter top with his index finger.

“Can I get a dance later tonight?” Marvin asked. He was staring at the back of Laney’s dress with a creepy expression on his face. But when he tried to walk around her to see the front of her dress, he tripped and fell into a puddle of leftover rain water.

Laney pressed her palm to her throat and looked down at Marvin. Then she stepped back a few feet so she wouldn’t get wet and stain her dress. She made no effort to help him to his feet.

Junior stopped in his tracks. He was halfway up the path by then. If he hadn’t seen it with his own eyes he wouldn’t have believed it. Marvin didn’t just catch his foot on a rock or a loose twig and take a short tumble. From the way he fell forward, then fell backward with his arms flying in the air, it looked as though he’d tripped over a large, blunt object like a box or a chair. But there was nothing there; just empty space on both sides of Laney.

Marvin stood up fast and looked around to see what he’d tripped over. He turned to the left, then to the right, scratching the back of his head. His white waiter’s jacket was soaked with dirty rain water; the front of his black slacks were clinging to his legs.

By the time Junior reached Laney, Marvin tugged on the back of her dress again and said, “I’d better go change my clothes. I’ll be looking for you on the dance floor.” Then he purposely turned his back on Junior without saying a word and went into the clubhouse.

Junior didn’t like the fact that Marvin was still going after his sister, but he didn’t have time to get into it then. “I saw him trip,” Junior said. “But there’s nothing here to trip over.”

Laney smiled and looked down at the empty space to her right. “He tripped over Elmer. I don’t know how you could miss it.” Then she scolded Elmer in front of Junior. She pointed her index finger at the empty space and said, “You walked in front of him on purpose, Elmer. That wasn’t nice.”

“Good work, Elmer,” Junior said. He’d always known there was something about Elmer he liked.

Then Junior looked at his watch. “I don’t have much time. Will you cover for me? Tell mom and dad I went bowling and that I’ll be back late tonight.” He’d never asked Laney to cover for him. It was always the other way around.

“Where are you really going?” Laney asked, with a nasty grin on her face. She liked this. Junior had always been the good boy and she’d always been the one to sneak around.

“Just tell them I went bowling,” Junior said.

\* \* \* \*

When Junior stepped out of the dressing room in Lavender Hall, Carlo was waiting for him beside a red drapery next to the dance floor. The dance act ahead of them was just finishing up their routine. Carlo was wearing a heavy black leather biker jacket with chrome studs and zippers, tight faded jeans with rips and tears in the thighs, and black boots with Cuban heels. His hair was slicked back and his skin was bronze from the summer sun. He was bouncing on the balls of his feet, staring out at an audience of men wearing full leather gear.

As Junior crossed toward him, wearing high-heeled boots, a tight black leather vest, and open chaps, he felt self conscious and slightly silly. The black leather dog leash



was dangling from a studded collar around his neck. The G-string only covered Junior's genitals. Most of his pelvis and his entire ass were exposed. He grabbed Carlo's sleeve and asked, "Do I look okay?"

Carlo stared at him. He looked him up and down, bit his bottom lip, and inhaled through his nose. Before he had a chance to answer Junior, another guy who was walking behind Junior took one look at Junior's naked ass and reached down to squeeze it. But this guy's hand never actually touched Junior's ass. Carlo grabbed the guy's wrist, lifted the guy's arm up over his head, and said, "You try that again and I'll break both your arms." Then he nodded in Junior's direction and said, "This is someone special and don't forget that."

Junior's eyes grew wide. Carlo was always so cool and calm. Junior had no idea Carlo had a jealous streak. If the guy had grabbed his ass, Junior probably would have enjoyed the attention. But it made him smile to know Carlo was there to protect him from things like this.

The guy lifted his other arm and waved his hand in surrender. Carlo gave him a mean look, squeezed his wrist one more time, then released it.

When the guy was gone, Carlo put his arm around Junior's shoulders and asked, "Are you okay? I'm sorry about that guy. Some of these Leather Night guys get carried away and forget their manners after a few drinks."

"I'm fine," Junior said, leaning into Carlo's side. "Thanks for getting rid of him."

Carlo squared his shoulders and tucked in his chin. "Hey," he said, "you just let me know if anyone else screws around like that with you."

“I will,” Junior said, loving every minute of the attention Carlo was giving him. “With you around I always feel safe.”

Junior meant every word of what he was saying. He was in love. He wasn’t just trying to boost Carlo’s ego on purpose. Now Carlo wasn’t just the best looking, strongest, sexiest man Junior had ever met. Carlo Pagano was the brave white knight on a steed that Junior had always fantasized about. He was there to protect Junior from harm, rescue him from the loneliness he’d always known, and keep him safe from the advances of sleazy guys who didn’t have good intentions.

When the music started and they stepped out on the dance floor to do their routine, Junior wasn’t nervous or self conscious anymore. All the moves and turns and steps they’d been rehearsing for weeks came together as if they’d been doing this routine together for years. There were a few awkward moments when Carlo lifted Junior up over his head, but the audience never noticed. Instead, they roared and applauded, begging for more. The fact that the entire routine revolved around sensuous moves where their bodies rubbed, their legs mingled together, and their hips bucked, drove the audience wild. Men all over the bar hooted and screamed when Carlo ran his fingers down Junior’s spine and over his delicate round ass. They whistled when Junior got down on his knees, arched his back, and rubbed his face back and forth across Carlo’s crotch. And when Carlo improvised and tugged on the dog leash, which they hadn’t even rehearsed, the entire room started to applaud.

It went so well, and the audience was reacting so positively, Carlo pulled Junior up against his body at the end of the routine and whispered, “Do you want to really make them go wild?”

“How?” Junior whispered, trying to focus on his steps.

“Just follow my lead,” he said. “We’re going to give these Leather Night guys a dance routine they’ll never forget.”

Then Carlo nodded at the DJ, which meant he wanted him to keep playing the music. It was a disco song with a continuous beat, and the singer had a deep, husky voice. This would have been the last song in the medley if Carlo hadn’t decided to improvise and continue dancing. Junior wasn’t sure what to expect, and he didn’t know what to do. So he paid close attention to what Carlo was doing, and tried to look as if it had all been rehearsed.

Carlo stepped back and slowly began to remove his biker jacket. In the 1970s, male dancers who stripped were just becoming popular. Carlo wanted to take advantage of the moment. He opened his legs wide, leaned backwards, and thrust his slim hips forward. He looked into Junior’s eyes and nodded, then removed his jacket and tossed it across the dance floor. Junior smiled and started to unbutton his vest, following Carlo’s lead. While he did this, the audience applauded and started throwing money into the middle of the dance floor. He pulled off the vest and tossed it on top of Carlo’s leather jacket, then slowly started dancing to where Carlo was on the other end of the dance floor. Junior saw one-dollar bills, five-dollar bills, and even a few tens and twenties. And he knew that on top of the money Carlo was making for doing the dance routine, this extra cash would be his to keep as well.

They met in the middle of the dance floor, both shirtless now. They rocked their hips to the beat of the music and Carlo tugged on the dog leash a couple of times. When Carlo released the leash, he reached down and unfastened his jeans. He pulled down his

zipper, yanked the tight jeans down his legs, and then quickly pulled them off over his boots. Carlo had only been wearing a silky black G-string under his jeans, and now his naked ass was exposed to the men in the audience.

Carlo grabbed Junior's hand and started twirling him around. They repeated a few of the dance steps they'd done earlier, then Carlo pulled Junior up against his body and started kissing him. Junior melted into Carlo's strong body and closed his eyes. He placed his hands on Carlo's shoulders and followed his lead. While they were kissing, it felt as if they were the only ones on the room.

When they stopped kissing, Junior stepped back. He bucked his hips to the beat of the music and smiled at Carlo. Then he unbuttoned his chaps and let them fall down his legs. He placed his arms on Carlo's shoulders for support and carefully lifted his legs out of the chaps. He kicked the chaps across the dance floor with the tip of his high-heeled boot and turned all the way around so that his back was facing Carlo. He spread his legs wide, arched his back, and moved into Carlo's crotch. Carlo grabbed his hips and started ramming his crotch in Junior's naked ass. Each time Carlo slammed into him, Junior's head fell back and his mouth opened wide. With Carlo's large hands on his hips, his mind went blank and the only thing he could hear was the beat of the music. He didn't hear the men in the audience screaming and clapping anymore. The only thing he felt was an intense connection to Carlo and how they were both reacting to the music.

By the time their extended dance routine was over, the dance floor was littered with cash. While they took their bows, holding hands, the audience whistled and clapped. Someone Carlo knew backstage got down on the dance floor on his hands and knees,

scooped up the money, and tossed it into a bag. Their act had been the final act of the night. After that, the show was over and the dance floor was open to everyone again. So they took their time bowing and thanking the audience.

When they finally left the dance floor, the guy who had scooped up the money handed them the bag. Carlo took it and thanked him, then he handed the guy a twenty-dollar bill for his help.

“Half of this money is yours,” Carlo told Junior.

“No,” Junior said. “I want you to keep it.”

“You earned it,” Carlo said. “You were great tonight.”

Junior didn’t want to take the money. He knew Carlo needed it more than he did, and he wanted Carlo to keep it. “We’ll talk about it later,” Junior said. “You hold onto it now.”

Then the owner of Lavender Hall came back stage to praise them. He said their routine was the best part of the entire show and he wanted to hire them to do other events all year long. He even said he’d double their salaries if they danced and stripped at the same time. The owner couldn’t stop praising them. He said what he’d liked the most was that they were real dancers and it was more than just a sleazy strip show.

While the owner talked, Carlo grabbed his leather jacket and wrapped it around Junior’s shoulders. Then he pulled Junior in front of him so no one could see Junior’s naked ass. Junior sank into his chest and rested his head below Carlo’s strong square chin. His jacket smelled like leather and a mixture of all the spicy colognes he’d ever worn. Junior had to hold his own clothes in front of his body, so no one could see that he had a full erection ready to burst from the G-string. This surprised Junior. Under any other

circumstances, he would have been too self conscious, standing there out in the open in front of strangers, to even get an erection. But with Carlo holding him this way, Junior couldn't control his urges. He could feel Carlo's erection pressing into his bare ass, which distracted him even more. But he didn't fight his erection. Instead, he wiggled his hips a few times without being obvious. He even reached down and rested his palm on Carlo's upper thigh and ran his fingers back and forth.

When the owner of Lavender Hall left them, Carlo leaned forward and whispered, "You're being a bad boy now."

Junior looked up at him with wide, innocent eyes. "Why is that?" He knew what Carlo was talking about. He was still stroking Carlo's thigh, hoping to keep Carlo's erection full and hard.

"If you keep rubbing my thigh like that, my dick is going to bust right through this G-string. As it is, I don't know how I'm going to get back to the dressing room like this. We may have to stand here all night."

Junior smiled. "We'll just walk back very slowly. No one will notice. And when we get back to the dressing room, I'll do what I did to you at the lake the other day."

"You will?"

"Of course I will," Junior said, reaching back to hold Carlo's dick. He stroked it a few times and kissed Carlo on the chin. "You deserve a reward for dancing so well tonight."

"What about your reward?" Carlo asked.

Junior turned fast. He tipped his head sideways and smiled. "What I'm going to do to you is *my* reward."

## Chapter Eleven

Carlo insisted on driving Junior back to *The Farms*. He said it was the least he could do. Junior had blown him well. He'd removed all his clothes, he'd gone down on the dressing room floor, and he'd pressed his palms to Carlo's thighs. Then he'd crawled across the dressing room floor on his knees, pushing Carlo up against a wall. He'd sucked until Carlo's legs trembled and sweat dripped from Carlo's temples.

When they walked out to the Riviera, Carlo opened the door for Junior and helped him inside. Junior smiled and sat down quietly while Carlo slammed the door. No one had ever opened or closed a car door for him. It wouldn't have occurred to him to do it for Carlo. This was nice; he couldn't stop smiling. If getting down on his knees and sucking Carlo off made Carlo this attentive, he wondered what Carlo would be like when they finally fucked. Junior knew this was coming. He wasn't sure when, but he knew Carlo was going to ask about fucking him eventually. It was something Junior had always wanted to do, but had always been terrified to do.

Carlo hit the gas and they sped out of the crowded parking lot. They headed back to where Carlo usually parked his car, near the cabins where the summer help lived. It was a dark night without a moon, but the sky was clear and the stars were shining. When they rounded a curve, Carlo was driving so fast Junior fell into his side. Carlo put his arm around Junior and slid his hand down that back of Junior's pants. Junior arched his back so Carlo could get all the way into his pants, and then he rested his head on Carlo's chest and closed his eyes.

Carlo played with his ass all the way back to *The Farms*. It wasn't a long ride, but by the time they pulled into Carlo's parking space Junior's zipper was down, his pants were sliding down his legs, and Carlo was trying to insert his finger into Junior's body. Junior wasn't complaining either. His pants were halfway down his legs by then and he was ready to take them all the way off. If Gary hadn't come running out to the car when he did, Carlo probably would have fucked him right there in the back seat of the car.

But Gary rushed up to the driver's side of the car and banged on the window. Junior sat up fast and pulled up his pants. When Carlo lowered the window and Junior saw the serious expression on Gary's face, he pressed his palm to his stomach and braced himself for bad news.

"What's wrong?" Carlo asked.

"It's Stella," Gary said. "She's in her cabin. She's bad. It's very bad." His voice was shaky and he kept running his right hand through his hair.

Carlo jumped out of the car and they jogged up to Stella's cabin. Junior followed a few feet behind, hoping it wasn't as dreadful as it sounded. But when they reached the cabin's front porch, Junior could hear Stella moaning inside. And when they went in, Stella was lying on her bed, writhing in pain, surrounded by a few of the other people who worked at the clubhouse. Carlo ran up to her and held her hand. He gave Gary a look and shook his head.

"I thought this guy was a real doctor," Carlo said.

"He was nothing like I expected," Gary said. "The place was filthy and he didn't even have gloves. It was nothing more than a back room behind a dry cleaning store."



When I heard her scream, I tried to get inside and get her out. But the door was locked by then and I couldn't do anything."

"Why didn't you take her right to the hospital?" Carlo asked.

"She said she was fine in the car," Gary said. "She wasn't like this until we got back here."

Junior looked down at Stella. Her face was gray, her blond hair was damp with perspiration, and there was blood on the white sheets between her legs. She had both hands pressed to her lower abdomen and she was moaning and sobbing at the same time. Junior had never seen anyone this sick in his life. It looked as if she was about to die. He didn't wait to ask Carlo if it was okay to get medical help. He just ran out of the cabin. He ran down the stone steps, past the clubhouse, and up the front walk of his own house. By the time he walked into his parents' dark bedroom, he had to control his breathing so he wouldn't wake his mother.

He tapped his father's shoulder and pressed his finger to his lips. Then he whispered, "Dad, you have to come with me. It's an emergency. Something's happened and they need a doctor."

"What is it?" his father asked. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Junior said. "It's someone else."

By the time Dr. Edgar was dressed, he grabbed his medical bag and drove Junior back to Stella's cabin. They didn't speak in the car. Dr. Edgar drove faster than he normally would have driven and parked next to Carlo's Riviera. Dr. Edgar was a trained medical professional and he was in crisis mode. He seemed to know there wasn't time to

talk. He didn't wait for Junior to lead the way. He just got out of the car, looked up at the people standing outside Stella's cabin, and jogged up to the door with his medical bag.

Junior followed him into Stella's cabin, where Carlo was sitting on the bed holding Stella's hand. There were people standing around the bed, and people leaning against the walls. They meant well, and they were genuinely concerned about her, but Junior couldn't help thinking that it resembled a side show.

"Everyone get out of here," Dr. Edgar said.

When everyone was gone, Carlo rose from the bed and stepped back to the front entrance as if guarding the door. Junior walked up to Carlo's side and watched his father open the medical bag.

Dr. Edgar sat down on the bed where Carlo had been sitting. He felt Stella's forehead and then pressed on her lower abdomen. When he pressed, she bolted forward in pain. He pulled his stethoscope out of the bag and told Stella, "You're going to be fine. Just close your eyes and take deep breaths." Then, before he started examining her, he turned his head and faced the front door. "Who is responsible for this?" he asked.

He wasn't talking about the doctor in New Jersey. He was talking about who had gotten her pregnant.

Everyone had left the room and had gone outside on the front porch. The only ones standing near the door were Junior and Carlo. There was an awkward moment of silence, then Carlo stepped forward and said, "I am."

Dr. Edgar looked at him and frowned. Then he pulled something out of his medical bag and placed it on the bed next to Stella.

Junior stared at Carlo with a horrified expression. He didn't understand why Carlo was taking the blame for something that sneaky, sleazy Marvin had done. Carlo had done nothing but try to help Stella. Dr. Edgar should have been looking down his nose and frowning at Marvin. Junior wanted to say something about Marvin, but he didn't want Carlo to get mad at him.

Without even realizing what he was doing, Junior grabbed Carlo's right bicep with both hands and looked up at him with absolute devotion in his eyes. It wasn't the kind of gesture a guy would make with another guy. It was the kind of gesture a lover would make with another lover. And when Dr. Edgar turned his head and saw his son holding big, strong Carlo's bicep, he took a quick breath, stared at them both for a moment with a confused look in his eyes, then went back to treating Stella.

Junior's stomach jumped; he knew what his father was thinking. The only thing he could have done that would have been more obvious would have been to kiss Carlo on right on the mouth.

An hour later, after Stella had been treated and she was out of danger, Dr. Edgar emerged from her room and stepped onto the porch. Junior and Carlo were outside by then. There were dark circles beneath Dr. Edgar's eyes and he was staring down at the floor boards as if he was embarrassed to look anyone directly in the eye.

Gary ran up to him and shook his hand. "Thank you, Dr. Edgar. Thank you for coming out like this."

Then Carlo walked up to Dr. Edgar, squared his shoulders, and reached out to shake his hand, too. "I'd like to thank you..."

But Dr. Edgar pulled his hand back. He just looked down at Carlo's hand and frowned. Then he looked into Carlo's eyes with a blank, empty expression. When he turned his back on Carlo and walked away from the cabin, Carlo's hand was still extended in mid-air.

Junior followed his father back to the car. He'd never seen his father so serious in his life.

Halfway there, Dr. Edgar stopped walking and asked, "Is this where my money went?"

Junior shrugged. "She needed help."

"I'm not sure what I saw tonight, Junior," Dr. Edgar said. "I don't understand why you were holding that man's arm like you were, or looking at him the way you were looking at him. But I don't want you to have anything to do with him, or any of those people. And I never want to discuss this night again."

"But you don't know the whole story, Dad," Junior said. He wasn't going to explain why he was holding Carlo's arm. That would have been too much of a shock for one night. But he did want to explain that Carlo was not the one who'd gotten Stella pregnant.

Dr. Edgar didn't want to listen. "I don't want your mother finding out about this. I'm going home now and I'm going back to bed."

"If you'll just listen..."

"I've seen enough and I've heard enough for one night," said Dr. Edgar. He turned and looked into Junior's eyes. "I forbid you to have anything to do with this Carlo character again."

Junior tried to explain one last time. But Dr. Edgar turned his back on him and walked to his car. Junior watched him leave; Dr. Edgar didn't look back. He'd never seen his father so deflated. He feared deep in his heart that his father would never be able to look at him with respect again. This wasn't about Stella or the money. This was about Carlo, and about the way he'd grabbed Carlo's arm, and the way he'd looked into Carlo's eyes. Junior knew his father wasn't a stupid man. All those years of wondering why Junior hadn't dated, why he'd refused to go to his high school prom, and why he'd never expressed interest in girls had probably all fallen into place in that one instant when he saw Junior holding Carlo's arm.

## Chapter Twelve

Junior didn't go back home right away. He couldn't get the look of defeat that had been on Carlo's face out of his mind. When Dr. Edgar had turned his back on Carlo the way he had, Junior had literally felt the pain and disgrace that Carlo was feeling. Junior had never felt this close to anyone in his life. It was as though he could feel every emotion Carlo was feeling at the same time.

So he waited about an hour, walked around the golf course under the stars, then walked up to Carlo's cabin and knocked on the door.

When Carlo answered, Junior shrugged and said, "Am I welcome here?" He wasn't sure how Carlo would react, especially after his father had just shunned him in front of everyone.

Carlo looked down at his feet, as if he couldn't look Junior in the eye. "Come in," he said. He was only wearing a pair of baggy white boxer shorts and white athletic socks. He looked just as strong and powerful as he always looked, but there was something missing now. His voice was too soft and his expression was blank.

Junior stepped into the cabin and looked around. There was soft music playing in the background on a record player. It was the latest Barry Manilow album and Junior had heard the song on the radio a few times. Carlo's cabin was just one square room, with unfinished planks on the floor, bare wooden walls without drywall or insulation, and a few pieces of old furniture. The bed was up against the far wall, there were two old fashioned, rickety nightstands on either side of the bed, and there was a Bentwood

rocking chair resting on top of a threadbare oriental carpet. The caning on the back part of the Bentwood rocker had cracks and holes, and the edges of the carpet were frayed and delicate. The bed itself was nothing more than a plywood platform with a full-size mattress. But it had been neatly made up with a thick black comforter and black sheets and pillow cases.

“It’s nothing like where you live,” Carlo said, clearly embarrassed of his room.

“It’s wonderful room,” Junior said, and he wasn’t lying. He could smell Carlo’s spicy cologne; he could feel Carlo’s masculine energy everywhere. On the floor, beside the bed, was a pair of Carlo’s pointy shoes with the Cuban heels.

Carlo grabbed a handful of clothes that he’d discarded earlier and pulled them off the chair. “Here,” he said, gesturing to the rocking chair, “Sit down.” Then he quickly tossed the clothes onto a heap of other clothes in a far corner of the room.

Junior sat down slowly, praying the old chair wouldn’t collapse. Being in Carlo’s room, alone with him, was different than being with him out in the world. This was his personal space; he was everywhere in this cabin. Junior wanted to go over to the corner of the room and pick up all of Carlo’s old clothes and fold them neatly so they wouldn’t wrinkle.

Carlo crossed to the record player to turn it off. But Junior said, “You can leave it on. I like that song.”

Carlo stood without saying a word. Then he stepped away from the record player and sat on the bed with his legs spread wide. He couldn’t look Junior in the eye; he kept staring at the floor.

"I'm sorry about my father," Junior said. "He shouldn't have treated you the way he did." Junior chose his words with care so he'd make his point without having to go into too much detail.

"You don't have to apologize," Carlo said. "You're father saved Stella's life. He was wonderful. I admire and respect him."

"I know that," Junior said. "But he wasn't wonderful with you. He was wrong." Junior took a deep breath and sighed as if he were in physical pain. "I know he saw me grab your arm. I know he saw how I looked at you. He treated you that way because of me."

"Your father," Carlo said, "the way he saved Stella was the real thing. He's a great man. Compared to a lowlife like me, a dancer from Newark, New Jersey, who is nothing, your father is a real hero. He treated me like a loser because I am a loser."

"That's bullshit," Junior said. He moved forward on the rocker and raised his voice. "You're not a loser. You're the most wonderful guy I've ever known."

Carlo tilted his head and gave him a surprised look. Then he frowned and said, "Very few people know I'm into other guys. I don't look gay and I get away with murder. I pretend I'm interested in the women at *The Farms* and they stuff my pockets with extra cash while I'm dancing with them. I flirt, I play with them, and I work them to get what I want. It's the only way I know how to survive."

"But it's not always going to be this way," Junior said. "You're smart and talented and ambitious. You have options. You're going to open a restaurant and build your own business one day. Why can't you see yourself the way I see you?"

"We come from two different worlds, Junior. Can't you see *that*?"



Junior blinked. "Are you serious? Have you taken a look at my world? I suck dick, and my sister has an invisible dog named Elmer."

*"Elmer?"*

Junior smiled. "I'll tell you about Elmer later. That's not the point. The point is that you have options just like everyone else."

Carlo laughed. "You make it all sound so easy," he said. "You make it sound like the world is this wonderful place and we're all going to fulfill our dreams. You think you can save everyone, including me."

"Yeah," Junior said, in a lower voice. "I'm the best. I just run to my daddy and he can make everything right again."

Carlo furrowed his eyebrows. "You didn't have to get your father tonight," he said. "You did the right thing and it took courage. I've never met anyone like you. And the way you learned how to dance in such a short amount of time took guts."

Junior shook his head back and forth. "I've lived my entire life being terrified of everything. I'm terrified of not being who my parents want me to be, I'm terrified of not doing the things people expect me to do, and I'm terrified someone will find out I'm gay. But most of all, I'm terrified I'll lose you, because you'll never be able to love me even half as much as I love you."

Carlo stood up from the bed and looked up at the ceiling. Junior just sat there, wondering if he'd said too much too soon. He hadn't planned on telling Carlo that night that he was in love with him, and now he was terrified Carlo would turn his back on him and ask him to leave. There was something about Carlo that seemed apprehensive, as if he were scared of showing his real emotions.

Carlo didn't say anything. He continued to stare at the ceiling as if he wasn't sure what to do next. Junior waited a few minutes in silence, listening to a slow, sad song about lovers, hoping Carlo would say or do something. When he didn't, Junior stood up from the rocking chair and removed all his clothes. He went to the bed where Carlo was standing and put his arms around Carlo's shoulders. He laced his fingers at the base of Carlo's neck and he felt Carlo's strong hands slip under his arms and press on the small of his back. Carlo pulled him into his body and they started to dance on the ancient, frayed carpet.

While they danced, Junior closed his eyes and tossed his head back in an overly dramatic move. He felt safe in Carlo's arms, yet naked and free and unrestrained. The dramatic tossing his head back and swooning wasn't something he normally would have done. He knew it was trite and somewhat laughable. But the fact that they'd danced together and rehearsed together for so long made it seem appropriate. He held Carlo's neck for support and shook his head around, then went forward with the beat of the music and ran the tip of his nose along the bottom of Carlo's square chin. Carlo hadn't shave since early that morning. He had rough, prickly stubble that brushed the soft skin on Junior's nose. The muscles at the top of Carlo's shoulders were firm and thick. Each time Junior squeezed them with his fingertips, his erect penis pulsed and his balls jumped. Though he knew it was really happening, he still found it hard to believe he was actually dancing naked with a man like Carlo.

Carlo was a hard man to read. He was proud and stoic and his expression was often blank. But Junior knew Carlo was just as excited as he was. He felt Carlo's erection poke his naked pelvis whenever Carlo bucked his hips to the slow sexy music. After just

a few minutes of dancing, Junior couldn't resist lowering his right hand. He slid it down and squeezed Carlo's huge round chest muscle. Then he lowered his palm to Carlo's hard, textured abdominal muscles and rubbed them. He used a light, feathery touch, and Carlo closed his eyes and sighed. When Junior finally lowered his hand down between Carlo's legs, Carlo's dick was sticking out of the fly in his boxer shorts. Junior had been hoping this would happen. He felt awkward about mentioning it out loud, but he'd always thought erections sticking out of boxer shorts were both sexy and adorable.

He wrapped his fingers around Carlo's shaft and pulled the soft skin back and forth. He milked the shaft to the beat of the music, rubbing the tip of his thumb just below the head. Junior wanted to drop to his knees and start sucking again. His heart was racing and his mouth was watering. He wanted to press his face into Carlo's boxer shorts and take Carlo all the way to the back of his throat just like he'd done earlier in the dressing room.

But Carlo stopped dancing. He leaned back and looked Junior in the eye. When he reached around and grabbed Junior's ass, he said, "You have hot little ass. The first time I saw that ass I wanted to pull down your pants and jump on your back."

"You have a dirty mind," Junior said. He smiled and stroked Carlo's dick faster.

"Sometimes I put my pillow between my legs when I'm in bed and I pretend the pillow is your ass," Carlo said.

Junior tapped the tip of Carlo's dick with the flat pad of his thumb, and then he lifted his thumb to his mouth and licked a clear drop of Carlo's pre-come. He swallowed and licked his lips, then reached down and grabbed the shaft again.

Carlo squeezed his ass harder this time. "I'll bet your ass is tight."

Junior knew Carlo wanted to fuck him, and he wasn't going to refuse. Junior wanted it to happen, and he wanted Carlo to be his first. He'd experimented with dildos and a few of his mother's old candles, so he wasn't a complete virgin. He knew it would hurt a little at first, but the pain would go away and he'd eventually want as much as he could get. At least, that's how it had been with his mother's colonial beeswax tapers.

So he released Carlo's cock and stepped back. "Do you have Vaseline?" he asked.

In 1978 this was the most common lube around. Junior had read that some gay men even carried a small jar in the glove boxes of their cars just in case they needed it in a pinch. And, of course, in 1978 there was no talk about condoms or safe sex because the most serious thing anyone could catch was treatable with medications.

Carlo nodded yes, then reached into a drawer on the nightstand for a jar of Vaseline.

"I've never done this before with anyone," Junior said. He wanted him to know he was a virgin, partly because he thought it was romantic and partly because he wanted Carlo to go easy on him.

"I had a feeling," Carlo said. "You don't have to do this if you don't want to do it. Not all gay men like getting fucked. I should know. I'm one of them. I only had to do it once to know it wasn't for me."

Junior's head tilted to the side. He'd been dreaming about getting fucked by Carlo for weeks now. There had been times it felt as though he had an itch deep in his ass that would never be satisfied.

Without having to be asked, Junior climbed up on the bed. He got down on his hands and knees, spread his legs as wide as they would go, and arched his back so his

hips would be high and easy to mount. He'd seen male models pose this way in porn magazines. He didn't feel self conscious with Carlo. He felt dangerous and sexy.

Carlo's eyes bugged. When he saw Junior on the bed in that position, he climbed up behind him and opened the jar of Vaseline. He didn't even bother to remove his boxer shorts. He just pulled his balls out of the opening, lathered his erection until it was coated and slick, then rubbed more lube up and down Junior's ass crack.

When Carlo inserted his finger into Junior's body and rubbed lube around the opening, Junior closed his eyes and took a quick breath. Carlo's finger moved fast, but it wasn't awkward or irritating at all. There wasn't any pain. By the time he inserted a second finger and started pulling both fingers in and out of Junior's body, Junior's erection was so hard he had to concentrate on not coming too soon.

"I'm just doing this to open you up," Carlo whispered, shoving his fingers all the way in, then all the way out. "You're so tight. I want you to be relaxed and ready for what's coming."

Junior nodded yes and moaned. He tried to speak, but he couldn't find his voice. If Carlo's dick felt even half as good as his two fingers, Junior was afraid Carlo might have to peel him off the ceiling in the morning.

A few minutes later, Carlo pulled his fingers out of Junior and said, "I'm going inside. Are you ready?"

"Ah yes," Junior said. "I'm fine." He felt like backing up. The itch was getting more intense.

The music stopped, but Carlo had the stereo set on automatic. The record player's arm clicked and lifted and swung to the right, then swung back to the left and the album

repeated from the beginning. When the first soft song started to play, Carlo pressed the head of his dick into Junior's opening and slowly slipped it all the way into his body.

Junior's eyes widened and his jaw dropped. There was a moment of excruciating pain, a sharp stab that cut into Junior without warning. It twitched his eyebrows and tightened his stomach muscles. It shot through Junior's entire body and made him wince. This was nothing like the pleasure he'd experience with Carlo's fingers. It felt more like Carlo had shoved Junior's mother's extra-wide Christmas candle centerpiece into his ass instead of a narrow beeswax taper. Junior bit his bottom lip and clenched the black comforter, hoping and praying the pain would subside. Carlo didn't move, as if he knew the pain Junior was experiencing. He remained deep in Junior's body, with his hands on Junior's ass rounds, spreading them apart.

Carlo's pelvis was pressed to his ass, and he felt the soft cotton of Carlo's boxer shorts against his flesh. Junior took quick breaths and tried to accommodate him without complaining. He almost lost patience and asked Carlo to pull out. For a moment, he even felt like he had to go to the bathroom and he stopped feeling sexy. It felt as if Carlo had split him in half with a soda bottle and he'd never be the same again.

Then, a moment later, the pain disappeared and his body began to relax. He lifted his head and turned it to the left. He gave Carlo an encouraging look and nodded yes. The next thing he said surprised him. He'd wanted this first experience with Carlo to be romantic; he'd wanted it to be sweet and tender and memorable. He'd planned to say the things he'd once read in a gay romance novel. But what came out of his mouth that night was anything but romantic, sweet, or tender. It was more like trite, raunchy porn.

“*Fuck* me as hard as you can, Carlo,” he shouted. “Bang me into the *fucking* wall and nail me to the plaster.” Then he tossed his head back, opened his mouth, and rammed his ass into Carlo’s pelvis a few times.

He couldn’t see Carlo’s expression, because he was too focused on the big dick up his ass by then. But when Carlo slapped his ass, with a crack so loud it echoed throughout the empty room, and Carlo started bucking his hips, he knew Carlo had not been offended by what he’d said.

Carlo slapped him again and moved with a steady rhythm. His balls smacked the bottom of Junior’s ass. His fingers pressed into Junior’s ass cheeks so hard, Junior would have bruises on his ass for days afterwards. Carlo was so strong and determined. He pushed Junior forward and Junior went down on the mattress. When Junior was flat on his stomach with his legs spread wide, Carlo fucked him so hard Junior’s head jerked. Junior stretched his arms forward and held the edge of the mattress for support. Carlo clenched his teeth and took heavy breaths. It didn’t take long for Junior to feel pre-orgasmic sensations. Each time Carlo went deep, he brought Junior closer to the kind of anal climax Junior didn’t even know existed. Junior had read about guys having orgasms without touching their dicks while getting fucked, but he’d never fully believed they were true stories.

When he felt his orgasm building, Junior lost control of his senses and shouted, “Deeper, Carlo. Don’t stop. Please don’t stop.” His calves rose, he arched his feet, and his toes curled back. “Yes, Carlo,” he shouted. “Keep fucking and don’t stop.” He closed his eyes and imagined Carlo’s dick sliding in and out of his body. He thought about big

strong Carlo using his soft white ass to get pleasure. The harder Carlo tagged him, the closer he reached climax.

Carlo responded to Junior's commands. He didn't slow down and he never stopped to rest. He continued fucking Junior until his breathing grew heavier and his right leg bent slightly at the knee. "I'm gonna come," he said. His voice was deeper than usual. "I can't hold back much longer."

"Yes," Junior said. "Give it to me. I want it. *Fuck* me, Carlo." He'd been on the verge of climax for a few minutes. Now, while the image of Carlo filling him with come took control of his imagination, he knew it wouldn't be long. This entire act, for Junior, was just as mental as it was physical. He was with Carlo and fantasizing about Carlo at the same time. The more he envisioned Carlo on top of him, the closer he came to climax.

Carlo blasted his load first. He gave Junior a few hard bangs in the ass, then dropped his seed deep into Junior's body. A second after Carlo came, Junior busted his load all over Carlo's black comforter. Junior never touched his dick. It was an internal, anal orgasm that began deep inside his ass and traveled to the rest of his body. He felt the sensations from the tips of his toes all the way to the top of his forehead. And when Junior came, the lips of his anus clamped down so hard on Carlo's shaft, Carlo shouted, "Fuck, yes."

Then Carlo rested all his weight on Junior's back. He kissed Junior's neck, wrapped his bulky arms around Junior's shoulders, and continued rocking his hips slowly. "I don't want to pull out yet," he said. "Is that okay? Are you in any pain now?"



Junior closed his eyes and sighed. "You can stay inside as long as you want. I'm fine." He felt as if they'd become one person that night and he didn't want the moment to end.

Carlo laughed. "You liked it, didn't you?"

"You sound surprised."

"I am," Carlo said. "If any guy tried to do to me what I just did to you, I would have kicked him off the bed. But then, I always knew you liked dick."

Junior closed his eyes and smiled. Carlo sounded smug, but Junior didn't care. Junior had never felt so completely at home in his life. "It hurt at first but once I got used to it I couldn't get enough. I hope that doesn't sound terrible. I'm being honest." He was still surprised at how much he'd liked it. He'd always known he wanted to do it, but he never would have been able to imagine just how fantastic getting fucked really was.

"There's nothing wrong with liking dick," Carlo said. "It's very normal."

"Ah well," Junior said. "It's not just about any dick. It's about *your* dick, and your eyes and your hands and your *everything*. You were wonderful. Can we do it again in a few minutes? I want to do it on my back this time, with my legs over your shoulders, so I can look into your eyes."

Carlo patted his ass gently and said, "Let's just relax for a few minutes. We have all night. You're starting to sound like a sex maniac."

"Look who's talking," Junior said. "You didn't even take off your underwear."

"Sorry about that," Carlo said. "I guess I was a little excited."

"Don't apologize," Junior said. "I liked it."

"I guess you did."

“I want to kiss, too,” Junior said. “The next time you fuck me I want you to kiss me while you’re fucking me. Can we do that?”

“We can do that,” Carlo said, rocking his hips. “We can do anything you want.”

## Chapter Thirteen

Before the sun rose the next morning, Junior kissed Carlo goodbye and went back to his parents' house so no one would know he'd spent most of the night in Carlo's bed. His family was going to brunch that morning and he didn't want to arouse their suspicions. When he left Carlo's, he took a short cut through the golf course, walking with his hands in his pockets and a huge grin on his face. He hadn't showered yet and he'd been making love to Carlo all night. When he inhaled, he could still smell Carlo's strong, masculine aroma. Before he'd left Carlo in the dark cabin, he'd given him a quick blow job and he could still taste Carlo's penis. Though his legs were sore from dancing—and getting fucked twice that night—he knew deep in his heart that he'd just experienced one of the best nights of his entire life.

No one even noticed he'd been out all night. Or if they did, they didn't say anything. During brunch, his mother and Laney talked about a new lipstick Laney had bought in town. It was called Topsy Pink and Laney said it went perfectly with her tanned face. Laney also said Elmer approved, smiling down at the empty space next to her chair. Junior's mother nodded with a nervous smile at people who passed their table. Laney whispered something no one could hear to Elmer. Almost everything was normal, except for the fact that Junior's father wasn't speaking at all. Usually, he'd be animated and talking about his plans for the day. But that morning he just sat at the table, sipping a cup of black coffee, staring down at a newspaper.

When Valerie Timberlake walked up to their table and said, “We’re starting to rehearse for the talent show next week,” Dr Edgar frowned and said, “I don’t think we’ll be here for the show. We’re going to head back home in a few days.”

Junior’s mother lifted her head and stared at Dr. Edgar. Evidently, this was news to her.

Laney dropped her fork and leaned forward.

“But you can’t leave,” Valerie said. Her voice was high and loud, as if she’d had too much coffee that morning. She was wearing blue baggy short pants that puffed out at the hips that looked like old-fashioned bloomers. “This is the big event of the summer.”

Dr. Edgar frowned. “I’ve been away from my medical practice for too long already,” he said. “I think it’s best if we just leave early.”

Junior’s mother remained speechless, with her mouth half open. Normally, Dr. Edgar would have given a longer explanation and he wouldn’t have been so curt.

Laney looked as if someone had just stolen her new Topsy Pink lipstick. “We can’t leave,” she said. “I’m supposed to sing in the show.”

Dr. Edgar gave Laney a stern look. “I said we’re leaving and that’s it.”

“I have to get down to the golf course,” Valerie said. As she turned to leave, she looked back over her shoulder and said, “Junior, I’ll be needing you for backstage help with props.”

When Valerie was gone, Junior’s mother said, “We haven’t even discussed this. I had no idea you wanted to leave early. We have a lot of time left.”

Junior sat back in his seat, folded his arms across his chest, and gazed out to the golf course. His father refused to even look at him, which wasn’t normal. His father was

usually paying too much attention to him, making Junior feel guilty because his father was ignoring Laney. But the only thing on Junior's mind was Carlo. His stomach turned and his face felt hot. If they left early, he'd never see Carlo again. He had a feeling that was his father's plan.

When Dr. Edgar saw the defeated expressions on their faces, he looked back and forth a couple of times and said, "I just thought it might be nice to leave early. But if you don't want to, we can stay."

Junior took a quick breath of relief.

Laney sat back and smiled.

Dr. Edgar forced a smile and asked Laney, "What are you going to sing?" This wasn't normal either. Dr. Edgar rarely cared about Laney's latest whim or impulse. He never said it aloud, but Junior always thought his father considered Laney frivolous and dizzy.

But Dr. Edgar didn't wait for Laney to answer. He just stood up from his chair without saying where he was going, and turned his back on Junior.

Laney jumped up and followed him. "I was thinking about singing *Oh, What a Beautiful Morning...*"

As their voices trailed off, Junior's mother put down her napkin and watched Dr. Edgar leave with Laney on his tail. Her face was blank and she didn't say a word, as if she suspected something was wrong but was afraid to ask. Junior pretended everything was fine. He reached for a large bagel in the middle of the table and split it in half with his fork. He stuck his knife into a bowl of cream cheese and slathered the bagel from edge to edge. For some reason, he was famished that morning.

\* \* \* \*

After brunch, Junior left his mother with a few of the wives and took a walk up to Stella's cabin. He wanted to see how she was doing and to see if she needed him to bring her anything.

The cabin door was partially open. He knocked and stepped inside. Stella was still in bed, but she was propped up against the headboard. All the color had returned to her face and her blond hair was pulled back into a neat ponytail. When she saw him enter, she smiled.

"I wanted to stop by and check in," Junior said.

"You just missed your father," Stella said. "He's a great guy. I don't know what I would have done without him."

Before Junior could respond, there was a knock on the door and Carlo walked into the cabin with a huge smile on his face. He crossed to the bed without even noticing Junior. When Carlo saw him standing there, he stopped smiling and nodded hello with a guilty look on his face.

"Hey, Carlo," Junior said.

This was awkward, running into Carlo after they'd just spent the night together. They tried not to look at each other for more than a second, because when they did, both of their faces flushed with shame.

"Carlo," Stella said. When he entered the room, her eyes lit up and she smiled.

"You look great," Carlo told her.

"Dr. Edgar said I'm going to be fine," Stella said.

"Excellent," Carlo said.

While they spoke, Junior put his hands in his pockets and stared down at the foot of the bed. He wasn't sure where to look. If he looked at Carlo for too long, he was afraid Stella would figure out there was something going on between them.

"How did the dance routine go at Lavender Hall last night?" Stella asked, still smiling.

Carlo hesitated. He gave Junior a look, put his hands into his pockets, and said, "Good."

Then Carlo stared down at his shoes and tilted his head. There was an awkward moment of silence. Stella stopped smiling and looked back and forth between Carlo and Junior.

"I'm going to wait outside," Junior said, slowly moving toward the door. He couldn't get out of that cabin fast enough. He wasn't sure whether or not Stella knew that Carlo was gay. He wasn't sure if Stella knew he was gay.

"Wait," Stella said. "You guys are looking for trouble." She turned to Carlo and said, "You've always told me never to get too close to the summer residents, and you're right." Then she looked up at Junior. "And Carlo could lose his job if anyone ever found out about you two. You guys need to knock it off before this gets out of hand. These summer resort places are like small towns, and everyone finds out about everything sooner or later."

"Is it that obvious?" Carlo asked.

Stella rolled her eyes. "Give me a break. I know you too good, Carlo."

Junior stood there staring at her. He didn't know what to say. So he smiled and said, "I'll be outside." Carlo and Stella had known each other a long time, and he felt like a stranger who was in the way.

He sat down on the wooden steps outside the cabin. He thought he'd just sit there and wait for Carlo, but then realized he could hear every word they were saying through the open window above his head.

"What are you doing?" Stella asked Carlo. "You're the one always telling me never to get mixed up with *them*."

When she said "them," it sounded almost as if she were repeating a dirty word. Junior rested his elbows on his knees and cradled his head on his palms. He knew she was talking about people like him, the summer residents who came from privileged backgrounds and went to good schools.

"I know what I'm doing," Carlo said. "I don't need a lecture."

Junior looked up and smiled. At least Carlo wasn't agreeing with her.

"You listen close," Stella said. "You gotta stop it now. There's no way nothin' like this can ever work. You're headed for trouble."

Junior tilted his head and frowned. For the first time, he realized there was a difference between people like Stella and the summer residents. Stella didn't speak like the summer residents spoke. She didn't know an adjective from an adverb, she used words like "gotta", and almost every other sentence she spoke contained a double negative. She dropped "g's" with words ending in "ing", and didn't even know she was doing it. But more than that, there was a low-end edge to her entire tone, a suggestion that she probably hadn't even graduated from high school.



But none of this mattered to Junior. He was in love with the most astonishing man he'd ever known. He didn't care about the way Carlo spoke and he didn't care where Carlo had gone to school. He knew Carlo was naturally smart and intrinsically decent, and that was all that mattered to him. Stella was wrong. She had no right to try to keep them apart. He knew she meant well, but that didn't make it right.

"Look," Carlo told Stella. "I have to leave. I'll stop back later."

Carlo didn't wait for her to reply. He stormed out the door and stepped onto the porch. Junior stood up fast and smoothed out his jeans. He pretended he hadn't heard a word they'd said, hoping Carlo wasn't going to take Stella's advice.

Carlo ran his palm through his hair and said, "I have a dance lesson now." He spoke fast; his lips were pinched and his eyebrows were knitted together.

Junior gazed at him with adoring eyes, leaned back into the chipped clapboards, and gulped.

"I'll see ya," Carlo said, walking down the steps.

As he walked away from the cabin, Junior's heart sank and his stomach jumped. He hadn't seen Carlo this serious since they'd first met, and he wasn't sure what Carlo was thinking or feeling. He couldn't let Carlo leave this way. He had to say something.

So he stood up and shouted, "Carlo!" He didn't know what else to say.

Carlo stopped walking and turned back. He looked at Junior for a moment with a serious expression. Junior gazed into his almond-shaped eyes, hoping and praying Carlo would say or do something that would confirm they were still together. Junior clenched his fists and took a deep breath.

When Carlo finally tilted his head and smiled, Junior exhaled. It took a moment longer than Junior had expected it would. But he wasn't disappointed. This wasn't just an ordinary smile between a two friends. This was a warm smile that said, *I love you. I have to leave now. We'll be together soon.*

## Chapter Fourteen

Junior and Carlo decided to play it safe for a while. Junior didn't want his father to know he was sleeping with Carlo, and Carlo didn't want Ben or Valerie Timberlake to know that he was sleeping with Junior. In 1978 the word "gay," in reference to the homosexual community, was still so new people like Junior's father and the Timberlake's weren't even sure how to use it in a sentence. When the word wasn't being used seriously by people in the gay community, it was usually being used as a dry joke on late night television by comic types looking for a cheap laugh. Though the world was changing, Junior's father would have dragged Junior back home to the Main Line, and Carlo would have lost his job at *The Farms*. So Junior and Carlo quickly agreed, while Carlo was teaching a dance class to a group of older women, they wouldn't see each other for at least a week. And they would never be seen together in public.

But it didn't stop raining that week. It poured nonstop until Junior thought he'd lose his mind. By the end of the week, while Laney was getting dressed for a dinner dance with Marvin—she'd refused to stop seeing Marvin-the-creep—and his mother and father were getting ready to play bridge with a few other couples, Junior was ready to go into the bathroom, lock the door, and sit on one of his mother's beeswax candles. He hadn't been with Carlo in so long he was afraid he was becoming a virgin all over again.

Laney looked into a mirror over the soda, flipped back her blond curls, and said, "I can't find my Topsy Pink lipstick. I know I put it in my purse the other day. Now it's gone."

They were all in the family room. Junior was reading a magazine article about Mark Twain's life and he was having trouble keeping his eyes open.

"Have you seen my Topsy Pink?" Laney asked her mother.

"Maybe Elmer took it," Junior said, with a sarcastic tone in his voice, not looking up from the magazine.

Junior's mother shot him a nasty look, then she smiled at Laney and said, "No, dear. I haven't seen it. You must have misplaced it somewhere. I'm sure it will turn up."

Laney looked down at an empty space next to where she was standing. She was all dressed up that night in a white fluffy halter dress, with white high-heeled sandals and a white French-tip manicure. She smiled at the empty space and said, "Oh, I doubt it would be there. I'd never leave my Topsy Pink just lying around like that. It's my favorite color this summer." She could have said month instead of summer. Laney's favorite color changed often.

There was a moment of silence. Junior and his mother and father were staring at Laney by then. They knew she was talking to Elmer, as if Elmer really knew where she'd left her lipstick.

Laney shrugged. "I'll check it out." Then she turned to leave the room.

"Where are you going?" Dr. Edgar asked.

"Elmer says I left it on the shelf in the laundry room," Laney said. "So I'm going to check."

Dr. Edgar looked down at the empty space and frowned. Junior's mother rummaged through her purse as if she hadn't heard a thing. Junior just rolled his eyes and went back to reading about Mark Twain's experiences with U.S. presidents.

But a moment later they all heard Laney squeal. She ran back into the room waving a gold tube of Topsy Pink lipstick high in the air.

“I found it,” she shouted. “It was right on the shelf where Elmer said it would be.” Then she leaned forward, put her hands on her hips, and said, “I don’t know what I’d do without you, Elmer.”

Everyone ignored Laney. Junior’s father looked down at his car keys and fumbled with them. Junior’s mother always became so flustered when Laney started talking out loud to Elmer, her face turned red and she was unable to speak without a stammer.

When Junior finally looked at his father, his father turned his head in the opposite direction. Dr. Edgar was still giving him the cold shoulder and Junior was the only one who knew why. So Junior stood up from his chair and crossed the room to get a hooded raincoat from a hook next to the door.

“Where are you going, Junior?” his mother asked.

“I signed up to play charades tonight with Valerie Timberlake and a few other people,” he said. He knew his parents wouldn’t run into Valerie that night. They were playing bridge at someone’s house, not the clubhouse.

Dr. Edgar looked in his direction with a blank expression.

“If you wait a minute, we can drop you off at the clubhouse on our way,” Junior’s mother said. “We’re dropping Laney and Elmer off.” When she mentioned Elmer and realized how silly it sounded, she stammered on the last syllable.

“I’d rather walk,” Junior said. “But thanks. I’ll see you later.” Then he slipped out the door fast, so no one would ask him any more questions.

Carlo had told him he kept a hidden key beneath a rock under the porch. Junior had made it a point to quietly know Carlo's work schedule. That night he knew Carlo was in the dance studio teaching until eight o'clock, but he wasn't working after that.

It was times like this when he almost wished he had a friend like Elmer to keep him company.

\* \* \* \*

It was just getting dark outside when Junior heard Carlo's footsteps on the front porch. Junior sighed with relief, because he'd been waiting there for over an hour. He wasn't sitting on the Bentwood Rocker and he wasn't on the edge of Carlo's bed with his hands folded on his lap. He'd removed all of his clothes and he'd climbed into Carlo's bed. He'd taken the jar of Vaseline out of the nightstand drawer and he'd left it on top of the night stand with the lid off.

Carlo hesitated at the front door. Junior had left it slightly ajar and he knew Carlo must have been wondering why the door to his cabin wasn't locked. Carlo also had to be wondering why there was a small lamp burning. Carlo pushed the open slowly and looked into the cabin to see who was there.

While he was still in the doorway, Junior said, "I thought you'd never get here."

Carlo took a deep breath and walked inside. He shut the door and said, "You scared me to death. I thought someone had broken in."

Junior was in bed, with the covers pulled down well below his waist so Carlo could see he was naked. He stretched his arms and yawned, then said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. I'll leave if you want me to leave."

Carlo walked to the bed and put his hands on his hips. He noticed the open jar of Vaseline, then stared at Junior's naked torso. He raised his right eyebrow and said, "I should make you leave. It would teach you a lesson. You're a bad boy, sneaking around like this."

"I just wanted to be with you," Junior said.

Junior had another surprise under the covers that Carlo couldn't see. He pulled the black cover off his body very slowly and stretched his entire body again. He lifted his legs this time and arched his back. He wasn't completely naked at all. He was wearing the black leather knee-high boots with the high heels he'd worn for Leather Night. Wearing the high-heeled boots had been a last-minute idea. They made him feel sexy and submissive, just the way he knew Carlo wanted him to be.

Carlo stared at his legs for a moment. Then he licked his bottom lip and kicked off his shoes. His shirt, socks, and pants came off fast. When he removed his boxer briefs, his erection fell out and bounced up and down. He didn't speak. He just grabbed his dick and lathered it with a clump of Vaseline.

A minute later, he was in bed and Junior's high heels were braced on his shoulders. He pressed his dick to between Junior's legs and said, "I was afraid I was the one corrupting you. I'm starting to think it's the other way around."

Junior gazed into his eyes. "I want you so bad," he whispered, arching his back. "I can't think about anything but you, Carlo."

Carlo looked into Junior's eyes and guided his dick. He pressed the head into Junior's hole and pushed. When it entered, Junior threw his arms back and gasped from the pressure. He concentrated on relaxing his muscles and taking Carlo. There was some

pain this time, but not nearly as much as the first few times, and it didn't last long. Junior didn't mention this to Carlo, but while he'd been waiting for him he'd been opening himself up with his fingers so he'd be ready. And it worked. By the time Carlo's dick was all the way in his body, Junior had accepted him completely.

"Kiss me," Junior said. He lowered his heels from Carlo's shoulders and opened his legs as wide as they would go. "Kiss me while you fuck me." His voice was soft; he didn't want this to come out sounding raunchy or crude. But he had to say something. Junior had been fantasizing about this position all day. He couldn't imagine anything better than kissing the man he loved while the man he loved was deep inside his body.

Carlo's chest went forward. Junior placed his right hand on the back of Carlo's neck and the other on Carlo's shoulder blade. Junior squeezed the muscle on Carlo's shoulder and took a quick breath. He pulled Carlo's face toward his, then he opened his mouth and pressed his tongue against Carlo's tongue.

While they kissed, Carlo bucked his hips. Junior was always amazed at the way Carlo only used the muscles around his lower waist and hips to fuck. It was as if the center of Carlo's well-trained dancer's body was disconnected from everything else. The rest of Carlo's body remained calm and relaxed. His kisses were tender and slow, but at the same time he slammed into Junior's body with strong, determined hits. The harder Carlo poked, the more Junior wanted.

Ten minutes later, while Carlo was sliding in and out, Junior reached down with his right hand and grabbed his own dick. He could tell by the way Carlo was kissing him that Carlo was getting close. Carlo's tongue felt more powerful, and his breathing grew heavier. Junior wanted them to come together and he wasn't sure if he'd be able to



climax without touching himself that time. So he started jerking his own dick to the same rhythm with which Carlo was fucking him.

Carlo continued to kiss him. His tongue was still locked with Junior's tongue and his arms were around Junior's shoulders. A second before Carlo climaxed, he banged into Junior's ass hard and made a groaning sound that sounded as if it came from the pit of his stomach. And a moment after that, Carlo released his load into Junior's body, while Junior released his load all over his own abdomen.

When it was over, Carlo remained inside Junior just like he'd done the first time. Junior wrapped his legs around Carlo's lower half, he crossed his feet at the ankles, and rested the high heels just above Carlo's ass.

Carlo's head went up and he looked into Junior's eyes. "Are you okay?" he asked.

Junior slid his fingers down Carlo's arms and grabbed his biceps. "I feel like I'm in the middle of a fantasy," he said. "I never thought, in my wildest dreams, that I'd be making love to someone like you this summer." He closed his eyes and smiled. "I love you so much it hurts sometimes."

Carlo hesitated for a second. Then he sighed and said, "I love you just as much."

Junior recognized the gloomy tone in his voice. "It'll be okay, Carlo. We'll figure this out."

Carlo gave him a quick kiss. "You look good in those boots," he said, purposely changing the subject.

Junior uncrossed his feet and ran the heel of one boot up and down Carlo's lower spine. This made him feel both sexy and in control. He smiled and said, "I had a feeling you'd like them."

“Your father would probably come after me with a shotgun if he saw me on top of you like this,” Carlo said. “He already hates my guts.”

“He doesn’t hate you,” Junior said. “He just doesn’t understand.”

Right after that, Carlo’s dick slipped out of Junior’s body. He fell on top of Junior and rested his head on Junior’s shoulder. He didn’t seem to mind that Junior’s torso was covered with come. Junior caressed the back of Carlo’s head with one hand and the middle of Carlo’s back with the other. It was an unusual position: Junior’s legs were still wrapped around Carlo’s body and he was pinned to the bed with Carlo’s weight. But he wasn’t uncomfortable, not with Carlo on top of him. He could have remained this way for the rest of the night without voicing one single complaint.

## Chapter Fifteen

Junior went back home in the middle of the night and crept into the house without waking anyone in his family. Sneaking around had a certain dangerous quality that excited him and made him feel rebellious and naughty, especially because he was sneaking around with a guy like Carlo. And he'd never had the opportunity to sneak around when he'd been a teenager, because there hadn't been any guys to sneak around with. He almost wished someone would catch him. He would have loved to have seen the look on pushy Valerie Timberlake's face if she'd caught him in bed with Carlo, while he was wearing high heels and his legs were wrapped around Carlo's waist.

But he knew he had to be careful. If anyone discovered that he and Carlo were in love with each other and they were sleeping together, his life as he'd always known it would never be the same again. Though Junior wasn't unhappy with the fact that he was attracted to men, or that he'd fallen in love with Carlo, he knew if anyone discovered their secret it could cause the kind of trouble that he'd always preferred to avoid. He wasn't certain he was ready to handle admitting his sexuality to the world yet. The line between gay and straight was thick and bold, and when that line was crossed, there was no going back.

Then one night, while he and Laney were sitting outside in the dark, Laney took a deep breath and said, "I know what's going on with you and Carlo."

It was a warm summer night and there were moths flying near the overhead lamps. They were sitting outside on the deck, in two wooded deck chairs. Dr. and Mrs. Edgar

had gone to play bridge again and Junior and Laney were alone in the house. Laney didn't look him in the eye. She stared into the woods without moving her head.

Junior gulped. "What are you talking about?"

"C'mon, Junior," she said. "I know about you and Carlo. One night Elmer and I followed you to Carlo's cabin. We saw you dancing together, then Elmer insisted we leave. He didn't want to invade your privacy."

A large lump formed in Junior's throat. He gulped again and took a deep breath. Junior tried to retrace his steps. Since the first rainy night he'd slipped out to meet Carlo, he'd been doing it on a regular basis. He waited until he thought they were all asleep, then crept down the stairs in his bare feet and ran over to Carlo's cabin. But he was always home before dawn, and he didn't think anyone had seen him leave.

"Are you going to tell Dad about it?" Junior asked. She said she'd seen them. There was no use denying it. Junior was tired of keeping it a secret. A large part of him was relieved to know Laney had found out. He'd been dying to talk about it with someone.

Laney turned fast. "Of course not," she said. "At first I was shocked, but then Elmer calmed me down. Elmer thinks there's nothing wrong with what you're doing. And he thinks Carlo is a good, decent guy."

"He does?"

Laney nodded. "He likes Carlo," she said. "And he thinks it's a shame you have to sneak around."

Junior wasn't sure what to say, so he looked down at the empty space beside Laney and said, "Thank you, Elmer." He was elated to have someone on his side, even if it was an invisible dog.

Then Laney frowned and said, "I wish Elmer liked Marvin just as much as he likes Carlo. I'm thinking of going all the way with Marvin, and Elmer is livid about it."

Junior reached for her arm. "Oh, Laney," he said. "Not with Marvin. Please listen to Elmer this time. Elmer's right." He looked down and said, "Good boy, Elmer."

Laney pulled her arm back fast. "What do you care?" she asked. "You're so busy sneaking around with Carlo in the middle of the night you wouldn't care if I screwed all the guys on the soccer team."

"All I know is that if you're going to go all the way with someone, it should be with someone you love. Don't just do it because someone like Marvin is forcing you to do it. You deserve better than him."

"Sometimes I think you're just jealous," she said, "because Dad is paying more attention to me than he is to you this summer."

"Just trust me," Junior said. "Marvin is no good. I can't tell you everything. But you can't trust him." Then he reached out and grabbed her hand. When she tried to pull away, he held it so tightly she couldn't. "At least promise me you'll use a condom if you do decide to go all the way with Marvin. I'll even go out and buy the condoms for you."

\* \* \* \*

The next night, thanks to the fact that Laney was now more than willing to cover for him, Junior told his parents he was going to play miniature golf with Laney and Elmer. It worked out for them both, because Laney was really going to meet Marvin, and Junior

was really going to the dance studio to rehearse with Carlo. The only one who wasn't happy about all this was Elmer. Laney said Elmer hated it when they lied to Dr. and Mrs. Edgar.

Earlier that day, Junior had gone into town with his mother to do some grocery shopping. While his mother was shopping, he went next door to the local pharmacy and bought a package of condoms for Laney. When he saw her later that day, while he was on his way out to meet Carlo at the dance studio, he slipped the package of condoms into her hand and said, "Please promise me you'll use them."

Laney gave him a look and said, "Shit, Junior, I'm not even sure I'm doing it with Marvin." But then she sighed and gave him a hug. "Thanks."

Carlo was already in the studio waiting for him. The music was playing a disco song he'd heard the DJ play in Lavender Hall, and Carlo was working on a dance step alone. When Junior saw him moving his legs, he whistled back. Carlo was wearing tight black pants and a tight red shirt made out of some kind of slinky fake material. It looked just like a shirt that John Travolta had worn in *Saturday Night Fever*, and Junior couldn't wait to put his arms around Carlo to see how it felt.

Junior crossed the dance floor and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Carlo smiled, put his arms around Junior and pulled him to the middle of the dance floor. Carlo pulled Junior's shirt off and put his arms around his naked torso. They started to dance, with Carlo in the lead, and didn't stop until Carlo was spinning Junior around in circles. Junior wasn't nervous anymore. He concentrated on the music and followed every move Carlo made.

At one point, while they were dancing to a slower song, Carlo opened Junior's pants and pulled down his zipper. Junior hadn't worn any underwear on purpose, but he hadn't expected Carlo to pull down his pants in the dance studio. He arched his back and put his arms around Carlo's shoulders. While they rocked and swayed to the music, Carlo's hands slid down Junior's back. Junior's pants slid down to his knees. Carlo squeezed his ass with both hands and kissed him on the lips. It was late, there were no dance lessons scheduled for the rest of the night, and they both thought they were alone.

Junior was just about to get completely naked when they heard a car door slam outside the dance studio.

"Someone's coming," Carlo said. "Pull up your pants."

He pulled them up fast. Good thing he hadn't removed his shoes and socks yet, because there wouldn't have been enough time to put them back on before Valerie Timberlake bounced through the door. She had one of her bubbly bunches-of-fun smiles plastered across her face. Her skirt was a long, willowy, hot-pink affair with a ruffled hem, and her top was a white off-the-shoulder peasant blouse with puffy sleeves and little pink ribbons. Her wide exposed shoulders look more like they belonged to a linebacker than a young woman, and the only part of her legs that were showing were her thick ankles. She was wearing those awful flat sandals again, the ones with the loops for her big toes.

"Valerie," Carlo said, turning to the record player so he could lower the volume.

Valerie stood there in silence for a moment, looking back and forth between Junior and Carlo. She must have assumed Carlo was giving Junior a dance lesson, because she lifted one arm up, pressed the other to her stomach, and did a lumpy cha-cha

across the dance floor toward Junior. The dance studio was old, and the wooden floorboards rumbled and the windows rattled.

Junior froze.

Valerie sashayed in his direction, rocking her hips and dragging her sandals with uncoordinated scuffs. She reached for Junior's right hand and danced around him a few times, doing a cross between the cha-cha and a bad hula.

"I'm glad you're learning to dance, Junior," Valerie said. "This way we can finally dance together and you won't feel self-conscious."

Junior stood in the middle of the dance floor with a blank expression. From the corner of his eye, he could see Carlo looking out the window. Carlo's lips were pinched and his fists were clenched. Junior was amazed at Valerie's audacity. Junior hadn't given her a solitary hint that he was interested in her, and she was still flirting with him. She never considered the possibility that he'd rather dance with Carlo.

In any event, Carlo was not interested in watching Valerie dance the cha-cha, hula, or anything else. While she was still bopping around Junior, he flicked the arm of the record player and the music stopped with a high-pitched zip.

Valerie stopped dancing with a jolt, as if she was about to fall forward. She smoothed out her hot-pink skirt, fluffed her bushy black hair, and walked over to where Carlo was standing. When she crossed by a bright light, Junior could see right through the cotton fabric of her skirt. Her thighs rubbed together and her legs formed a shape that resembled the letter X. He looked down at his shoes, trying to force the image out of his mind.



“Carlo,” she said, “My father is letting me direct the final show this year and, well, you know, Carlo, I’d like to make it a really really fun time.”

Carlo squared his shoulders and smiled. “I have some great ideas for the finale. I’ve been working on a routine I saw in a film, a modern interpretation of a fast, complicated disco ballroom number.” Then he kicked his right leg in the air, up over his head, did a fast spin, and landed with his legs spread wide and his arms in the air.

Junior had never seen him do those steps. He folded his arms across his chest and smiled at how perfectly Carlo had landed on his feet without wavering.

But Valerie didn’t smile and she was not as impressed as Junior. Instead, she pressed her lips together, spread them into a wide creepy grin, and tilted her head to the side. “That’s not, like exactly, what I had in mind,” she said. “Besides, it’s too complicated for you. What I’d like to see is something that would be bunches and bunches of fun for everyone in the audience.”

Junior lowered his chin and raised his eyebrows. If she said “bunches of fun” one more time, he was going to kick her in the ass.

Carlo’s arms dropped to his sides and he stood there staring at her with a defeated look in his eyes.

“What I was thinking,” Valerie said, “is that we start the dance finale with the Hustle. You’ll start it off with Stella, and then everyone can join in on all the fun.”

Carlo bit the inside of his mouth. “The Hustle?” he said. “I just thought people would enjoy something more professional for the finale.”

Junior’s eyebrows knitted together. He could see how disappointed Carlo was. He kept looking down at his shoes and frowning. And Junior thought Valerie was way off

base. Even in 1978, the Hustle had already become synonymous with cheesy wedding bands, senior citizen cruise ships, and low-end suburban nightclubs.

“Well, ah, Carlo,” Valerie said, “You know, if you don’t like the Hustle, you could always just do the same tired thing you did at last year’s finale. But next year I’m sure I’ll be able to find another dance instructor who would love to do *The Hustle*.”

“It’s fine with me, Valerie,” Carlo said. His voice was deep and serious. “If you want the Hustle, you’ll get it.” There was an edge to his voice. He turned his back on Valerie and stared out the window.

Valerie crossed back to where Junior was standing. She seemed to enjoy her little victory, and putting Carlo in his place made her smile. She ran her chubby fingers down Junior’s back and said, “I’m sorry I interrupted your lesson.” Then she turned to leave. On the way out the door, without looking back, she shouted, “Carlo, make sure Junior gets his full lesson and that he gets his money’s worth out of you.”

When she was gone, Carlo slammed the lid to the record player with a loud crack. Junior jumped and looked in the other direction. Valerie Timberlake, the most awkward and least talented woman Junior had ever met, had just demeaned Carlo in front of Junior, and it broke Junior’s heart. He wanted to walk over and put his arms around Carlo and tell him it would be all right. But he knew Carlo well enough by then. Carlo was a strong, proud man and he didn’t tolerate weakness. If Junior had gone over, Carlo would have told him to go home. This was one of those times, Junior knew, when just offering quiet support was the best thing he could do.

## Chapter Sixteen

After Valerie left, Carlo said he didn't feel like dancing any more that night. So Junior put his shirt on and they left the dance studio. In order to get to Carlo's cabin, they had to pass the main clubhouse. Carlo walked fast, with long graceful strides, with his lips pursed and his fists clenched. Junior almost had to run to keep up with him.

"You can't let Valerie get to you," Junior said as they approached the clubhouse. "You have to be authentic, Carlo. You're better than she is."

"But she's the boss," Carlo said. "And I'm nothing. I've been running into her kind all my life, Junior. She comes from a rich family and she can be mean. People like Valerie eat people like me for breakfast just for sport."

"You have to fight for what you want," Junior said. He wanted Carlo to believe in himself as much as he believed in him. He knew Carlo was the one with the real talent, not Valerie and her half-assed finale ideas.

"These people will never listen to me," Carlo said. "And I need this job lined up for next summer. I need all the money I can get to save up for the restaurant. I can't risk them getting mad at me." He ran his fingers through his hair; his voice sounded calmer now. "Today I got a phone call from my uncle. He said he's got a job lined up for me in September and he can get me into the union."

"What union?"

Carlo closed his eyes and tightened his lips. "Dry wall and construction," he said. His voice dropped at the end of the sentence. He turned away from Junior and lowered his head.

When they reached a stone path, not far from the side entrance to the club house, Junior saw his father, Laney, and Marvin walking out the door. Junior didn't want his father to see him walking around at night with Carlo, so he grabbed Carlo's arm and said, "Get down."

They went down between two round shrubs and waited until Dr. Edgar and Valerie and Marvin were out of sight. Junior watched his father put his arm around Marvin as if Marvin was his own son. He was laughing and joking around with Marvin, while Laney walked two steps behind them with a huge grin on her face. Junior wondered what Elmer thought about all this. He wished Elmer would sink his teeth into Marvin's leg once and for all.

When it was safe to get up again, Carlo slowly rose and stared into Junior's eyes. Junior could see Carlo had been offended.

"I'm sorry," Junior said. "I just thought it would be best not to be seen together." There was a lump in his throat, and he wished he hadn't acted so quickly.

Carlo looked at him with disgust. "Be authentic," he said. "Fight for what you want. I don't see you fighting very hard for me, Junior. You don't even want mommy and daddy to know you're friends with a guy like me. God forbid if they found out you were sucking my dick. You're a fake, just like the rest of them."

"It's not that easy," Junior said, fighting back tears. When Carlo looked at him this way and spoke to him this way, he couldn't control his emotions. "I told my sister

about us, and I will tell my parents.” Junior had thought about this at length. Though sneaking around had been fun at first, he was tired of lying and tired of pretending to be someone he wasn’t. He’d been hearing that gay men were coming out of the closet for a while, and he’d decided that when the time was right, he would come out, too. He didn’t want to spend his entire life hiding his true identity. And now that he was in love with Carlo, he had a good reason to come out of the closet.

“I don’t believe you,” Carlo shouted. “I think I’m just a summer fling and you never had any intention of telling them about me. You’re no different from Valerie Timberlake and the middle-aged women who are always trying to get into my pants. You’re just like the rest of them and I should have known better.”

Before Junior could respond to these cruel accusations, Carlo turned fast and left him standing there alone.

\* \* \* \*

Junior didn’t see Carlo again until the following evening. He had dinner in the clubhouse with his parents and Laney, then excused himself from the table and said he was going to work on props for the talent show. His father just grunted something without looking up from his plate. His mother smiled and said how nice it was that he was getting involved with so many things that summer. (His mother had always wanted her children to be part of all the clubs in school and to be part of the popular crowd like she’d been. Until that summer she’d been sorely disappointed in both of them.) Laney gave him a quick smile and winked, as if she knew a dirty little secret. Junior had a feeling that Elmer was wagging his tail.

He hadn't seen Carlo all day. Not at the beach, the dance studio, or anywhere else at *The Farms*. When he'd asked about him, Gary told Junior that Carlo had taken the day off because he had a stomach virus. Junior knew this was a lie, and he suspected Carlo had taken the day off because he was confused and depressed about the way Valerie had treated him.

When Junior reached Stella's cabin, the sun was just going down. It was a warm, quiet night, and the cicadas were beginning to sing. He walked up to Stella's door and knocked a couple of times, hoping Stella would tell him where Carlo was that night. If she refused to tell him, he was prepared to beg.

Stella opened the door partway and looked at him with pursed lips.

"Do you know where Carlo is?" he asked, pushing the door open wider.

Stella didn't have to answer. She stepped aside and he saw Carlo sitting on the edge of her bed. When Carlo saw Junior standing there, he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and sighed out loud.

A moment later, Carlo stood up and walked out to the porch where Junior was standing. All the other summer help was working in the clubhouse that evening and there was no one around. But they couldn't stand there on the porch, out in the open, and talk freely like a straight couple. So they walked around to a narrow path at the back of the cabins where it was private.

They stopped beside a large oak tree. When Junior reached up and placed his palm on Carlo's bicep, Carlo threw his arms around Junior's body and kissed him on the mouth. He kissed him with such force Junior's lips hurt his legs felt weak. While they kissed, Carlo lowered his hands and massaged Junior's ass. It was as if they'd never

argued. Junior closed his eyes and all of his worries disappeared. He was safe. Carlo was holding him and he wasn't mad anymore.

Only they were so busy kissing, they missed the sound of crackling gravel as someone approached them. By the time they saw Marvin standing on the other side of the path, it was already too late to lie about what they were doing. Junior's back was arched and Carlo's hands were already down his pants.

Marvin stopped and his eyebrows went up. He stared at Carlo's hands on Junior's ass and said, "Looks like I've been trying to get into the wrong sister's pants this summer. I just hope Junior sucks dick better than his sister." Then he grabbed his crotch and shook it up and down in Junior's direction. "I thought I saw you staring at my big dick in the shower room. All you had to do was get down on your knees and say please."

Carlo released Junior and lunged at Marvin. He punched him in the back, threw him down on the path, and then jumped on top of him. They rolled around for a minute, then got up and faced each other. Both men gritted their teeth and stared. Their faces were red, there were leaves and branches on their clothes, and they were trying to catch their breath. When they started to walk in circles, Junior stepped back and leaned into the tree. If he'd thought Carlo needed help, he would have jumped into the fight. But he knew he didn't have to help Carlo with this one.

Carlo was slick and agile. When he fought, his body moved with the same grace and rhythm as it did when he danced. Marvin, on the other hand, was clumsy and awkward. His arms flailed around in circles and he kept tripping on stones. When he tried to swing at Carlo, he missed Carlo's chin and almost fell over a rock. That's when Carlo tackled him and knocked him down again. He pinned Marvin to the path and held Marvin

in a headlock that was so tight the muscles in his arms popped through the surface of his skin.

Then he lifted his other hand and made a fist. He was about to slam him right in the jaw when he stopped and said, "You're not worth it."

He released Marvin from the headlock and stood up. He turned his back on Marvin and crossed the path, wiping sweat from his forehead. When he looked back, Marvin was brushing leaves off his pants and straightening his polo shirt.

"If you ever say one word about what you saw tonight," Carlo said, "I swear I'll break every bone in your body with my bare hands. Do you understand?"

Junior was looking back and forth at them as if he were watching a tennis match. Marvin didn't answer.

*"Do you understand?"* Carlo shouted.

Marvin jumped and nodded yes. "I won't say anything. I was never here."

"Now get out of here," Carlo said.

When Marvin was gone, Carlo walked over to Junior and rested his head on Junior's chest. Junior cradled his head in his arms and said, "Thank you."

No one had ever fought for Junior before. No one else on Earth cared enough about him to fight for him. This one act of absolute unconditional love, no matter what Carlo had said or done to hurt him the night before, made Junior feel both extraordinary and cherished. His heart raced with amusement while his eyes filled with tears. What Carlo had just done for him, without thinking about it, was better than jewelry or clothes or anything material. All those frustrating years of being alone and watching his straight friends have fun didn't matter anymore. All the bitterness of missing so much



disappeared. And Junior knew, deep in his soul, he'd been waiting for someone like Carlo all along.

## Chapter Seventeen

The week before Labor Day weekend, Junior started working on props for the talent show. Though he and Carlo were still sneaking around at night, they hadn't discussed the future or what would become of their relationship after Labor Day. When Junior thought about leaving *The Farms* at the end of summer and not seeing Carlo again, he felt a pull in his stomach that traveled all the way up to his jaw. From what he had seen so far that summer, summer friends were a rare breed. They formed close bonds that lasted for a couple of months, and when summer was over they went back to their regular lives and didn't see each other for the rest of the year.

Junior didn't care about continuing a year-round relationship with anyone else in *The Farms*. But he didn't want to end his relationship with Carlo just because summer was over and he was going back to school. This wasn't a summer fling or puppy love. He wanted to see Carlo all year long and he wanted them to build a relationship together. The only problem was that he wasn't sure how Carlo felt about this. When it came to talking about emotions and feelings, Carlo knew how to change the subject to something lighter before Junior even knew what was happening.

One afternoon a few days before Labor Day weekend, while Junior was in the clubhouse theater painting a fake rock in different shades of gray, Junior saw Helen Randolph, one of the golf widows that was always chasing after Carlo, walk over to Carlo and smile. Laney was rehearsing the song she would be singing for the talent show—*Bali High*, from *South Pacific* (a mistake). Carlo was behind the piano, looking

over sheet music for the show. Helen gazed at Carlo the same way she gazed at him when they were dancing, as if she was undressing him with her eyes. Helen's husband, Chester, was playing cards with Ben Timberlake and a few of the other men not far away. But Helen didn't seem to care about Chester. She was wearing a tight, low-cut white short-sleeved sweater that showed a line of cleavage. Her tight black skirt had a slit up to her right thigh, and she was wearing open-toe black pumps with four-inch heels. Junior held the paintbrush and watched her out of the corner of his eye. Her outfit wasn't very appropriate for a warm summer afternoon, and she had wrinkles between her freckled breasts that made him wince. He was close enough to hear what they were saying, but he pretended to be focused on painting the fake rock.

Helen went up to Carlo and squeezed his bicep a few times. She smiled and said, "This is our last weekend. I've worked something out so we can be together." Then she pulled a cigarette out of a small glittery case and waited for Carlo to light it. Junior made a face. He had a feeling that she was the type of woman who slumped around the house all day in her bra and slip.

Carlo looked up from the sheet music with furrowed eyebrows. He lit her cigarette and pressed his lips together.

"I'll see you later," she said, inhaling the tobacco deeply.

Junior rolled his eyes and dabbed a glob of gray paint into the fake rock with such force the cardboard almost caved in. At that same moment, Laney screamed, "Bali High," hitting a sour, piercing note, and Junior's shoulders jumped.

Carlo looked down at the sheet music and shook his head back and forth a couple of times.

A few minutes later, while poor Laney was still trying hard, with her mouth open as wide as it would go, to reach another high note, Junior watched Carlo get up and cross to where Ben Timberlake and the other men were playing cards. He wanted to give Ben the sheet music to *The Hustle*, the song for the grand finale at the end of the show. He walked up to the card table fast and handed the music sheets to Ben without interrupting the card game. But as he turned to walk away, Chester Randolph grabbed his wrist with one hand and pulled his wallet out of his back pocket with the other.

“Hey kid, I’m going to be playing cards all week, well into the night,” Chester said, handing Carlo cash. “I’d like you to take good care of my wife and give her a few extra dance lessons this week.” He shoved the cash into Carlo’s hand without even asking if Carlo wanted to do it.

Junior held the paintbrush in mid-air, watching Helen’s expression. She was standing behind Chester’s chair. She lowered her eyes and smiled at Carlo, and when no one was watching, she licked her lips and winked. Junior wanted to walk over to the table and paint Helen’s face three shades of gray, then paint her wrinkled cleavage purple.

Carlo looked down at the cash and frowned. Then he squared his shoulders, gave Helen a look, and handed the money back to Chester. “I’m sorry, Mr. Randolph,” he said, “But I’m busy with the talent show all week and I won’t have any time for extra dance lessons. But Stella is free this week, and I know she’d love to give Mrs. Randolph a few extra lessons.

Chester Randolph smiled and took the money back. He looked at Helen and said, “When I see Stella, I’ll ask her, doll.”

Helen Randolph put her hands on her hips and gave Carlo a nasty look. "That would be nice," she said to Chester. But she didn't look happy about taking a dance lesson from a young, beautiful woman like Stella.

Carlo left the table and went to the other side of the theater to work on a dance routine with Valerie Timberlake. On the way, he turned fast and looked into Junior's eyes. He gave Junior a quick thumbs-up gesture and winked.

Junior went back to painting the rock, pretending he hadn't been listening. He smiled and took a deep breath. He knew Carlo needed the money, and he knew it must have been difficult for Carlo to turn the cash down. But Junior also knew Carlo had about as much interest in Helen Randolph as Junior had in Valerie Timberlake. And for once, Junior felt as if he'd gotten even with all the pushy, obnoxious women like Valerie and Helen who had taken him for granted and made him feel awkward and uncomfortable.

When Laney finished singing, the piano player rolled his eyes, pressed his palm to his stomach, and forced a smile. "Let's take a break now, honey. We can't rehearse more again tomorrow."

"How was I?" Laney asked him.

The piano player nodded and looked in Junior's direction for help.

Junior looked down and continued to paint.

"You were great, sweetheart," the piano player said. "But you should rest your pretty voice now." Then he jumped up from the piano stool and bolted out of the theater.

Laney smiled and turned away from him. She didn't see him roll his eyes on his way out the door, or look up at the ceiling in frustration.

On her way out, Laney walked over to where Junior was painting the rock and said, "I'm going to do *it* with Marvin tonight. He doesn't even know yet." Then she slapped her thigh and said, "C'mon, Elmer."

Laney left so fast Junior didn't have time to say anything. He shouted, "What does Elmer think about all this?" But Laney didn't turn around. She just strutted out the door and headed back home without answering him.

So later that night, while his mother and father were out playing bridge, Junior followed Laney to Marvin's cabin. It was after nine o'clock at night. Carlo was giving dance lessons and Junior wasn't supposed to meet him until after ten. Laney was all dressed up that night, in a black dress with a square-cut bodice, black pumps, and a little silver circle pin fastened just above her left breast. Her long blond hair was full and puffy; her face was all made up with Topsy Pink lipstick and white frosted eyeshadow. Junior hadn't seen her look this good since she'd entered a small-time beauty pageant back home.

He walked behind her with his hands in his pockets, wondering what he was going to do and say. He hated getting involved this way, but he didn't want to see her make a mistake. On the one hand, this was none of his business. Laney had known about what he was doing with Carlo for a while, and she hadn't meddled in his affairs. On the other hand, Laney didn't know all the facts about Marvin. She didn't know how he'd abused and mistreated Stella without giving any thought at all to the child Stella had been carrying. He noticed Laney was carrying a purse, and he hoped she had the condoms inside the purse in case she did wind up having sex with Marvin that night.

He was going to stop her and talk to her outside the clubhouse, but he ran into Valerie Timberlake by accident. Valerie kept him there, talking about how much she was looking forward to the grand finale, when everyone would join in and dance to *The Hustle*. He smiled and listened. He rocked and bounced on the balls of his feet, waiting for her to stop talking. But Valerie talked so much Junior didn't catch up with Laney until she was outside Marvin's cabin door.

By the time he reached Marvin's front porch, Laney had already knocked on the door and was pushing it open. From where Junior was standing, he had a clear view of the inside of Marvin's cabin. When Laney opened the door, she looked into the room, stared at the bed, and gasped. She let out a high-pitched yelp and stepped back.

Junior blinked and pressed his palm to his throat.

Marvin was in bed with Helen Randolph. They were both naked, Marvin was flat on his back, and Helen was straddling his hips. Helen's hair was flying in all directions. She was riding Marvin's huge dick and there were beads of sweat dripping down her temples.

Helen and Marvin stared at Laney with their mouths open. Helen covered her sagging breasts with a sheet, and Laney slammed the door shut.

Junior ducked down under the porch so Laney wouldn't see him. He knew that if she had seen him there she would have been humiliated, even more than she already was. He thought about following her home to see if she was okay. But he knew she'd never discuss this with him. Laney was proud and stubborn this way—the same way he would have been if something like this had happened to him. Besides, he knew she'd be okay.

She had Elmer. Elmer was always there to make things right again for Laney. So he waited until Laney was out of sight, then walked over to Carlo's cabin.

\* \* \* \*

By the time Carlo came home, Junior had drifted off to sleep while waiting for him. He'd removed all his clothes and he'd fallen across the bed with two pillows beneath his stomach. He'd wanted Carlo to walk inside and see his ass high in the air. He'd planned that when Carlo opened the front door, he'd spread his legs wide and arch his back and all Carlo would have to do was mount him. His ass was already pre-lubed with plenty of Vaseline.

But when Carlo finally climbed onto his back, Junior was in a deep sleep. His eyes opened wide, his heart began to race, and he jumped.

But Carlo put his arms around him and whispered, "Don't worry. It's only me." Then he unzipped his pants and pulled them down to his thighs.

He didn't bother to take off all his clothes, which didn't surprise Junior. If possible, Junior liked to be naked during sex. He didn't care where he did it, but he liked removing his clothes first. It was sexier, more romantic. But Carlo didn't seem to care about this sort of thing. When Carlo was horny and he wanted to fuck, sometimes he'd just pull down his zipper, yank his dick out of his pants, and tell Junior to bend over. One night on the way home from Lavender Hall, Carlo was so horny he nailed Junior to a tree trunk in the woods.

Carlo didn't always concentrate on foreplay either. There were nights when all he cared about was getting off. He cared about Junior getting off, too, and he was conscientious about making sure Junior always got off with him. But they didn't always



spend hours and hours having oral sex, exploring each other's bodies until they wanted to yawn out loud, and worrying about G-spots and other technical things. Sex with Junior and Carlo was simple and concise, and sometimes rough and fast, but always synchronized with a balance of mutual respect and their own brand of passionate romance. They knew, without having to discuss it out loud, what the other one liked. Carlo knew Junior liked to be dominated and manhandled. And Junior knew Carlo liked to dominate him and pin him to the bed while he lay there and submitted to Carlo's needs.

That night, Carlo was not in the mood for any foreplay at all. After he pulled his pants down to his knees, he inserted his dick into Junior's body and fucked him. By this time, Junior had learned how to accommodate Carlo's dick without experiencing any pain at all. He knew how to relax the right muscles at the onset of entry, he knew how to position his body so Carlo wouldn't have to work too hard to get as deep into his body as he could, and he knew how to lie there and enjoy every single inch of Carlo until his eyes rolled back and his toes tingled. He'd also learned, through practice that summer, how to tighten his muscles so he could clamp down on Carlo's dick and make his hole tighter. Each time he did this, Carlo moaned and fought for breath.

Carlo fucked him hard that night. His balls and pelvis slapped against Junior's ass so much it sounded as if Carlo was slapping him with his open palm. It lasted ten or fifteen minutes; it was so ferocious the mattress almost slipped off the box spring. And when they both came together, Carlo fell onto Junior's back and bit the back of Junior's neck.

A few minutes after that, Carlo pulled out and stood up. His pants were still around his hips and his face was still red. Junior turned on his side and smiled. He could still feel Carlo inside his body.

“I’m going into the bathroom to clean myself up,” Junior said. “When I come out, I’ll wipe down your whole body with a warm wet cloth. Just get into bed and wait for me.”

When Junior returned, Carlo was flat on his back, sprawled across the mattress, and he’d removed all of his clothes. Junior had cleaned up and he held a washrag in one hand and a plastic container of sudsy hot water in the other. He climbed onto the bed and started wiping Carlo’s forehead first. As he worked his way down Carlo’s body, Carlo closed his eyes and laced his fingers behind his head.

When Junior reached Carlo’s feet and wiped between his toes, Carlo moaned and said, “This is almost as good as the sex itself. No one has ever washed my entire body like this. I feel like a king or something.”

Junior shrugged and smiled. That’s how he wanted Carlo to feel. He gently passed the warm rag between two of Carlo’s toes. “You must be tired from working all day. I like doing it.”

“I could lie here all night like this,” Carlo said. “But you’d better put your pants on. It’s getting late and your father already hates me enough. We don’t need any more trouble.” He was always worried about what Dr. Edgar thought of him, constantly searching for approval he might never receive.

Junior knew he was right. It was almost three in the morning. When he was with Carlo, the time seemed to disappear. He took the container of water and the wet rag back

into the bathroom and rinsed them out. Then he went back to the main room and put on his clothes while Carlo sat up and watched.

Carlo followed him out the door and onto the front porch. It was dark outside, there was no moon and all the other cabins were quiet. Carlo was still naked, but it was so dark they didn't think anyone could see them. Carlo grabbed Junior's arm at the top step and kissed him on the mouth. Junior put one hand on Carlo's shoulder and grabbed his flaccid dick with the other.

When they stopped kissing and Junior released his dick, Carlo bucked his hips a few times and said, "Kiss my dick goodnight, too."

"Are you serious?"

"C'mon," Carlo said. His dick was swinging. "Just a quick kiss goodnight."

Junior smiled and reached for Carlo's balls. Though Carlo wasn't big on foreplay, he loved it when Carlo did things like this. He cupped Carlo's genitals in his palm, lifted them up, and leaned forward. He planted a long, wet kiss in the middle of Carlo's shaft and took a quick breath.

"Goodnight," he said. "I'll see you tomorrow." Then he jogged down the steps and headed toward the path that led back to the main club house.

But when he passed Marvin's cabin, Helen Randolph was outside on the porch puffing away on a cigarette. She inhaled, released a stream of smoke through her nostrils, and said, "My, I never would have guessed. So you're the one who has been keeping *my* Carlo busy all summer. I was wondering why he didn't have time for anything else."

Evidently, Helen had just seen them together on Carlo's porch. Junior was hoping she'd seen everything, too. Helen's voice had a nasty edge that trailed along that thin line

of condescension that privileged women like her often used while speaking to their help. It was her unwarranted sense of entitlement that made Junior clench his fists and give her a sharp look. As far as he was concerned, Helen was nothing more than a cheating bitch who had seen better days.

Junior stopped walking and lifted his chin. He looked into her small brown eyes and said, “*Your* Carlo?” No one had informed him that Carlo belonged to Helen. For the first time, Junior felt as if he had the upper hand. He wanted Helen to know she was way out of her league and this time there was nothing she could do to compete with him. Before Carlo had entered his life, he would have been mortified if someone had seen him with a man that way. But he felt a strange sense of pride pass through his entire body, and he didn’t care what Helen Randolph thought about him.

She laughed in his face. Helen had been around the block and a kid like Junior wasn’t going to intimidate her. “How much is Carlo charging *you* for dance lessons?”

Junior remained calm. After that nasty comment, he decided to bury her. So he smiled and lifted his right eyebrow. “Not a dime,” he said. “As a matter of fact, Carlo’s been paying my way all summer. He insists.” This was true. They didn’t go out often in public, but the few times they had gone out to small diners, Carlo had always insisted on paying. And he was always asking Junior if he needed any extra cash. Because he was older and he knew Junior wasn’t working, he said he felt protective and didn’t like to think about Junior walking around without cash in his pocket.

Helen stopped laughing and her face fell. Suddenly, she looked ten years older. “Well, I guess Carlo isn’t the *man* I thought he was.” Her voice went deep; she flicked the cigarette over the rail like the gutter bitch that she was.

Junior smiled. "You'll never know what kind of man Carlo is." Then he turned his back on her, lifted his chin, and left her on Marvin's porch with her mouth half open and one strap hanging off her shoulder.

## Chapter Eighteen

In the morning, Junior and his family went to the clubhouse for breakfast. It was the end of the season and Junior's mother wanted to take advantage of all the amenities during their last few days at *The Farms*. They sat a large round table overlooking the golf course, with Ben and Valerie Timberlake. Valerie talked about the talent show and Laney talked about how much she'd been rehearsing her song to get it perfect. Junior just sat and listened, poking a grapefruit around on his plate with his fork.

While the waitress was pouring Ben and Dr. Edgar more coffee, Ben shook his head and frowned. "Things are changing so fast," Ben said. "You go out of your way to treat people right, and you just get stabbed in the back. People just aren't the same anymore." He spoke with a defeated tone and he kept shaking his head.

"What's wrong, Ben?" Dr. Edgar asked.

"Someone on my staff is a thief," Ben said, lighting a cigarette.

"Someone, ah, stole Chester Randolph's wallet," Valerie said, with an animated voice. "He had it while he was playing cards last night, and this morning it was gone." She was leaning forward on her elbows, smiling as if she were enjoying the story a little too much.

"Helen Randolph said she saw the dance instructor, Carlo, walking around where they were playing cards," Ben said. "She said it was about two in the morning and he wasn't doing anything special. She said she thought it was odd the way he was just lurking around. Those were Helen's exact words."

Junior sat up and listened. He'd seen Helen Randolph outside Marvin's cabin at three in the morning. She hadn't been anywhere near the room where the men had been playing cards at two in the morning. There was no way she could have seen Carlo there, because she'd seen Carlo kissing Junior goodnight.

Ben continued, "So we asked Carlo where he was last night, and if there was anyone with him to back up the story. He said he was home alone, reading a book, and there was no one with him."

Valerie laughed. "Trust me, Carlo doesn't even read road signs while he's driving. I'll bet the only thing there is to read in his cabin is what's on the back of his toothpaste tube." She made Carlo sound like an illiterate fool, and she smiled the entire time.

At first, Laney had been listening to the conversation with a smile on her face; she loved intriguing gossip. But when she heard they were trying to blame the theft on Carlo, she gave Junior a look and grabbed her mother's arm.

"Mom," Laney said. "I want to go check a few of my dresses now for the talent show. I want to try them on, walk out on stage, and you tell me which dress looks best from a distance." Laney was trying to get her mother away from the table because she knew Junior had probably been with Carlo the night before.

"Do we have to go right now?" Junior's mother asked.

"Please," Laney said. "I'm really worried about getting this dress right."

Junior's mother sighed and rose from the table. Then she and Laney left the club house. On the way out, Laney looked at Junior and shrugged her shoulders. No one else saw her do this. Junior smiled and nodded, thanking her for taking their mother away so he could defend Carlo to his Ben and his father.

When they were gone, Junior grabbed Valerie's arm. "There's no way Carlo could have stolen that wallet." He knew Carlo couldn't have stolen the wallet because he'd been with Carlo almost all night. He didn't want to admit this because they would have asked him why he was with Carlo, yet he had to say something to support Carlo. He couldn't allow Carlo to take the blame because vicious Helen Randolph wanted to get even with Carlo for rejecting her and sleeping with Junior instead.

"This isn't the first wallet that's been stolen this summer," Valerie said. "There have been several other wallets missing and we've been trying to figure out who is doing it. It only stands to reason that if Carlo was lurking around the card game last night and a wallet was stolen, Carlo is the one who did it."

Junior knew he had to make them believe Carlo was innocent. But someone called Ben away from the table just as he was about to speak.

When Ben left, Junior rose from his seat and sat down next to his father on the other side of the table. Dr. Edgar was still giving Junior the cold shoulder for lying to him about Stella and the money and his unusual friendship with Carlo.

"Dad, Carlo couldn't have taken the wallet," Junior said. "Helen Randolph is lying. I know she is. She couldn't have seen Carlo last night lurking around the card game. You have to trust me, Dad. Please don't ask me to explain how I know this." He was begging now, trying to spare his father the truth, because he knew his father would figure out that he and Carlo were lovers.

"Sorry, Junior," Dr. Edgar said. "There's something about that guy I just don't trust." His tone was abrupt and definite. He refused to look into Junior's eyes.



Then Ben returned to the table and Junior looked up at him. “Carlo didn’t do it,” he said. “It could have been that old couple. The old lady dropped her purse one day and when I helped her pick up the contents, I saw more than a few men’s wallets. I thought it was strange at the time, but it was none of my business.”

“Myrtle and Hector?” Ben said, as if Junior had just lost his mind. “They’re the sweetest little old couple at *The Farms*. They pay for everything in cash.”

Dr. Edgar slammed his coffee cup against the saucer. “Junior, you can’t say vile things like that about nice, respectable people like Myrtle and Hector.” Then he shook his head. “I don’t know what’s wrong with you. I don’t know who you are anymore. I just glad your mother isn’t here to listen to this nonsense.”

“I saw the wallets myself,” Junior said. “I swear on my life. And Myrtle and Hector were both very nervous and couldn’t get away from me fast enough.”

“Helen Randolph saw Carlo in the room where the wallet was stolen,” Ben said, “and Carlo can’t prove where he was last night. That’s all I need to know.” He pointed to Valerie and said, “Let’s go, kid. You’ll get your first lesson in firing an employee for stealing.”

Junior knew he didn’t have a choice. He had to explain, in detail, and he was willing to make this sacrifice for Carlo. “Mr. Timberlake,” Junior said, with a pleading tone, “I know Carlo wasn’t in the room where the wallet was stolen last night. Helen Randolph is lying and she’s just trying to make everyone think Carlo took the wallet. I know this because Carlo wasn’t alone in his cabin reading last night. He was with me at two o’clock. I spent most of the night with him and I didn’t leave his cabin until three

o'clock this morning." He wanted to mention he'd seen Helen smoking a cigarette outside Marvin's cabin, but he didn't want to stoop to Helen Randolph's level of deceit.

"*You* spent the night in Carlo's cabin?" Ben asked. His eyebrows went up and his jaw dropped.

Junior nodded yes, without saying another word. He figured it was none of Ben's business why he'd been there, and Ben could draw his own conclusions.

"Ah well," Ben said. He looked at Valerie. She was sitting on the edge of her seat and her mouth was half open.

"Why would you spend the night in Carlo's cabin?" Valerie asked.

Junior rolled his eyes. "We were playing cards, Valerie." He said this with a sarcastic tone, wishing he could just tell her he was sleeping with Carlo.

"That's enough, Junior," Dr. Edgar said.

Then Dr. Edgar took a quick breath and lowered his eyes. Ben and Valerie looked out the window. They didn't ask again why Junior was with Carlo, or what Junior had been doing with Carlo. But Junior could see by the expression on his father's face that his father didn't need a detailed explanation. It was the same expression he'd seen on his father's face when his father had seen him look into Carlo's eyes and grab Carlo's arm in Stella's cabin. He knew his father suspected he and Carlo had been lovers for some time. And all this just confirmed his father's suspicions.

\* \* \* \*

By noon, Junior found his father sitting alone in a deck chair on a small veranda at the back of the clubhouse facing the lake. Junior couldn't take the silent treatment anymore and he was tired of hiding who he was. But most of all, he was heartbroken that

his father had lost all trust and faith in him. Though he was in love with Carlo, he was still the same person he'd always been.

He walked up to the chair and looked down at his father. He squared his shoulders and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry for sneaking around and I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Stella and why I needed the money. I thought I was doing the right thing by trying to protect Stella. It was the kind of thing you don't talk about in detail."

Dr. Edgar looked up at him. His stare was blank and his lips were pressed together.

"But I'm not sorry about Carlo," Junior said. "He's a good man. I've always tried so hard to be what you wanted me to be. I've always tried to please you and make you proud of me. My entire life has been spent looking to you for approval, and now it's killing me. I'm never going to be with a girl like Valerie Timberlake, or any other girl. No matter how much you wish and hope, no matter how much you ignore me and give me the cold shoulder, that's just not who I am. But I'm still your son, and you're still my father, and you can't ignore me for the rest of my life. You can't pretend I'm not here."

Without actually saying the words aloud, Junior was telling his father he was gay and that he'd been seeing Carlo all summer.

Dr. Timberlake didn't say a word. But his bottom lip began to quiver and he clenched the arms of the chair.

"I've never done anything wrong," Junior said, with a tremble in his voice and tears forming in the corners of his eyes. "If you love me, you'll understand that I didn't choose to be who I am and I didn't do it to hurt you. I love you, Dad, and I can apologize for what I did with Stella and the money. But I can't apologize for who I am."

Then he left his father staring out at the lake. He walked back to Carlo's cabin and waited for Carlo to return. Junior had no idea what Ben Timberlake was going to do to Carlo now that Junior had given Carlo a solid alibi. Junior was hoping he'd done the right thing by telling the truth.

When Carlo finally did arrive, Junior was on Carlo's bed staring at the ceiling and thinking about the future.

"This has been a long day," Carlo said. "They caught up with the old couple, Myrtle and Hector, and the police did a background check on them. It turns out those two are wanted in several different states for stealing wallets and other things. They have a long list of criminal offenses, and they've made a lot of money. The police went through Myrtle's purse and found Chester Randolph's wallet, along with a few others they've stolen this summer."

Junior jumped up and put his arms around Carlo's shoulders. "Then you're okay. I was worried Ben wouldn't believe me."

Carlo stepped back. "Ben fired me," Carlo said.

Junior closed his eyes and inhaled. "They fired you because of me, didn't they? They fired you because I said I spent the night with you."

"When Helen Randolph heard that Myrtle and Hector stole Chester's wallet, she told Ben Timberlake she'd seen us kissing a few times in public places."

"But she only saw us once," Junior said. "Last night outside the cabin...we've never kissed anywhere in public."

"She's a fucking liar."

"So they fired you because we were kissing?" Junior asked. "Is that legal?"

“Ben said he was letting me go because he didn’t like my attitude,” Carlo said. “He didn’t mention anything about firing me for kissing you. But I know what he was thinking. He just looked at me with disgust in his eyes.”

Junior turned and walked to the window. “So I did it all for nothing, and I still got you fired anyway. What a colossal waste of time, and what a fucking fool I’ve been. I should have just kept on lying, pretending to be someone I’m not. All that talk about being authentic is nothing but a joke. Now you’re fired and my father is devastated for nothing.”

Carlo walked to where Junior was standing and he grabbed his shoulders. “You didn’t do this for nothing,” he said. “You did this for me. And no one has ever done anything for me that was so honest and so unselfish.”

Then he put his arms around Junior and kissed him on the mouth. A minute later, he pulled him to the bed and unfastened his pants. They made love again, with the same intensity as always. When it was over, Junior walked back to his parents’ house feeling even more disconnected than he had been before they’d made love. Carlo was leaving *The Farms* for good, and Junior wasn’t sure how he’d ever learn to live without him.

When he reached the house, he didn’t walk into the main entrance. He overheard his mother and father talking with Laney in the living room and he didn’t feel like confronting them. So he crossed to the rear of the deck, where he could slip into the house through a sliding glass door and sneak up the back steps to his bedroom without being seen.

But on the way, he overheard something peculiar. He stopped near an open window and listened. Junior heard Dr. Edgar tell his family that Ben Timberlake had just

called to tell him Marvin had been attacked in the woods the night before by some kind of wild animal. Ben said Marvin was still hysterical and he was claiming he'd been attacked by a large black dog, with long ears that pointed up and a long bushy tail.

"A dog?" Junior's mother asked. "That sounds awfully strange."

"Ben thinks it was really a bear," Dr. Edgar said. "He thinks Marvin is too hysterical right now to know this. Ben says there are black bears all over these woods. And a dog would never have attacked Marvin this way."

Junior leaned forward and looked through the window. His father was standing next to a table where the telephone was. His mother was sitting on the sofa with her legs crossed. Laney was sitting beside the fireplace in wing chair, looking down at the empty space beside her, smiling at Elmer. She didn't seem upset in the least that Marvin had been attacked.

"Is the poor boy hurt badly?" Junior's mother asked. She was so clueless about everything that had happened that summer Junior almost felt sorry for her.

Dr. Edgar frowned and said, "Well, the dog didn't leave a scratch on Marvin's face, and most of his body is fine."

Junior's mother uncrossed her legs and leaned forward. "I don't understand."

Dr. Edgar pointed to his crotch and winced. "Ben said it wasn't pretty."

Junior's mother covered her mouth with her palm and gasped.

Junior blinked and looked at Laney.

Laney smoothed out her white tennis skirt and fluffed her hair. She stood up from the chair, and said, "Elmer and I are going for a walk before dinner." Then she practically skipped out of the living room with a huge jack-o'-lantern smile on her face.

## Chapter Nineteen

On the afternoon of the talent show, Junior was up in his third-floor bedroom staring at the ceiling. Laney and his mother had gone out and his father was downstairs reading. Junior hadn't been with Carlo since they'd made love in Carlo's cabin the day Carlo had been fired. He hadn't seen Carlo or spoken with him, and he didn't even know when he was leaving. He had a sinking feeling in his stomach that he'd never see Carlo again. Junior's entire body ached when it occurred to him that he'd never hold him, taste him, smell him, or hear his smooth deep voice. In a day, Junior would wind up going back to his real life without ever knowing what had happened to Carlo.

But more than all this, he felt a void he couldn't even describe. It was as if he'd lost a deep part of his very being that he didn't even know he'd had.

It was a warm, breezy afternoon. The bedroom window was open and Junior was trying to figure out a way to see Carlo before Carlo left *The Farms* and went back to his life in Newark. He was wondering if it was possible to sneak out of the house without being seen when he heard a car pull into the gravel driveway. The tires crunched, the car skidded to a halt, and a car door slammed. Junior got out of bed and moved to the open window. When he looked down, he saw Carlo walking up the deck steps toward the front door. Carlo was wearing tight black pants, a tight black T-shirt, and a shiny black leather jacket. His eyes were covered with dark glasses and his lips were pressed together. He looked and walked as if he was already back home in Newark and he'd left his summer life behind.

There was a knock on the door. Junior put on a pair of sweatpants, a T-shirt, and sneakers, then jogged downstairs to the front door. When he reached the entrance hall, he stopped short and leaned into a wall. His father had reached the front door first and he was standing face to face with Carlo.

“What can I do for you?” Dr. Edgar asked. His voice was deep and stern. Though his back was to Junior, Junior knew he was frowning.

“I’m going today,” Carlo said, removing his dark glasses, “and I wanted to explain...”

“You don’t have to explain anything to me,” Dr. Edgar said. “I know what you’re all about. You’re just as slick on the outside as you are on the inside. You get a woman in trouble and instead of taking responsibility for what you did you take the easy way out and almost get her killed. Then you poison my son with your loose morals and confuse him so much he doesn’t even know who he is anymore. You’re trouble.”

Junior closed his eyes and bit his lip.

“You’re wrong. Junior does know who he is,” Carlo said. His voice was calm and polite. “Junior is smart, and good, and stronger than you think, and I’d never do anything in the world to hurt him.”

Junior’s eyes grew wide, and his heart skipped a beat. No one had ever stood up to Junior’s father this way.

“Don’t you tell me about my son, and don’t tell me what to think,” Dr. Edgar said. “You’re nothing but a passing phase for Junior. You’re a summer *friend* who was never meant to be taken seriously.”



Junior's heart began to race. His father made Carlo sound like Elmer, and Carlo was far from a passing phase. Carlo was real, not invisible. His father couldn't pretend Carlo wasn't there. Carlo was the one thing that represented the man that Junior wanted to become. Junior thought about running up to his father to defend Carlo, but he didn't want to embarrass Carlo anymore than his father already had. If he had done or said something, it only would have made the situation worse and there would have been a scene. And though Junior knew he was gay, he still hadn't fully accepted the magnitude of it all. Discussing this openly with his father and the man he was in love with just wasn't something he was ready to do yet.

So Junior waited. He could see Carlo through the screen door, but Carlo couldn't see him. Carlo stared down at the floor and shook his head. He didn't raise his voice and he didn't go back at Dr. Edgar with any mean comments.

"I'm sorry I bothered you, Dr. Edgar," Carlo said. Then he turned fast and jogged back to his car.

\* \* \* \*

By the time Junior's father closed the front door, Junior was out the back door and on his way to Carlo's cabin. He took shortcuts and ran through the woods. He bypassed the clubhouse and crossed the golf course. He was hoping Carlo would go back to his cabin one last time. He just wanted one last chance to see him before he left for good.

The Riviera was parked on the road below Carlo's cabin. Carlo walked back to the car, carrying two large suitcases. When he saw Junior approach the car, he stopped for a moment and just stared. A second later, he squared his shoulders and strutted down to meet him.

When he reached the car, he pulled a small brown bag out of one suitcase and tossed the suitcases into the back seat. He walked over to where Junior was leaning against the car and smiled.

He handed the bag to Junior and said, "Here, I want you to have this. I wasn't sure I'd see you again. I was going to tell Stella to give it to you."

"What is it?"

"It's half the money from the dance routine we did on Leather Night."

Junior stepped back and lifted his hands. "Oh no," he said. "I want you to keep it. Without you in the lead, I never would have been able to pull that off."

Carlo tried to force it on him, but Junior shook his head and refused. "Are you sure?" Carlo asked.

"I'm sure."

He tossed the bag of money into the car and smiled. "Good luck in school this fall," he said.

"This place isn't going to be the same without you," Junior said. He was smiling, trying hard to put up a good front so Carlo wouldn't see that he was crumbling inside.

Carlo laughed. "Valerie Timberlake will keep you busy until you go home," he said.

Junior laughed and shook his head, then took a quick breath and rested his cheek on Carlo's chest. He put his hands on Carlo's shoulders and rubbed them a few times. But he didn't cling. He was afraid if he did cling he'd never let go.

Carlo looked up at the sky and sighed. "No regrets, Junior."

“No regrets,” Junior said. He knew this was the end, and there was nothing he could do to change things.

Carlo reached forward with both hands. He placed his palms just below Junior’s jaw and lifted Junior’s head so Junior could face him. He cradled Junior’s head for a second, then kissed Junior on the lips. When Carlo inserted his tongue into Junior’s mouth, a single tear slid down Junior’s right cheek and landed on Carlo’s finger.

Then Carlo stepped back and lifted his chin. He smiled and said, “Take care.”

Junior stood behind the car and watched Carlo pull away. Carlo hit the gas hard and the Riviera fishtailed a few times. As he sped down the crooked gravel road that led to the main road, a cloud of dust mushroomed around the car until Junior couldn’t see anything but a faint, disjointed image rolling into the distance.

When the dust finally settled, Junior walked back to the house. He went up to his room and fell asleep for the next two hours. At six, Laney knocked on his bedroom door and he told her to come inside. He sat up on the bed and Laney sat down next to him.

They sat there in silence for a few minutes, until Laney finally said, “Elmer told me what happened earlier this afternoon.” Then she put her arm around Junior and hugged him without saying a word.

Junior frowned. He knew Laney had gone out with his mother that afternoon to buy more Topsy Pink lipstick. Laney wanted another tube before she went back home. But he also knew Laney and his mother had missed the scene with Carlo and his father at the front door.

“Why didn’t Elmer go with you to the store today?” Junior asked. He was curious. Elmer went everywhere with them.

“Mom said we were in a hurry and she didn’t want to deal with Elmer this afternoon,” Laney said, laughing. “So I asked Elmer to stay home, and he wasn’t insulted at all.” She took a deep breath and sighed. “But he heard what happened when Carlo showed up and he told me all about it. He was in the living room and he couldn’t help hearing. He wasn’t eavesdropping.”

Junior smiled. “Tell Elmer not to worry about it,” he said. He knew Laney meant well, and he knew she was genuinely concerned about how he was feeling now that Carlo was gone. Besides, there was no use trying to make sense of Elmer by then. Junior figured Laney was either guessing what had happened, or she’d overheard his mother and father talking about Carlo’s visit.

“Can I do anything?” Laney asked, hugging him tighter.

He rested his head on his sister’s shoulder and said, “I’ll be okay.”

## Chapter Twenty

The talent show ended with Valerie Timberlake singing a solo version of *Auld Lang Syne*. It was painful to hear. Her voice had such a high-pitched nasal quality it sounded as if she were pinching her nose. Her black fuzzy hair was parted in the middle and pulled back with two butterfly combs. She wore red lipstick and large gold hoop earrings. Instead of wearing one of her usual blousy, fluffy peasant dresses, she wore a black jumper over a tailored white blouse. The jumper stopped mid-calf, and there were black patent leather Mary Janes on her feet. When she opened her mouth to sing, her head went back and her arms flew out in a melodramatic dramatic gesture. She was singing this song as a heartfelt symbolic gesture to all the people at *The Farms* who had formed strong summer friendships and wouldn't see each other again for a while. She was trying to milk the moment for all it was worth.

Junior was not impressed and he felt disconnected from everyone in the room. He sat back in his seat with his arms folded across his chest and tightened his lips. Laney was somewhere backstage with Elmer and the rest of the people who had performed in the talent show. Though Laney had missed all the high notes in her song, the audience had applauded for her and his mother and father had shared proud, approving nods when she was finished. The rest of the show had been just as lame and mediocre. Normally, Junior wouldn't have enjoyed a show like this under any circumstances. He would rather have been over at Lavender Hall, dancing to the latest music and mingling with people who

wore the newest fashion trends. But he didn't have a choice. His father was already furious with him and he didn't want to make things worse by not going to the talent show.

When Valerie Timberlake finally stopped singing and introduced the professional dancers who would be starting off the grand finale, his heart sank. When *The Hustle* started to play, and Stella and the other dancers bounced onto the stage, he clenched his fists under his arms. Carlo should have been up there; he was the best dancer in the entire place. And they shouldn't have been playing *The Hustle*. Valerie should have listened to Carlo's ideas. The show would have been much better.

Junior watched his mother and father. They were sitting up in their seats, bobbing and smiling to the beat. His mother was clapping her hands against the beat of the music and his father was slapping his knee with awkward strokes. Junior looked around the room. They were all smiling. The middle-aged couples sitting at the other tables were just as animated as his mother and father. Even Helen Randolph was tapping her shoe and rocking her shoulders. It looked as if she couldn't wait to jump up out of her seat and start doing *The Hustle* line dance, *The Bus Stop*. Junior wondered what he was missing. Evidently, it didn't take much to impress a crowd of upper-middle-class straight people who didn't get out very often.

The only other person in the room who had the same defeated expression on his face as Junior was Gary, the waiter. Gary was leaning against a door jam with a frown on his face and his hands buried in his pockets. When he noticed Junior was staring at him, he rolled his eyes and made a weird face.

Junior and his family were sitting at a small table along the wall. His mother and father were on the outside of the table and he was wedged into a dark corner between the

wall and a thick stone column. The longer *The Hustle* played, the deeper Junior sank into his shoulders and pretended to be invisible. This was even more tasteless than the red, white, and blue canvas luggage his mother had given him as a graduation gift for college.

Then Marvin passed by their table. He was wearing a dark suit, a white shirt, and a yellow tie. He walked slowly, with a slight limp, and his head was bowed. Evidently, his crotch was still hurting from the animal attack.

When Marvin passed, Dr. Edgar jumped up from his seat and reached for Marvin's arm. Dr. Edgar pulled a check out of his pocket and said, "I wanted to give you this, to help out in school this fall." Then he slapped him on the back and smiled.

Junior closed his eyes and shook his head, wondering how his father could be such a poor judge of character. If there was anyone who did not deserve a pat on the back or a check, it was Marvin.

At first, Marvin looked stunned. He took the check from Dr. Edgar, stared at it for a moment, then smiled. "Wow, Dr. Edgar," he said. "Thanks. I thought that after you found out about Stella and me you wouldn't want anything to do with me. It's not like I meant to get her in trouble or anything." He jiggled the check and said, "This will come in handy next year."

"What about you and Stella?" Dr. Edgar asked. His face tightened and his eyebrows furrowed.

"I thought Junior told you everything," Marvin said, still holding the check in midair. "You know how these things are. These girls like Stella are always getting themselves into trouble." He winked and fake-punched Dr. Edgar in the arm. "No harm done."

“Junior never said a word. I knew nothing about this.” Then he yanked the check out of Marvin’s hand, looked at him with absolute disgust, and went back to his seat.

When Dr. Edgar sat down, he gave Junior a look. His head was tilted to the side and it was hard to tell whether he was confused or mad.

Junior didn’t care. He just shrugged his shoulders and said, “I asked you to trust me. Carlo had nothing to do with Stella getting into trouble. Carlo only said he was responsible for her because Marvin wanted nothing to do with her.”

Before Dr. Edgar had a chance to respond, someone stepped up and stood beside his chair. When Junior looked up, he saw Carlo standing next to his father. Carlo’s shoulders were back and his head was up high.

Junior sat up and blinked. The last person he’d expected to see that night was Carlo. He’d been imagining him back in Newark, going out to a nightclub somewhere in New Jersey, where there would be tons of good-looking young guys fawning all over him.

“*Nobody* puts Junior in the corner,” Carlo said. Then he reached forward.

When Carlo grabbed Junior’s hand, he pulled him up off his chair and out of the corner. Junior didn’t resist. He stepped around his father’s chair and stood next to Carlo without releasing Carlo’s hand.

Dr. Edgar looked around the room to see if anyone else was watching, then tried to stand up so he could stop them.

But Junior’s mother grabbed Dr. Edgar’s arm and said, “Maxwell, leave them alone. We can’t run his life. He’s a man now.” Then she gave her husband a serious look that said she wasn’t joking around. She only called him Maxwell when she was mad about something. “I’ve been watching everything this summer and I haven’t said a word



to upset you. But I'm not going to sit back quietly this time and watch you drive my son away. We're going to get to know Carlo better, Maxwell." Then she nodded at Carlo and said, "He looks like a decent young man."

Carlo smiled at her.

Dr. Edgar sank into his seat and slumped forward. He knew she was serious.

While Valerie and Ben Timberlake were forming a line to do *The Bus Stop*, stumbling over their large flat feet, Carlo tugged on Junior's hand and pulled him out of the room.

When they were outside the clubhouse heading toward Carlo's car, Junior asked, "Where are we going?" Carlo was walking so fast he had to jog to keep up.

"Over to Lavender Hall where we belong," he said, with his deepest, proudest voice. "They're having their own end-of-summer celebration over there tonight and we're not going to miss it. The owner hired the Village People to appear and the show is just about to begin."

"The *Village People*?"

"He has connections in New York," Carlo said. "We have to move fast."

Carlo opened the door for him. Junior noticed the keys were in the ignition and the engine was running. When Junior sat down, Carlo closed the door and jogged to the driver's side. He sat behind the steering wheel and slipped the car into gear. He reached for Junior's hand and hit the gas. The tires screeched and the car jerked forward. As they swerved down the clubhouse driveway with the back end of the big car sliding to the right, Carlo lifted Junior's hand to his lips and kissed him just below his pinkie finger.

Junior closed his eyes and smiled. This was a novelty. Instead of watching an image disappear in a cloud of dust, this time he was actually part of the image that was disappearing. And he couldn't have asked for anything more than that.

THE END