



The Fire Inside  
By Julia Talbot

Chapter One

Goddamn it, Nick hated it when he was out on a job and it started fucking raining. All that moisture made the roads slick as snot, all of the oil and grit beading up like little pond scum monsters, out to get his ass. The car slid around the corner and into the alley like a first baseman sliding into third, all steam with a lot of weight behind it.

The tinted window slid down at the barest touch of his finger, and Nick checked his target. Fucking perfect. All he had to do was pull the trigger. The target was in plain sight, and nothing blocked his aim. With any luck, everyone would think the guy was just a victim of a gang bang drive by.

Just as he took a deep breath and let half of it out, his finger starting to squeeze the trigger, something hit the hood of his car. Hard.

“Shit!”

Nick stared through the rain-dappled windshield, right into scared eyes staring back at him.

“Help me, please?” the kid shouted, banging his hands on the hood again. “They’re gonna get me.”

Fuck a duck. Nick didn’t know who the kid was, and he didn’t give two shits who “they” were. All he knew was that the kid’s banging and screaming had sent his target skittering into the dark beyond the alley like a giant cockroach.

Goddamn.

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t kick your ass, kid,” Nick growled through the open window.

“Because I need your help!” the kid replied, slip-sliding around to the window and reaching through to touch his arm.

The touch burned like fire. Literally. Nick felt blisters rise on his skin, the edge of his shirt sleeve smoking.

“Jesus!” He jerked his arm away from the hot touch, sticking it out to let the rain fall on it. “Look, I’ll give you a ride, okay? Just don’t touch me again.”

He got a panicky idiot look from big brown eyes before the kid nodded and slipped around to the passenger side. The kid buckled up and grabbed the ‘oh shit’ handle. “Can

we go? Now?”

Nick spent a second studying the kid, who wasn't as young as he'd thought originally. It was the shock of messy brown hair and big almost black eyes that made the guy look like an underage anime character. Close up, though, the guy had to be in his mid-twenties, and hard up, from his too-skinny, rough clothes look.

“Please? Go!”

Nick saw the two men pop out of the back of the Chinese restaurant that dominated the alley just in time. Throwing the car into reverse, he squealed away, the noise making a great harmony with the pop-pop-pop of two handguns going off. Right at them.

“Get out of here,” he said through gritted teeth as he sent the car into a spin so he could hurtle down the road nose first. “Sure. I guess I got nothing better to do...”

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Ty watched Nick drive. How he knew Nick's name was pretty much a mystery, but he knew it. Sometimes it was like that. Ty knew shit.

He shivered, curling in on himself, his skin breaking out in goose bumps.

Nick's eyes flashed at him in a sideways glance, little slices of light blue in the darkness. “You okay, kid?”

“Huh? Oh. Yeah. Yeah, Nick. I'm good.”

The car skidded into a sharp swerve, coming to a shuddering halt on the side of the road. Nick turned on him, leaning into his space.

“How do you know my Goddamned name?”

“Huh?” Ty asked again, the whiplash action leaving him stunned and blinky.

“I asked how you knew my name.” Nick wasn't a big guy, but he had hard, strong hands. One of them twisted up the front of Ty's t-shirt, hauling him as far across the seat as the seat belt would allow.

“I just do?” What else could he say? It was the truth.

“Bullshit!” Nick snarled. “You ruined my set up and you know my fucking name. Who are you working for?” Hands moving to Ty's shoulders, Nick shook him like a pit bull with a bone, getting right in his face. Those blue eyes had turned almost white.

“I’m not working for anyone! I’m between jobs.” There was no shame in being unemployed. Not in this day and age. A lot of people didn’t have jobs.

“You little fuck. If you’re lying to me...”

God, he was tired. So tired. He’d used up most of his reserves to stay one step ahead of the hunters. Ty could feel it, spreading deep into the core of his belly, the coldness that made his teeth chatter.

He used what little he had left in a desperate rush, sending a shaft of pure heat right to the place Nick touched him.

“I’m not working for anyone,” he whispered, even as Nick yelped and let him go. “Please don’t hurt me.”

Ty barely got the last word out before he slumped back in his seat, dropping off into a deep, healing sleep.

## Chapter Two

Nick paced back and forth across the floor of his borrowed room, the old floorboards squeaking on every second pass.

Every so often he cast a baleful eye on the kid who slept like the dead on his old beanbag chair. The guy hadn't woke up, not even when Nick had poked at him and cussed hard. And that skin had been like ice, cold and clammy, almost blue.

Jesus fucking Christ.

He'd thought about dumping the kid somewhere, but then he figured he'd never find out how the little shit knew his name, or what else he might know.

It had been at least five hours, though, and Nick was ready to get the kid up and out of his place.

Sighing, he paced back to stand next to the kid's feet, reaching out with his bare toes to poke at the kid's leg.

Brown eyes opened wide, staring at him for a long moment before too-long lashes fell back to rest on the thin cheeks.

"My name is Ty," the kid said. "Not kid."

"Yay for you. Who sent you? Why did you sabotage me?" His hands clenched into fists, aching to just tear the guy up.

"I told you, no one, and I didn't. You were there. You helped me." Ty sat up, pushing a heavy fringe of hair out of his face. "You're not going to believe me, are you?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure what to believe." Damn it, the whole wanting to beat the kid bloody had been a lot easier when Ty was asleep. "I'm too fucking old for this shit."

"Oh, bull. You're what? Twenty-nine?"

Nick had just turned twenty-nine the previous week. He stared hard at Ty, hands on his hips to keep from reaching down and doing some strangling. "You know an awful lot about me..."

"Uh-huh. I know you like homemade lasagna and cherry vanilla ice cream, that you did your first job when you were twenty, and that you used to go to a place called Rocco's Pizza when you were five and your dad would buy you cannoli. Now, who would know all that, *and* tell me all of it if I was just out to mess up your work?" Ty looked around, eyebrows drawing together. "Where are we?"

“You tell me,” he growled through clenched teeth. “You know everything.” Fucking Christ. Who would know that much about him? Most of it wasn’t exactly a secret, but Rocco’s pizza was an entire coast away. And his dad had died when he was six.

“No. I mean, I know you... Somehow.” The frown went deeper. “I... Wow. I’m hungry.” Ty’s stomach growled, emphasizing the point.

“Well, I’m not going to pay to feed you, man.” There was no way. And the kitchen in this place had no power.

“I have, um...” Ty sat up, digging in his pockets. There were a lot of pockets in the baggy cargo shorts, too. “I have twenty-eight bucks. Will that get us a pizza?”

“Hell, that will give us a feast.” His mouth watered. They could go to Allies and get subs, chips and some cookies.

“Cool!” Bouncing made Ty look about fifteen again, just like he had when Nick first spotted him.

“How old are you?” he asked, feeling like the worst kind of weirdo.

“Twenty-three. Told you I wasn’t much younger than you.”

No way. No *way* was this guy old enough to drink and vote and shit. Weird.

“Well, we might even swing a beer, then.” Here he was, pondering going out to eat with this freak that he’d picked up on the street.

“I’m not a freak. That’s not very nice.”

Nick’s mouth opened, then snapped closed. He closed his eyes. Okay. Okay, this was the city of weirdness, right? Everyone had something going on, including him. So why shouldn’t Ty be a mind reader or something? Why not?

“I’m not. I just... It’s like you’re a radio tower with me. It’s kinda scary.” Those eyes met his, just huge, like a cartoon puppy that wanted to go home or have a treat or something.

“Scary isn’t even the word. Come on, man. Let’s get some food.”

This had to be the weirdest situation in the history of the world.

But he was damned hungry, and if Ty was buying, he was eating.

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Ty bounced his leg a little, glancing around every so often to make sure they guys that were after him didn't appear out of thin air. They wanted him for his heat. Ty knew that. He'd be an idiot not to. He just wished they understood that it wasn't that easy for him to use it, and that it wore him out and...

Nick didn't understand him either. He got that. Not that Ty could blame him. He didn't get what was happening to him. In his brain, he knew that Nick was dangerous. Some kind of hit man, maybe. The rest of him knew that Nick wasn't out to get him, so he just didn't care.

Was that crazy?

"Stop bouncing, man. You'll just draw attention." Nick glanced up from his big old cheese steak, blue eyes back to blue, instead of that weird clear white.

"Oh. Right. Sorry."

"Hey, don't apologize to me. You're the one with the mythical 'they' on your tail." Wiping up with his napkin, Nick took a sip of his Coke.

The lady at the counter stared hard at them a moment, but Nick gave her a smile, and damned if she didn't smile back and go back to work. Of course, that smile left him blinking, it was so pretty.

His Nick had short, dark blond hair and those blue eyes and a crinkly-eyed smile and pretty hands.

Wait. When had he decided Nick was his?

"Hey. You gonna eat that? You need it, man."

His head snapped up. "What?"

"So you have a hearing problem?" Tilting that pretty head, Nick stared, licking a bit of sauce off his upper lip.

"No, just a focus problem." Things kinda got spinny sometimes. Or shiny. Or baffling. He had to ponder them. Oh, good Italian sub...

"You seemed pretty focused tonight. What are you running from, Ty?"

His skin prickled, the heat trying to bust out, trying to burn up anything that might threaten him. Ty reminded himself that nothing was gonna get him, not here. Not in this little hole in the wall, with Nick there to protect him.

“There are these guys. They want to use me for something.” He shrugged. “They’re a little misinformed.”

“Oh, I’m sure if they want you for mass destruction, you’ll do fine. We have enough money for one dessert. What do you want? A banana split or apple pie?”

“Apple pie? I love apple pie. With ice cream.” Sugar was probably a bad idea, but Nick didn’t know that, and it had been so long since he’d had apple pie. Real pie.

“Apple pie it is, then.”

The waitress came like they’d called, making eyes at Nick, which made Ty growly, but that was okay because he knew Nick didn’t swing that way.

That was one thing he didn’t mind knowing without being told.

No, sir. He didn’t mind that at all.

### Chapter 3

Nick wasn't sure when things had gone completely out of his control.

Really.

But somewhere they had.

Three days now, that Ty kid had been crashed out on his beanbag. Three days he hadn't been able to get back to work. There was a Hell of a pending job out there, too, and his client was starting to breathe down his neck.

And what was he doing? He was watching the kid sleep. Or bounce. Or eat sugar.

My God, Ty was fascinating on a sugar rush. Almost erotically so.

The kid had left Nick's apartment once, while Nick slept, returning with bags of groceries and a cheery grin when Nick pulled a gun on him as he came back in.

"Where did you get all that?" Nick had asked, knowing the kid was out of money.

"Some friends owed me money," Ty had answered, head down over the sacks.

"So why not stay with them?"

"Because they're not that kind of friends."

So now he was sitting, watching Ty, who bounced a little as he ate one hot pepper after another out of a jar, munching loudly.

"That can't be good for your tongue," Nick finally said, staring at Ty's pink cheeks.

"Huh?" Those dark eyes finally met his, shocking in their intensity. "Oh, no, it's cool. I like peppers. I got pickles and crackers, too. You want some? Oh! And tuna. And I got candy. Jolly Ranchers and apple rings and chocolate."

"Uh... How long were you planning on staying?" It was kinda fascinating, how he just sat there and watched Ty eat.

"Oh. Um. Well, I was hoping you'd let me stay a few more days." Those cheeks went red instead of pink, Ty staring at his hands.

"Why would I do that?" The food was starting to look pretty good, so Nick got up and wandered over, the amazing heat from Ty's body hitting him when he got within a few feet.

“Well, I bought you supper the other night, and I got groceries.” That little lip biting thing was very effective.

“You also cost me a job,” Nick reminded the kid.

“You didn’t need to do that job,” Ty said confidently. “I just know.”

How many things had Ty “just known” in the last few days? At first it had it had freaked Nick out, making him want to shake the kid and ask how Ty knew shit. Now he just kind of took it at face value.

“Why not?” Nick asked.

“Because, he has this uncle who will come after you. A Russian. He’s a warlock.”

“A war... Okay. So he could do nasty things, huh?” Nick said it teasingly. He didn’t half believe in that shit. Some of it, sure. This town was full of weirdness.

“Yeah.” Ty leaned back, looking up at him. “Want a snack?”

“I do. Move over.” Sinking down on the beanbag, Nick sort of leaned on Ty, letting all that heat soak into him, warming him. The crackers tasted great, crunchy and salty, and Ty made happy noises against him, finally giving up the peppers for pickles, then a bagel.

“Do you believe me, Nick?” Ty asked, nudging him with the nearest elbow.

“About what? The groceries or the warlock?”

“Either. Both. I wouldn’t lie. Not to you.”

“Well, at least when you told me about the warlock you looked me in the eye.”

“Oh.” Ty chewed on his lower lip, fiddling with a cracker. “Someone really did owe me money. I just didn’t want to tell you what for. I was a little ashamed.”

“About what? Did you give someone a blow job or something?”

“No!” Ty moved away from him a little, staring at him. “No. I just did a little spell for him. And it wasn’t very nice. I mean, I didn’t hurt anyone, really. I just singed them a little.”

“Singed.” Dude. Ty was crazy.

“Like I did you. Your fingers. When you were touching me?”

He didn't like to think about it. His hands still throbbed once in awhile, remembering.  
"So you can do that from a distance?"

"Sometimes." He got a grin, as cute as it was surprising. "It takes a lot of concentration. I'm not good at that. Concentrating. You want a little pie? I got chocolate and cherry."

"I'm not sure you need sugar, honey." No, no more bouncy sugar rushes.

"Well, I need something to chill me down from the peppers. Oh! Should have gotten popsicles."

"You are the weirdest guy I've ever met." Shaking his head, Nick wondered how he'd gotten talked into this. "But you can stay a few more days."

"Really?" Ty bounced, making the beanbag jump and roll. "Thank you!"

Before Nick even knew what was about to happen, Ty leaned over and kissed him, full on the mouth.

They stared at each other after, both of them putting a hand to their mouths.

"You kissed me," Nick said.

Ty nodded, eyes huge. "Are you going to kick my ass?"

Nick thought about that for a moment. "I don't know," he finally replied. "Are you going to do it again?"

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Ty stared at Nick, completely unable to believe what he had just done. Oh, *he* knew that Nick was his, but Nick didn't. Not yet. So that had been really dumb.

"Does that mean you want me to? Or that you don't?" There, he'd asked. Now Nick could hit him or kiss him back or whatever.

"I don't know. I mean, I'm not going to kick your ass." Nick just sat there, right next to him, fingers stroking Nick's lower lip. "You're really warm."

"I was eating peppers."

Those blue eyes gave him the biggest once over, sort of shocked and wondering, all at once. "I swear, you're gonna make me crazy."

It trembled on his lips to tell Nick that he could make the man happy, too, but he didn't. Not yet. Nick wasn't ready for that. Instead, he said. "You need to answer the phone..."

"It hasn't..." The phone rang then, but Nick just sat there, mouth hanging open. It was only when the answering machine clicked on that Nick hopped up to answer it.

"Lo?" Nick shifted from foot to foot, a frown dawning on his face. "Yeah. Yeah, I know. Look, can we meet about this? I have some new information. Right. Okay. I'll be there."

Nick hung up, giving him a wide berth on the way to the door. "I have to go meet my client. Stay out of trouble, okay?"

Ty tried not to pout. "Okay, but you be careful. Tell him about that Russian uncle."

"I will." He got one last look before Nick left, one last baffled expression "You... you stay in. Going to get groceries could have exposed you to the guys who want to get you."

"Okay." He waited for Nick to leave before pumping an arm in triumph. Knowing that Nick worried about him warmed him more than any pepper out of a jar ever could.

He would definitely have to kiss Nick again.

A lot.

## Chapter 4

The meeting with the client had gone better than Nick had anticipated. The whole Russian uncle explanation had the guy backing way off on wanting him to hit the target, and the client had given him a two hundred dollar bonus for keeping curses from raining down on their heads.

Go him.

Or go Ty, really.

The little fuck was right on the money. Nick had spent an extra hour checking out the mark, finding him eating with his uncle in little Russia. When he asked around, no less than three people had made the mark to ward off the evil eye...

Sometimes living where he did made Nick think the whole world had gone crazy.

He unlocked the door to his apartment, finding Ty sacked out on the beanbag again, fast asleep. The kid had kissed him. He'd liked it. So what was that all about?

Sighing, he went to make coffee, his leg brushing Ty's foot when he went by.

"Jesus! Fuck, you're cold."

Ty opened his eyes, slowly, as dark as always, but cloudy and less than alert. "Hmm? Oh, hey, Nick." The smile didn't quite work, all lopsided and off kilter.

"Hey, kiddo. Sorry I woke you, but your foot was freezing."

"Yeah. I'm kinda cold. The hot peppers only worked so long. Did your client get the uncle thing?"

"Huh?" It took him a moment to follow. "Oh, yeah. Looks like you were right, too. I checked around."

"Cool." Ty shivered, drawing his arms and legs up, wrapping them around himself.

"What's with you and the not being able to regulate, huh?" Nick kicked his shoes off and sank down on the beanbag, feeling bad for the kid. That was his story, anyway, and he was sticking to it. He pulled an afghan over both of them, cuddling close. "Thanks for the intel. Got me a bonus."

"Oh, that's neat." Shivers wracked Ty's whole body now, like the kid was caught out in a subzero freeze. It wasn't hot-hot, but God knew it wasn't cold, either. It was bizarre.

"Are you sick? I swear to God, if you give me something..."

"No. Not sick. Just cold. So cold. Kiss me?"

Okay, if Ty had been hanging out in the freezer until he got home just to lure him into kissing, he would...

A soft laugh broke his train of thought. "Nick, that's silly. I know you liked kissing me. Why would I have to lie?" 'Lie' came out in a stutter, Ty's teeth chattering hard.

"I don't know. Why do you want me to kiss you now?" Fuck, it wasn't like Ty was in any shape for it.

"It will warm me up. I promise. You want to warm me up, right?" One shaking, freezing cold hand settled on his cheek, and it was like some weird Halloween prank at a haunted house, only real.

"Okay. Okay, just let go of my face." If a kiss warmed Ty up a little he wouldn't have to worry about his nuts freezing off where Ty's leg slid between his.

He got a smile, Ty's dark brown eyes lighting up, and the kid leaned up to give him a kiss, lips starting out frigid, but softening and heating faster than Nick could have imagined. The kiss kept on, long and slow, but light enough to feel almost tentative.

Ty murmured happily, breaking away to change the angle of their mouths before kissing him again, and again.

Nick's cock rose, starting to really take an interest in the whole thing, and Ty's leg pressed against it rhythmically, rubbing through two layers of clothes. It felt good; it had been too long since someone had touched him, at least someone who wasn't a backseat blow.

The kid hummed, hands on him again, but fiery hot this time. They slid across his shoulders and down his back, pulling his hips hard against that lean thigh, giving him good friction. All the while Ty kissed him, tongue slipping into his mouth to taste, surprisingly assertive.

Letting himself go with it, Nick rocked and humped and felt his cock press against his zipper. He kissed Ty back, tasting the remnants of hot peppers, and when Ty's hand settled between them, squeezing his cock beneath his jeans, Nick let himself come.

Just that easy.

God, it felt good. Amazing. Even if he was exhausted.

"Better?" he managed to ask, his words slurring in his own ears.

"Mmmhmm. Much. See how warm?" Ty rolled to lie on top of him, covering them back up.

"Yeah. Warm..." he murmured, thinking it was a good thing, because he was kinda cold. That was his last thought before he drifted off to sleep.

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Ty paced, biting his thumbnail.

He hadn't meant to take so much from Nick. Not at all. But Nick wasn't waking up, and it had been almost twelve hours.

Nick wasn't dead or anything. His chest rose and fell, his skin was nice and rosy as he warmed back up, and there was a little smile on his face. Ty had taken off Nick's clothes and cleaned him up, and he'd dressed Nick in a fresh pair of boxers and a t-shirt. Even that didn't wake Nick up, and considering the man's reflexes, it should have.

Hunting through Nick's stuff, Ty found a little silver cell phone, glancing at Nick every so many seconds, just to make sure he didn't get caught.

The number was almost a half forgotten thing, and he had to chant it out loud a few times, just to make sure he got it right.

"Hello?"

Oh. Oh, good. Davie.

"Hi, Davie. I... it's Ty."

"Jesus, Ty. I've been worried sick. I thought they got a hold of you."

"No. No, I'm..." Was he okay? "Uh. I need some help, Davie."

"What, honey?" Davie asked, sounding as concerned as only a favorite cousin could. Ty had tried not to contact family, but Davie knew everything.

"I had a friend who helped warm me up..."

"Did you hurt him?" There it was, the sharp question he'd been asking himself.

"I don't know? I mean, he's still asleep, and it's been hours."

"But he's breathing?"

"Yeah, and his color looks fine."

"Check his eyes. Are they moving like he's asleep?"

"Oh." He hadn't thought of that. Davie always told him that meant the brain activity was fine, and he always forgot. Ty went to the beanbag to look down into Nick's face.

"They're moving." They were, Nick's eyelids twitched madly, in fact, like he was having a dream of mammoth proportions.

"Then you're good. Wait a little while and then try to wake him up. Is this phone secure, honey?"

"No." He bit his thumbnail again. "I should go, huh? I promise I'll call or email or something this week. 'Kay?"

"Be safe, honey. I miss you."

"You too, Davie."

They hung up with a lot of unspoken questions hanging in the air, but it was best to keep all of their calls short. It really was.

The little phone was trying to burn a hole in his hand, telling him to make some more calls, but it would be stupid to tempt fate anymore. Fate was a fickle, mean old bitch.

He wandered. He stared at Nick, willing his man to wake up. He made macaroni and cheese out of a box with canned milk...

Ty sighed an hour later, deciding Nick was just broken. It was all his fault.

"I am not broken," Nick mumbled, sitting up and rubbing the back of his neck. "And you don't need to be so loud."

"I didn't say a word." At least not with his mouth. Ty bounced over, flopping ungracefully on the beanbag. "You're okay!"

"I'm hungover as hell. What did I drink?"

"Um. I think you were just a little under the weather. But you slept it off!" Giving Nick a bright smile, Ty patted the lean belly that was somehow under his hands. "Do you want some macaroni and cheese?"

"Mac and cheese... You've been busy."

"You slept for a long time." Ty couldn't quite meet those bright eyes, with their inquisitive slant. He felt really guilty for using Nick's phone...

"Who did you call?"

"Huh?" His eyes did snap up to meet Nick's now, his mouth dropping open. It had never worked both ways before. Never.

"On my phone. I saw you." Nick frowned, biting his lip. "Maybe I dreamed it."

When Nick started to get up, Ty pulled him back down. "That's it! You must have dreamed it." Clamping down on his unruly thoughts, he smiled and kissed Nick's cheek. "You should eat. I'll get you a plate."

Nick's stomach growled, making them both blink. "Yeah, yeah, okay. Food would be good. You said you'd never lie to me, Ty."

He'd bounced up to get the mac and cheese, and now Ty sort of hung his head, filling Nick's plate. He had said that, hadn't he? "I called my cousin Davie. Just to ask him if I'd ruined you or something."

"Ruined me by making me come?"

His head whipped around, and he stared at Nick, who was picking at his boxers, cheeks a flaming red. It was cute.

"Well, you slept so long."

"I'm fine. You gonna get me a Coke, too?"

"Sure!" If Nick said he was fine then he was fine and Ty could stop feeling guilty. He brought the food and a Coke, and some Smarties for him, because he needed a little sugar.

"Are you gonna bounce if you eat those?"

"Um. Probably?" He grinned, patting Nick's knee. "You can handle it."

Nick rolled his eyes, tucking into the food like a starving man. "I imagine I'll have to."

That suited him. Nick wasn't broken, wasn't kicking him out, and liked his mac and cheese.

Even if he had used canned milk.

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Nick woke up sometime in the middle of the night, feeling much more alert than he had the last time he'd opened his eyes. Way more alert. As in code red alert.

Rolling gently out from under Ty, Nick reached for his pistol, the butt coming right into his hand like he'd called it, his thumb working the safety. Thank God he'd moved it earlier so it would be right there. Being exhausted was no excuse for being stupid.

Letting his eyes adjust to the dark, Nick listened, tuning out Ty's breathing to see what it was that woke him up. His place got a lot of night noise, but Nick knew all the usual suspects, and this hadn't been one of them.

There. The tiniest shift of fabric over wood came to him again, the sound of someone creeping along the wall. Since he and Ty were the only ones who were supposed to be there, and the cockroaches weren't big enough to war clothes, that meant they had company.

Unwelcome company.

There was no way that Ty would wake up quietly, so Nick left him sleeping, circling toward the front door in the opposite direction from their visitor, who was moving along the wall to the kitchenette.

Unlike his unknown visitor, he knew where all the furniture was, where the pictures hung on the wall, so he could move faster, keep things quieter. Now that he was away from Ty he could hear the guy breathing. No woman was that bad of a mouth breather. Well, no woman he knew, anyway.

"Oof." The sound made him smile. Not grin, like he wanted to, because he didn't want to show teeth, but yeah. Smile. That pinpointed the guy's location, and Nick took bead on it, knowing it would scare Ty shitless, but this way he could just shoot and ask later...

The lights in the kitchen flared on, blinding him, and a shot rang out, wood splintering right next to his cheek.

Jesus fuck.

He sprinted, heading across the room to grab Ty and got the hell out of there, squeezing shots off as he ran.

"Fuck!"

He heard it loud and clear, as loud as the sound of kitchen things shattering, the smell of burned mac and cheese suddenly strong.

Shit. Nick almost lost it laughing, the adrenaline making him a little crazy. He'd shot the leftovers.

The next bullet almost hit his hip, the air hot as Ty's skin as it whizzed by, and someone shouted, the sound tinny like it came out of an earpiece.

"Idiot! We need the dark one alive!"

Huh. Well, it wasn't about the Russian uncle, then. It was about Ty.

Ty sat up, eyes wide and terrified, staring right into his. "Nick! No!"

He turned just in time to see the bore of a gun pointed at his head, the man behind it burly and completely anonymous in a black stocking mask. Before he could raise his gun and fire, a jet of pure flame shot up from his little gas stove, sending the man with the gun staggering back, screaming.

Springing up like a wind up toy, Ty grabbed his arm. "Come on!"

"Ty! I need my shit..." He wasn't gonna run away. Damn it. He wasn't.

Until the front door burst open and two more men spilled in, these two carrying big damned guns loaded with what looked like darts.

"Later, Nick!" Ty shouted, and pulled him along with almost superhuman strength, one pale hand snagging his phone and car keys right before they burst through the window and started a freefall to the street below.

## Chapter Five

Ty hit the street first. He didn't bounce; he landed on his feet. Somehow he managed to keep his Nick from landing the same way, though, because Nick wasn't made like him, and might break all those little bones in the feet and ankles.

Nick clung to him, hands grasping and then sliding. "Jesus, fuck! We just jumped out of the window. My place is on fire."

When he looked up, he could see the flames in the kitchen, all red and orange and...

"Ty!"

Jumping, he turned guilty eyes to Nick. Ty had gotten a little mesmerized there for a moment. "Where's your car?"

"You can't remember where I parked? Jesus." One hand latched onto his arm, tugging him along. "They're gonna start shooting at us again if we don't get moving."

They finally reached the big black car, Nick shoving him inside, and he was really glad Nick still had those feet. Nick would need them to drive and all. He knew people without feet could drive, but they had to have special equipment and he and Nick didn't have time for that.

"Stop it. Stop babbling. Tell me where not to go."

"I am not babbling!" Ty slapped his hand against the dashboard, keeping himself upright when Nick took a corner on two wheels. "What do you mean, where not to go?"

"I need to know where they might look for you. I have contacts all over town, but there's no sense taking you somewhere they'd be hunting you to begin with."

"Oh." Oh, right. That made sense. Uh. Would people look for him? "Shit! My cousin Davie. The one I called. Will they hurt him?"

"They might. We can send someone to him, tell him to lie low a few days..."

"Okay." Biting his thumbnail, he braced for a sharp right. Damn. "I'm sorry, Nick. I lied to you before, about you coming down with something."

"This is really not the time, Ty."

"Yes it is! If I have to do... something desperate to save us I might end up draining you again." There. It was out. He hated lying to Nick.

The car swerved a little, Nick staring over at him, those blue eyes light enough to see in the dark.

"Draining me..." Nick growled. "What the fuck?"

"I was so cold. I needed some energy, and I couldn't really start a fire in your apartment."

Nick pulled over to the curb, the brakes squealing, the car jerking back and forth. One hand landed on Ty's shoulder, pulling him around so they sat face to face.

"You're going to explain all this now, babe. In small words. I'm not moving until you do."

\*\*\*

Nick sat, waiting for Ty to explain why and how and everything. Needed some energy, so Ty'd fed off Nick like some kind of psychic vampire? What the fuck was up with that? And that didn't even begin to explain the whole jumping out the window and not getting hurt thing.

"I can't explain right now," Ty said, looking away. "Please, we need to get moving, get someplace safe. I'm so sorry I got you into this." The last part Ty said staring straight into his eyes again. Yeah, that Ty meant.

Nick pondered their situation for a moment before throwing the car into gear and making a u-turn against traffic. "Okay, okay, but you're going to explain everything, got it?"

Ty nodded. "I will. I promise."

Nick drove. He didn't say much else, just drove until he got to a seedy hotel he used occasionally for prepping a job. None of his clients knew about it that he knew of, so it would work. Ty had no idea where they were, so even if he called someone again...

Shit. The cousin.

Pulling over at a phone booth, Nick handed Ty some change. "Go call your cousin. Ask him if he has a place to lie low. If he doesn't, I'll make a call, too, send someone for him."

Those big eyes stared into his a moment, then the kid ran for the phone, dialing and plunking in coins, staring nervously into the night. Then he started chattering, waving one hand frantically.

Yeah. Talk talk talk. They were gonna talk a lot once they got settled.

Ty came trotting back to the car, smiling a little, making that pale face light up. "He's okay! He's going to stay with some friends, so we don't need to send anyone. Thank you."

"Sure. Come on."

"Do you feel it, too?"

"Feel what?"

"The tingle on the back of your neck. It means they're coming."

"Jesus." He *was* feeling a tingle on the back of his neck, but he didn't want to think about it being some kind of hoodoo. Goddamn, he hated that magical, mystical shit.

"Well, they are. Is this hotel gonna have room service?"

"Uh, no. No room service. Not unless we can convince the cockroaches to serve for us."

"Ew."

Nodding, he backed the car out, and hit the road, making a circuitous route to the hotel, finally pulling in around the back, pulling into the space that the night manager kept just for him. Routine could be dangerous, but it could also pay off in the end.

"You stay here. I'll get us a room." Nick waved off Ty's protest and headed in, sneaking in the back way to clap Vinnie on the shoulder, making the big man jump.

"Nick! What you doing, huh? Trying to scare a year off my life?"

"Sure. Shortening lives like the grim reaper. That's me." Rolling his eyes, he handed Vinnie the twenty he'd found in the car. "My place got rolled tonight by some guys looking to do bad things. Will this work until I can hit my stash tomorrow?"

"Anything for you, Nick," Vinnie said, pocketing the money and handing him an old fashioned key, not a card. You know the room."

"I do. Thanks, Vin. Oh, and if anyone should ask..."

"Who should ask? I know nothing."

\*\*\*

Ty sighed and bit his lip, bouncing one knee. He didn't like sitting in the car. It left him feeling incredibly exposed, and he was starting to get cold again. Really cold.

Nick seemed really mad about that. The warming up part, not the sitting in the car. Ty couldn't help it any more than he could help being who he was. He was born that way. Damn it, his father hadn't given him much, but he had left that little talent behind. If Ty could really call it a talent.

Looking down at his lap, Ty saw that his clenched hands were shaking, white knuckled, his nails leaving little crescents in his palms.

Damn.

He didn't want to hurt Nick. Not at all. The last thing Ty wanted was to bring trouble down on that pretty blond head. Nope, he liked Nick's head a lot. Attached to Nick's body, which he liked even more. Maybe he should just go.

Thinking hard, he almost missed Nick coming back, the car door opening almost giving him a heart attack.

"Come on, kid," Nick said, grabbing his arm. "We have some talking to do."

Nick's touch felt like fire, so warm and good that he had to spring back to avoid melting right into it and stealing that warmth.

"What the hell?"

"I... I'm sorry. Is there s-somewhere we can build a fire?" His teeth chattered like one of those wind up gag toys.

"Yeah, sure. This is like a high end ski chalet. What on earth is wrong with you?"

"C-cold. Please, Nick. Don't want to hurt you."

Those bright eyes caught his, Nick trying to see right into him, even though it was a little dark for that. Then he got a nod.

"Okay. Come on."

They were already behind the hotel, so Nick just dragged him back past the dumpster, grabbing an old wooden pallet and dumping the pieces into an old metal mop bucket. The pieces started burning right away when Nick touched the lighter to them, having pulled it out of the car.

Oh. Oh, look at that.

Ty pushed right up, ignoring Nick's admonition to be careful, not to burn himself.

Yeah, like he'd ever burned himself in his life.

That was what had sent him to foster care, actually. Until Davie's mom had taken him in, Ty had bounced from home to home, his own mother horrified at what she'd produced as a son.

His hands settled just over top of the flames, his skin feeling like ice, and the fire turned blue, the crackling and leaping of dry wood suddenly reduced to a tiny, slow burn.

"What the fuck...?"

"More wood, Nick."

He knew Nick would have more questions than ever, but right now Ty needed help. More fire. He needed more fire.

The flames leaped, Nick dumping a load of dry cardboard on the fire, and the flames danced around his hands, sucking him in all the way to his wrists. Oh, that felt good. So good. Ty closed his eyes and let the fire outside feed the one he had to have burning inside.

All of the explanations could wait.

\*\*\*

Ty had better damned well explain.

Nick had tried to pull Ty's hands out of the fire, but he hadn't been able to even move that skinny body, and when he examined Ty's hands afterward, there were no blisters, no burns.

Just this blissed out expression in Ty's eyes that made him look high, or like they'd just had sex...

The kid was fiery hot to the touch when Nick pulled him into the hotel room, locking all of the locks and pulling the chain, too. Ty just stood where Nick left him, swaying a little, humming a little tuneless something.

Damn it, he hated it when he didn't know what he was getting into.

"Okay, Ty," he said, going to sit on the bed. "Tell me what's going on."

Ty started, staring at him for a moment, pupils swallowing up most of his eyes. Then he shrugged.

"Okay, but you're not going to like it."

\*\*\*

Ty perched on the wobbly little chair across the room, wanting to touch Nick so bad that he ached. He had to explain, though. Nick wouldn't do anymore without it.

"You know how some people in this town can like, read minds or tell the future and stuff?" he asked, watching that weird expression slide across Nick's face.

"Yeah. I know that. Even if I don't get it."

"Well, I can, uh, use fire." How else did he explain it?

"Use fire. Like in that book about the little girl who could flambé people with just a look?"

"There's a book?" Ty liked to read, but he'd never gotten much of a chance as a kid. "I guess? I mean, it's not something I can control very easily. Sometimes it works like I want it to, sometimes it just... pops up at the worst time."

Great. Nick thought he was some kind of demented lightning bug. He heard that thought as clear as day.

"I'm not a bug. I'm a person just like you."

Nick drew in a quick breath. "I never said that out loud. What, are you a mind reader, too?"

"I never have been before..." He chewed his thumbnail.

"What, you mean it's just me? Why, because I saved your life or something? Now we're magically connected?"

"I don't know why!" Oh, Nick, please don't. Don't do this.

"Well, you'd better figure it out and get out of my head," Nick growled, his thoughts a swirl of grr and holy shit.

"I'll try," Ty said in a small voice, chewing harder on his thumbnail. He was getting cold again, just like that. It was like Nick was sucking all the air out of the room with his anger. "I... I should go."

That was it. He should go. That would let Nick go back to his life, keep Ty and his dirty magical self away. Ty bounced up, feeling like gravity had gotten ten times stronger while he was sitting, trying to explain an accident of genetics.

"You don't have to go," Nick said gruffly, not meeting his eyes, and Ty dipped into Nick's guilty/relieved/guilty thoughts before he even thought about it.

"I know. You're a good man, Nick." He moved toward the door, and when Nick would have gotten up to follow, Ty sent a tiny swarm of fireflies his way, blocking Nick just enough that Ty could undo all the locks and slip away.

The last thing he heard from Nick was cursing, the words following him all the way down the alley and out of his Nick's life.

Being wanted had been sweet while it lasted.

## Chapter Six

Nick cursed viciously.

Goddamn it, why did he feel guilty about driving the kid away? Maybe it was those big, sad, brown eyes. Maybe it was that little swarm of embers that reminded him that the kid was telling the truth. Ty really was a fire-user.

Stranger things had happened.

Still, why was it his responsibility to keep Ty safe? Warm?

It wasn't. Nick had done his share, right? Saved the kid's life, lost his borrowed room to a fiery explosion.

Fuck, he'd even jumped out a window.

Sighing, Nick flopped on the bed and picked up the TV remote. He just wanted to forget Ty even existed. Okay, so Ty had maybe saved his life back there with the whole Russian warlock thing. The being on the bottom when they'd gone out the window was helpful, too.

Goddamn it. Again.

The TV had a series of late-night bullshit commercials on, along with home shopping and some porno movies. Porn was never gay enough for him, and God knew that would only make him think of Ty.

Ty tasted like hot peppers and cinnamon candy. Nick could remember that with painful clarity, even if he wondered sometimes if his orgasm had been real that one time.

The sound of squealing brakes had him up and off the bed, had him heading out the door of the room before he even thought about it, had him booking it out to the street. The offender seemed to be a minivan, with a demented, gray haired lady at the wheel.

Not Ty.

Okay, now he was freaking out about nothing. Ty wasn't going to steal his car, and the kid wasn't going to get kidnapped or...

The scream cut right through the night, and Nick pelted to his car to grab a weapon from his stash in the trunk before making a run for it. He ran down the alley, following the screaming, his breath heaving in and out of his lungs.

That was Ty. Nick didn't know how he knew, but he did.

Ty needed rescuing. Again.

Looked like Nick was going to have to charge in and save the day.

\*\*\*

Ty had slowed down when he got maybe a block away, calling himself all kind of a fool. He was safer with Nick than he was without, wasn't he? Oh, he wasn't gonna go back. No, he wouldn't endanger Nick that way. But he didn't know what to do.

He really didn't.

Chewing his thumbnail, Ty shivered a little, thinking longingly of a hot chocolate and some steaming warm soup. Oh, maybe a hot toddy. That would rock.

Mainly, though, he needed to find a place to hide, and then figure out what was going on. He knew there were these guys, just like he'd told Nick. What he didn't know was who, and what exactly they wanted him for. Oh, everyone who'd ever tried to lock him up wanted to use his fire, but these guys were way more persistent than most, so they must have a master plan or something.

Things were getting spinny again.

Right. Hide. Then... Then what?

Nick could so help him with this. If he had any money, he'd hire Nick to figure it out.

The thought made him laugh, but it came out as more of a sob. Nick didn't want him. He sank down on the curb, wrapping his arms around his knees. Maybe he could just sit right here and be very small.

Except he couldn't. He was an adult now; he had to deal with his own shit.

Surging to his feet, Ty started in the opposite direction of Nick's motel, just to make sure he didn't tempt himself with stopping by and offering to warm Nick's bed. Or have Nick warm his. Or whatever.

When he turned the corner out of the alley without even looking, he hit something hard and heavy, bouncing back and yelping. Rough hands fell on his arms, and there was this guy in like, a tactical vest and a ski mask.

"Got him!"

Oh, fuck a duck. Ty struggled, pulling back, feeling like a chihuahua on the other end of a rope toy from a Rottie.

A hard slap rocked his head back on his neck, that same booming voice telling him to shut the fuck up. Hey, he hadn't even realized he was screaming. Just flailing. Slapping back. Not using his damned fire!

What a fucking idiot.

Ty focused, trying hard to think of a wall of flame, and he might not have gotten that, but he sure got enough of a flare to make the man holding him stagger back and scream, too, so Ty figured that was okay.

Then all he had to do was turn tail and run.

\*\*\*

Nick skidded around the corner, the hard light from a parked car surprising him.

What shocked him even more was the feel of Ty's body slamming into his. He'd know that skinny, way-too-hot form anywhere.

"Ty! Babe. You okay?" He had to shake Ty to get those wide brown eyes to focus on him, but they did, widening with amazement.

"Nick? They're back there. Following me. We've got to go. We... I. You shouldn't help me."

"Shut up and come on."

\*\*\*

Nick dragged him off, and it occurred to Ty that Nick had dragged him around a lot in a very short time. The thought had him laughing, and Nick shook him like a mongoose with a snake. Like Rikki Tikki Tavi.

"Stop it. I need you to not be hysterical. Get in the car. Come on."

"But what if they know your car, now?" That was logical, right? Go him! Still, he sat in the passenger seat when Nick flung him there, biting his thumbnail.

"I burned them, Nick," he said as Nick revved the engine and took off like a shot.

"I know, Babe. You're going to get cold. So we need someplace where we can light a fire, then a new car."

The tires squealed as they went around a corner, and the whole thing had an eerie sense of familiarity. They'd done this what? Three times now?

"Y-you shouldn't help me."

"Nope. I shouldn't. But looks like I am, Babe, so deal with it. I am strangely zen."

"C-cold." He was now. So cold. So fucking predictable. God, he was useless.

"You're not useless, Babe. Just tired. Get some rest, huh?"

No, no. He wasn't going to be put to sleep like a cranky baby. He wasn't. Ty could handle making fire and then staying awake. He so could. It just took a little effort and maybe some toothpicks for his eyes...

"Where are we going?"

"Huh? Somewhere not here." Nick's blue eyes shone in the lights from the dash. "It will be dawn soon. We'll find somewhere to lie low."

"No, really. Are we leaving the city?"

"No." Nick turned another corner, throwing him up against the door. "We'd stand out more somewhere in Hicksville. And you'd stand out a lot more in a city that doesn't believe in magic, huh?"

Well, yeah. There were some advantages to living on the border between the real world and the magical veil. People didn't look at you funny when you could reach into a wood-burning pizza oven and pull things out with your bare hands.

Okay, maybe funny, but not with horrified shock.

Ty slid back against the seat, his head feeling heavy and baby-like. God, he hated using fire like that, in a hard burst. It really made him queasy.

"Puke in my car and you'll regret it."

"I didn't *say* anything!" Ty shouted, feeling childish as all hell.

"Yeah," Nick said with a laugh, one that actually sounded funny ha-ha. Amused. "Well, now you know how it feels."

Oh. Right. He guessed that was okay, then. The last thing Ty heard before he sank into sleep was Nick laughing.

Still sounding kinda happy.

Go him again.

\*\*\*

Nick drove at least two boroughs over, knowing it would take people a while to find them as much as he'd driven around. Then he stopped at a place he'd never been, only heard of. A very special garage.

"What can I do you for?" the little gray headed mechanic who came out asked him.

"I need to trade this in for something different. Fast." He'd hit his stash on the way, Ty not even knowing he'd stopped, and he had a five hundred dollar budget for this deal.

"You need it to run as smooth as this one? That might cost you."

"I just need it to be reliable and have a V-8."

"Cool. Cost you three-fifty."

"Nothing red," Nick warned. "And I need to transfer my stuff, but not my plates."

"You got it."

Half hour later Nick was on the road again. Ty was starting to worry him. He'd seen the kid sleep deep before, but Ty's lips were blue, and his chest was barely moving.

Goddamn it, why did he have to pretend to be a good guy? Why?

Fire. They needed a place with fire... Maybe down by the old train station. They had rooms for rent down there, rooms that had old wood stoves in them. Or so he'd heard. Something about some kinds of magical folk needing a place to burn herbs or effigies or some shit.

Yeah. Yeah, that would work. Nick reached over to touch Ty's arm, hissing at the cold clamminess of the kid's skin. Jesus. He needed that fire now.

Like right now.

He zipped down the main artery, turning off at the train yards and hitting the crumbling old residential neighborhood a couple miles beyond that.

Then he started trolling for room for rent signs.

Nick thought for sure they would run out of gas before he found something, but he finally found an abandoned place, the ground floor windows sagging in. He'd have to be careful. If someone saw or smelled smoke, they might come investigate.

Ty had to get warmed up now, though. So it was worth the risk.

He dragged Ty inside, wrapped in a blanket so he didn't get fucking frostbite on his hands. He used dry wood from one section of floor to light a tiny fire, one that would burn as clean as possible. Then he stuck Ty right next to it, all wrapped up.

"Jesus, kid," he said aloud, even if Ty couldn't hear him. "What am I doing, huh? What is it about you that gets to me?"

He wished to hell he knew.

Ty started whimpering, working toward the fire, just like that, and while Nick had seen him up to his elbows in flame, the blanket catching on fire would be bad. So he went over and unwrapped Ty like a burrito, pushing the kid closer to the fire without the trailing ends of cloth.

Moaning, Ty moved restlessly, skin still cold to the touch. Nick's stomach growled, and he grumbled, thinking of the leftovers he'd had. That he'd shot. Christ, he'd have to get some food.

He couldn't leave Ty shivering and trying to crawl into the fire, though.

So he did the one thing he could think to do, the one thing he'd seen work on Ty's cold spells better than anything else.

Nick held Ty in his arms and leaning down, pressing his lips to Ty's. Even as he felt Ty start to warm up, Nick felt the cold leeching into his own bones, like he was standing outside in a snowstorm. His eyes started to droop closed, and he hoped to hell what he was doing was working.

They were gonna need Ty to wake up and stand watch.

## Chapter Seven

Ty woke up warm and toasty, his mouth moving lazily against someone's lips. Oh, that felt good, just kissing like he had nothing else to do all day and all night. He could hear the crackle of a fire, the warmth of it like the sun on his face.

Man, some days it was good to be alive. His cock was mostly hard, his hands were wrapped around someone's back...

Nick.

His eyes flew open, staring right at Nick's face, which was so close it was all fuzzy and out of focus. Backing away just a bit, he saw that Nick was sound asleep, lips still moving in kissy motions, which should have been cute, but was kinda scary, instead.

Maybe it was because Nick was so pale, and so very cold.

Oh, God. He'd done it again.

How could he have done it again without even knowing it? He'd been totally out before they got to... well. Wherever they were.

Sliding out from under Nick's lax body, Ty wrapped the rough blanket around Nick's shivering form and looked around.

Oh. Oh, he'd been in places like this before. Old rooms, rented out by the hour or the week, clean enough of the surface but so old there was no way to get at all the grime. Still, it had a wood stove, which needed more fuel if it was going to keep going.

Ty stoked the fire up, checking to make sure the cast iron wasn't rusted out and that he wouldn't set the room on fire. Then he looked around for food.

Nothing. Not even an outdated can in the little set of cupboards. Nick must've been really worried about him, not to have stopped for food. Rats. Nick would need a lot of carbs when he woke up, a lot of fuel...

Carefully, Ty crept to the window to look out, making sure he could see out but no one could see in. There had to be a gas station or a convenience store, right? Even a liquor store could sell him peanuts and tortilla chips. Heck, he'd settle for a vending machine.

Man, there was nothing out there, at least that he could see from where he was. He'd have to do some recon, see what he could find. Ty didn't want to leave Nick alone for very long, not with the way things were going, but damn...

He stretched, looking around to see what all Nick had brought with them, and he grabbed Nick's military style jacket, pulling it on, looking for something to use as a hat. His dark

hair wasn't as obvious as Nick's stark blond, but he knew if someone was looking, he wouldn't be hard to spot.

Ty took one last look at Nick's sleeping form before screwing up his courage and opening the door a crack. Sticking his nose out, he sniffed, just like a puppy, scenting the air. Oh, it was cold, and he was so very tempted to use his heat to warm up the air around him, but he knew he had to conserve strength, because if he screwed up, both he and Nick would be down.

There was a twenty in Nick's pocket, and a Shell station on the corner that was actually open. Keeping to the shadows, Ty headed down and slipped inside, keeping his face turned from the sleepy clerk.

What did people like Nick need to eat? Nick had liked the macaroni, but Ty really knew so little...

He got a couple of cans of spaghetti and meatballs, and some Little Debbie cakes, a couple of candy bars, some Cokes, and even though it made him feel guilty because it was so much money, he got a pack of smokes and some matches.

Thank God the clerk never asked to see his ID. Duh. He'd really have to watch shit like that.

Anyway, what he'd picked up would be quick energy until he could make some cash and Nick was awake and until he could figure this all out.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out why these guys wanted him. He'd been on the wish list of a lot of petty tyrants who thought his talent would be useful. Lighting a cigarette, Ty pondered what was different about this batch. It was their persistence. And their casual use of violence. Most of the time these kind of guys decided he wasn't worth the risk pretty fast.

The cigarette tasted nasty, just like they always did, but the tiny fire kept him going, kept the cold at bay a little. It was amazing, how he could draw off the tiniest spark.

When he got back to the room, Ty found Nick tossing and turning, hands moving restlessly over the rough blanket. Nick's brow was furrowed, his lips working, and he could barely make out the, "Ty... babe."

Oh, that could break his heart, hearing Nick say his name that way.

"Right here, Nick. I'm right here." He dropped his bags and went to put his hand on Nick's forehead. Better. Warmer. His Nick settled right down, the lines on his face smoothing right out. So good.

He grinned and moved around, stoking the fire again, popping the pull tops on the cans of spaghetti and setting them on the lip around the top of the fire, figuring Nick would wake up soon. Heck, if he didn't, it wasn't like that canned stuff couldn't be reheated.

Chewing his thumbnail, Ty waited, sitting cross-legged next to Nick, watching the little flames dance in the stove. He moved closer and closer to the fire, his eyes glued to it, and before he even thought about it, he was sticking his hand in, watching the flames crawl along his skin.

"Are you crazy?" Nick growled, that lean body exploding into awareness, moving fast. Nick's hands grabbed his shoulders, yanking him back, and Ty sat on his butt and stared, his mouth hanging open.

"I'm okay, Nick. Really."

"Jesus." Rubbing at his eyes, Nick blinked and yawned. "All I saw was you burning."

"I'm pretty burn proof." Summoning a smile, he leaned over and kissed the corner of Nick's mouth. "You okay?"

"Hung over. You're hell on a body, Babe." Nick blinked some more. "What's that smell?"

"Spaghetti. From a can, but it's better than nothing. I forgot to get us spoons. Do you like spaghetti and meatballs? I used to eat it a lot when I was a kid, cold, right out of the can. This is better, because we can heat it--"

One of Nick's hands slid gently over his mouth, cutting him off.

"Where did you get food, Babe?" Did anyone see you? Did you get us caught again?

The last two questions Nick never voiced out loud, but Ty heard them loud and clear. He bit Nick's palm, making that hand jump, making Nick cuss a little.

"I keep telling you I'm not stupid, okay? I was very careful. I, uh, owe you a twenty, though."

Shaking his head, Nick smiled wryly. "What else did you get us?"

"Cokes. Sweets. Stuff. You want some spaghetti?"

If Nick didn't stop looking at him like that, like he had two heads or something, he was going to bust. Or go have another cigarette. Something.

"You got smokes?" Nick asked, sitting back and rubbing his neck.

"Uh. Yeah."

"Cool. Give me one, man. Then I might be up for that spaghetti."

\*\*\*

Ty handed him the pack of generic smokes and a box of matches, watching him with that kicked puppy look in those big brown eyes.

Sooner or later, he'd have to do something to get rid of that look, but for now he was feeling like a creaky old man, his body aching, his head pounding a little. Nick lit up the cigarette and reached for the Coke Ty had brought, feeling the burn of smoke and nicotine start to wake him up, along with the caffeine from the soda.

"Tell me exactly what you did," he said, wanting to make sure Ty had been careful.

"You first," Ty shot back, lower lip sticking out stubbornly. "I don't see your car."

"I traded us out." That had been one of his better ideas, even if the new wheels didn't have some of his custom deals.

"I must have slept through that, huh?"

"Yeah, and you're heavy as a rock when you're out like that." His stomach growled, and Nick tested the cans of spaghetti. Good enough. They got any hotter, they wouldn't be able to eat with their fingers.

"Sorry." Ty's shoulders hunched. "I'm sorry, Nick."

"You keep saying that, and I keep helping you. Eat your supper. Breakfast. Whatever."

They ate silently, both of them lost in thought, and he could hear vague echoes of Ty's worry, of the kid gnawing at the whole why someone was trying to get him problem. It had to suck, big time.

Hell, it sucked for him.

"Don't. I don't... I know it sucks," Ty finally said, eyes meeting his. "I tried to leave."

"You did. That went over like a lead balloon." Sighing, Nick set his can aside, holding his hand out. "C'mere, kiddo."

"Not a kid." But Ty came, sliding into his lap with a happy sigh. "What are we gonna do?"

"I know some people. We'll find out who these guys are, we'll find out what they want, and we'll make them go away."

"Promise?" Leaning, Ty kissed on his neck, lips soft and sweet on his skin.

"Yeah. Yeah, Babe. I promise."

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"We need that damned kid," the clipped, British voice squawked in Devon's ear. He turned his headpiece down, rolling his eyes.

"I know, sir. I promise, I shall do a far better job than your last few retrieval units."

"You'd better. You're far more expensive than those units."

"Indeed. You get what you pay for. Now, if you could tell me what I need to know."

What he needed to know was not how badly his employer wanted the target. Instead, it would be helpful to know the last point of contact, the capabilities of the subject and his erstwhile savior, and the make and model of the car they had escaped in.

"I sent you a report. To your phone."

"Ah, well then, I must let you go, hmm? I cannot access the information with you hollering in my ear." With great satisfaction, Devon severed the connection, keying up the file that his employer had sent. There was a list of locations: a hotel, a slumlord apartment, an address for a cousin of some sort.

He would start with the burned out apartment. There may well be something there that would lead him to the blond who was helping the target escape. He had a feeling that, unlike the target, that one had patterns, had regular contacts that he could tap.

Otherwise, his subject was far too unpredictable.

The file had been most intriguing, and Devon only took cases that interested him. No killing the subject, which was one of the things his predecessors had failed to remember, shooting and blowing things up.

Devon preferred a far more subtle approach.

Right. Time to get to work.

The burnt out slum apartment was little more than a boarding house, which was empty of inhabitants now, the upper two floors black with smoke damage and burnt timbers. Unbelievable as it seemed, no one had sifted through the debris for any sort of clue, so Devon pulled on a mask and some latex gloves, his boots crunching on all manner of detritus.

The room where the fire had started was what he wanted, and he made his way carefully up the rickety stairs, opening what was left of the door and surveying the tiny room. Kitchenette. Makeshift bed. Closet. The closet was the most likely place to still have useable items.

Devon moved across the cracked floorboards, the smell atrocious, even through his mask, and opened the warped door easily, smiling when he found smoke ruined but intact clothing.

"Beautiful," he murmured, pushing a few shirts across the rack. Pockets might yield business cards, receipts and other odds and ends. There were no coats, which was a shame, as they usually had the best yield, but one raggedy pair of jeans seemed especially promising.

Taking a deep breath, Devon peeled off one glove, and reached out, fingers trembling ever so slightly. This was going to hurt.

Closing his eyes and biting his lip, Devon touched the denim, waiting for the flood of images to begin.

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Ty bounced a little, trying not to wake Nick up again. His poor Nick. So tired. He'd promised things would work out, but Ty wasn't sure how they could. There was just too much. He felt like that hairy-footed kid from that movie with the ring. Like there was a great fiery eye, just watching him, waiting for him to screw up and show himself.

Well, he thought that was what the movie was about. He'd fallen asleep watching it at Tashi's flop house, and all he could remember was a lot of wheezing and some dude with elf ears, for sure.

Sighing, he bounced some more, chewing on his thumbnail.

"You're thinking so loud that the whole neighborhood can hear you," Nick said from under the blanket.

"Well, that's okay. There's nothing but trains and shit." Ty went to sit next to Nick, patting what he thought was Nick's ass under the covers.

"Someone is looking for you somewhere. Try to keep it down."

"Okay." They sat there for a bit, then Nick got up to go potty and whatever, and Ty found them snacks.

"Stop it. You're still thinking."

"Well, I have to do something," Ty said, wiggling over to lean against Nick when he sat down.

"I can think of a lot better things to do." He got an evil grin. Oh, good. Someone was feeling way better.

"I like when you do the thinking." Ty leaned a little harder, letting his hand fall to Nick's lap.

"Uh-huh. I know you do." Turning, Nick kissed him, and it made everything go away.

Everything.

Ty sank into the kiss, licking at Nick's lower lip, heat exploding in his belly. They rolled, Nick pushing down on top of him, moaning. His skin heated, his hips started moving, and Ty went from zero to sixty in nothing flat.

"God, babe." Nick moaned against him, starting to hump hard, and Ty nodded, his hands clutching at Nick's back.

"More."

"More of this?" Another kiss pressed against his mouth, all but devouring him. Nick was so hungry, so needy, all of a sudden.

It was like making fire.

They rocked harder, both of them moaning again, both of them ready to go right off. It was just amazing. Just fucking amazing, and so much better than worrying.

Nick reached down, got a hold of his cock through his sweatpants, and boom. Ty came. His cock jerked, his hips snapped, and Ty figured he was going to have to wash everything out in the sink.

It was so worth it.

"Ty..." Nick was still moving, still needing, and he remembered he had hands. Ty reached, too, grabbing Nick's hip with one hand, his cock with the other, and started stroking.

Grunting, Nick pushed through his fingers, humping hard. It took forever, but it was only a few seconds before Nick came for him, filling his hand with wet heat, the slick stuff sliding over his wrist.

"Oh, babe. I needed that," Nick said, panting a little.

Ty nodded. "Much better than thinking."

Nick laughed. "You know it, baby. You know it."

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"I know where he is," Devon said into the receiver, waiting for the snotty voice of his employer to offer praise. He was exhausted from his Finding, but he knew he could locate the boy now.

"Then go and retrieve him. Do not waste my time until he is in your possession."

The com clicked off, and Devon sighed. "Really, some people are so rude."

"You ready to show us where he is?" Aiden, the leader of his employer's team asked.

Devon looked Aiden over, pondering what a pleasure it would be to strap the man down and beat him black and blue before fucking his ass. It was an incredibly tempting scenario, and he sent a tiny shaft of his feelings straight into Aiden's mind, waiting for the reaction.

A hard-on. Interesting. Definitely something to file away for later.

"Yes. I have a location. Well, at least a narrowed field. Shall we?"

"A narrowed... Boss is gonna kill you, man."

"Not at all. I am far too valuable." Devon shot his cuff back to check his watch. "And I have a massage appointment in an hour. Let's get on with it, hmm?"

Once they got to the neighborhood he had envisioned, it would take very little time to find the fireball. The neighborhood had very few habitable hovels, and this one was near the trains. How hard could it be?

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The boy had all of the potential in the world. The old man needed him for his collection. Definitely needed. The one with him was intriguing as well. They would take him, as well, instead of killing him.

The old man clicked on the com to Devon, growling into the mouthpiece.

"Take both of the lads."

"I thought you wanted the other dead," Devon said, sighing that annoying, breathy sigh.  
"You know I hate conflicting instructions."

"Don't argue with me, boy. Just do what you're told."

Devon had been a good acquisition at the time, but he might simply be outliving his usefulness. Really, the boy was getting too big for his britches.

Too bad. His hands were worth their weight in gold.

Closing the file on his desk, the old man rolled his head on his neck and poured himself a brandy. Soon his collection would be complete, and the threat to his program would be eliminated.

All he needed to do was get his hands on the boy.

He never should have lost the youngster all of those years ago. Loose ends annoyed him.

It was time to tie them up.

## Chapter 8

Nick could feel someone coming. The back of his neck kept prickling, and his ears were hot. Ty was doing this whole domestic thing, wandering around, putting together a terrifying smorgasbord of junk food, singing a little.

The kid was still so loud that the whole neighborhood could hear him. Mentally.

It would have been cute, because Ty was babbling in his head about how hot Nick was and how much he liked Nick and how he hoped they'd have sex again soon and...

Yeah, it was a lot harder to be grumpy and make plans when you had a hard on.

"Ty. Kiddo. We have to go. We don't have time to eat all this."

Ty's face fell, lips pursing up a little. "Oh. Okay. I'm sorry."

Crap. The kid was feeling crappy enough with them fighting before and what with getting shot at and all. What would it hurt to sit and eat?

"Nah. Don't apologize. Just feed me, but then we have to go, okay?"

"Sure, Nick." That brought the grin back, and Ty bounced around, getting everything laid out before bringing over the Ding Dongs and pieces of cherry pie and some Slim Jims and shit. "Are we in a hurry for a reason? I mean, I know you said someone was looking for me, but there's always someone looking for me these days, and they can't be that close or you'd be making me leave, not being nice to me..."

"Stop. Less talking, more eating."

"Uh-huh." Ty sat next to him, but Nick held him off a little. Not an hour ago, they'd tried the whole snack think and Ty had touched him and it had all gone red-hot and uhn. They needed to think now.

At least the Ding Dongs were better than the canned spaghetti.

Nick ate a little before sliding away to light a cigarette, breathing in smoke and pushing it out his nose.

"You didn't answer me." One of Ty's hands fell on his leg, hot as a coal from the fire.

"Well, at least you're all charged up. " He grinned a little, not feeling the least bit cold. Thank God.

Ty snatched his hand away. "I'm sorry."

"No." Damn it, he had a way with making Ty feel bad, and Ty had a way with making him feel guilty. "No, babe. I didn't mean you couldn't touch. And they're close."

"How close?" Those dark eyes met his, suddenly focused. Serious.

"I'm not sure, but they're coming."

"Well, we should go, then." Ty bounced up again, packing up the food, stuffing random things in his mouth as he went. "We need to get in the car and run. I told you we should leave the city. I told you..."

"Stop it!" Nick shouted, his head all but spinning with Ty's chaotic thoughts. "We'll find another place. Then we'll figure out who's coming after you and take the fight to them."

Ty paused. "We can do that?"

"Do what? I hate hanging around like a sitting duck. It's kind of my job to find people and do what needs to be done." It was time he started acting like it, too. Nick finished gathering up their things, dumping a bucket of sand on the fire they'd had burning, making sure they wouldn't set the place ablaze.

"Time to go, babe," Nick said, the back of his neck all but blistering with the need to get moving, get away from the guy who was stalking them. He could almost see the guy clearly. Pale, thin and almost too beautiful to be real. Blond. Self-assured.

"He's kinda pretty," Ty said quietly, starting to fold in on himself.

"So are poisonous snakes."

"Yeah." Ty blinked, and then grinned at him. "Well, come on. Let's go. At least this time I'll be awake for the car chase."

"No car chases." Now, now, now. He grabbed Ty's hand with the hand not holding their gym bag and hauled ass, breaking into a run when they got outside.

"I thought you were going to do a hood slide, like on TV," Ty panted when they settled into the seats, grinning wildly at each other.

"Shit, babe. I'd kill myself." He gunned the engine, throwing the car into reverse and doing a three point turn. The tired screeched and smoked a little when they pulled out, the big car fishtailing just the tiniest bit.

He didn't know if they'd make it out without being seen, but Nick was pretty sure they had enough of a head start that they could lose a tail.

Now he just had to decide where to go next.

\*\*\*

Ty bounced, his head bobbing to the music he could hear inside. Little flames danced at his fingertips, lighting up the inside of the car for a few seconds at a time.

He hated this. Hated running, hated dragging his Nick with him.

"They've found our little hideout, haven't they?"

"Huh?" Glancing over, Nick frowned. "Stop that, babe. You'll get cold. And, yeah. They have."

"I knew it. I could tell by the way you were holding your shoulders."

Nick was getting better and better at reading things like that, like it was a talent he'd refused to acknowledge, but now that he was using it, it was getting stronger. Or something.

Ty let the little flames flicker out. "Where are we going?"

"We're going to magic town, babe. Where we'll be harder to find."

Oh, he could tell from the set of Nick's jaw that he didn't like the idea. Heck, Ty wasn't sure he did. "Magic town" was a part of the city where the really weird stuff happened. Where everyone whispered about talents they had, and where it wasn't just an odd flare of the unreal once in awhile. It could be a scary fucking place.

"That sounds like plan W, instead of like, plan C or D, Nick."

"Well, I think we're exhausting the alphabet, babe. I mean, we tried hiding out in normal places. If the blond guy has a finder talent or something, being around a bunch of other freaks will muddy him up a bit."

"Okay." He bit his thumbnail. "If I'm a freak, so are you."

Blue eyes met his again, leaving the road for scant seconds. "I know. I'm kinda zen with that these days."

"You are? You don't think I'm a weird bug anymore?" That might even be better than kissing, though with the Ding Dongs and pies, Nick would taste like chocolate and cherries and he liked kissing.

"Stop it, babe. I can't drive for shit with a hard-on."

"Oh. Uh. I could... you know. Take care of that for you." In the car. He'd seen that in a movie, too.

"What?" The car swerved, which was bad, as they were crossing a bridge into the borough that housed magic town.

"I could blow you while you drive." There. That sounded all adult and experienced and shit.

"Jesus Christ. Are you trying to make me have a heart attack?" Nick's hands clenched on the wheel, the sounds of plastic creaking kind of ominous.

"No, I'm just being nice. Trying to relax you." And I want to see if you taste like chocolate, he thought, smiling a little.

"I won't. Knowing your luck, I'll taste like Slim Jims," Nick answered out loud, and Ty had to laugh.

"Ew."

"Exactly. Now, stop it."

"But it's a nice thought. I like the way you smell. I like the way you taste, too, Slim Jims notwithstanding." Okay, he was really working himself up. Maybe it was the danger of being caught. Maybe it was a reluctance to actually go to magic town. Then again, maybe it was because he really liked Nick and it had been *hours*.

The car swerved again, but this time it was because Nick was pulling over, the tired screeching when the breaks hit hard. The engine clicked off, and Nick stared at him, licking his lips, eyes hot.

"Now I won't kill us. Go for it, babe."

Oh. Yay. Ty turned in his seat and bent, undoing Nick's jeans and reaching inside. Nick was hard for him, cock pushing out, wet and hot, and his mouth watered. God, yes.

"Babe. Come on," Nick moaned, hips rising up, cock bumping the steering wheel.

"Scootch back." No way was he gonna hurt either of them doing this, so he waited until Nick moved the seat back before diving in, licking the tip of that hard cock like an ice cream cone.

"Oh, Christ." Lying back in the seat, Nick put one hand on his head, the other reaching up to grab the headrest of the seat. That spread Nick out for him, pushed the heavy prick up into this mouth.

Ty would have grinned if his mouth wasn't full.

Instead, he sucked all the way down the shaft, his lips closing tight and pulling.

"Ty! Oh, damn. Not gonna last..."

Wait. Ty backed off a little, just barely licking. He wanted this to be good. Wanted it to last a while.

"Tease." Nick's fingers tightened in his hair, trying to pull him, make him go faster.

"Uh-uh." He so wasn't. Ty just liked the feel of Nick in his hands, on his tongue. There wasn't anything wrong with wanting to savor it, was there?"

"No, baby. Nothing wrong... Oh. There."

Ty swirled his tongue around the head, pressing hard at the slit, and Nick bucked for him, shouting, pushing at him again. Ty gave Nick what he needed, bobbing up and down, the steering wheel brushing his ear just enough to remind him to be careful.

Nick was about to come. Ty could smell it, could feel the way Nick's whole body drew up, toes to balls to belly. That was so pretty. So pretty. His Nick.

When Nick did come for him, he sucked it all down, licking that thick cock clean with a happy sigh.

"Yours, huh?" Nick asked, stroking his cheek.

"I can't help it. I've thought that since we met."

"Come here, baby." Drawing him up in the seat, Nick pulled him halfway across the console, reaching down to grab him through his sweats. "Gonna make you come, now."

"O-okay... I like to come." Ty's head fell back, his back arching as his hips started rocking. Oh, yes, please and thank you. That was hot as all get out. "Gonna burn me up."

"As long as you don't mean that literally, babe." Grinning for him, Nick stroked him harder. Fingers squeezing him, thumb rubbing insistently.

Panting, bucking, Ty came, his eyes flying wide open when he did. It kind of surprised him, how fast he blew.

Slumping right back down into his seat, Ty stared at Nick, wanting to kiss him but just not having the energy to move.

"You're not cold, right? Just feeling good?"

"Right." Poor Nick, thinking every time he came he'd start to freeze.

"Cool. Okay, baby. Time to stop playing and get someplace safe, okay?"

Settling back, Ty nodded, ready to face whatever they had to, now. He was ready.

He'd just needed a little Nick time.

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"What do you mean they're gone?" the old man snarled in Devon's ear. "How can they be gone?"

"Apparently, they knew we were coming." He hadn't counted on that, on one of them being talented enough to feel him. "You didn't tell me everything about this pair, did you?"

"You said you would do better than my last retrieval teams. I think you were less than honest with me, as well."

Cold rage settled in his belly. "Do not underestimate me, old man. You made that mistake with this pair of children, and it has cost me my afternoon massage. I will call you when I know their next location."

Devon was the one to sever the connection this time, clicking off his communicator. He watched the team leader, Aiden, who continued to talk to their employer for several minutes.

Then Aiden came over, an apologetic expression on his face. "The boss wants me to bring you in, Sir."

"Does he? I think not. We can catch up to them." Standing in the little hovel of a room their mark had rented told him that the youngsters were getting desperate, and that they would only get worse. Their signal would become louder, clearer.

"I can't..." Aiden swallowed when Devon moved closer, pupils going wide and dark. "He could kill me for disobeying a direct order."

"Nonsense. He knows very well how... persuasive I can be. Send the rest of the team to the cars."

A single barked order had the team fading away, and Devon reached out to take off Aiden's headset, turning it off.

"You'll get much farther in the world working with me instead of against me, my dear," he said.

Aiden blinked, big brown eyes staring into his as the man's Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "I -- I can 't."

Devon removed his right glove, flexing his fingers before he reached down to cup Aiden's cock with his palm, pressing hard against the fabric of Aiden's cargo trousers. "You can. I promise you, you will not regret it."

The flesh beneath his fingers rose, lengthening and hardening. A dark flush stained Aiden's cheeks, and those eyes slid closed, even as that cock pushed into his grip. Devon knew the power of his hands, knew that Aiden understood exactly what Devon wanted to do to him.

"Yes, Sir," Aiden said, dropping to his knees, fingers working open Devon's trousers. "I won't regret this one bit."

His prick was enveloped in wet heat, in the sweetest mouth he'd had in ages, and Devon thought this might be better than a massage. Oh, he knew he'd have to get back to work as soon as they were done, and save the pleasure of having Aiden's tight ass for later.

For the moment, though, he chose to enjoy his new ally. There would be time for work in an hour or so.

## Chapter Nine

Nick hated Magic Town. Usually he hated it because he stood out like a sore thumb. Between all the little baby Goths and the tattooed sideshow guys and the gray men who used magick so much that they drained the life out of themselves, Nick looked like a normal. People would stare and whisper and doors would close, and it always made his work a bitch and a half.

Now, though, he hated it because no one looked twice at him or Ty. It was like they fit in seamlessly, like they radiated some sort of weird magick beam that everyone there could see, and didn't question.

God knew he didn't want to shine the light of weirdness out of his ass.

Ty chuckled, and Nick glared over at him. "Stop it."

"I'm sorry! I could just see you bending over and laying a golden egg or something. Jeez, Nick. It doesn't work that way."

"Well, you tell me how it works, babe. This is new to me."

Shrugging, Ty turned to stare out the window as the car rolled slowly down a street partially blocked with a spilled dumpster. "It just is. I mean, most of these people didn't ask for it anymore than you did. Having a talent. They just do, and they have to deal with it however they can."

"You weren't any happier about coming here than I was. I heard you." Damn it, he wasn't some bad guy for being a little freaked out about all this.

"I didn't say you were bad, and I didn't say I was okay with it." Ty was drooping, shoulders slumping. "I'm just getting tired, Nick. Are we stopping soon? Somewhere where we can find out who's doing this?"

"Yeah. Yeah, we'll stop. Man, we're getting low on cash, though."

They were running out of gas, out of money, and he was starting to run out of ideas. At least he felt like the icy blond had lost their trail for now. Whatever had distracted the guy, it had worked well. If Nick couldn't feel him, then he couldn't find them. For now, anyway.

"I know how I could make us some money."

"No blow jobs on the street."

"What?" Ty stared over at him, brown eyes big as saucers. "No! No, I could do a few tricks, though. Just some simple fire stuff. People pay for that."

"Uh-huh. Nothing to draw attention to us." Fire tricks. Then they'd have to recharge and that would cost them both precious energy.

"Then we can find an empty place and squat. Someplace where no one is home." Ty's eyes went all dreamy. "With a big shower and soft pillows."

"And no dogs."

Ty tilted his head. "You don't like dogs."

"Dogs make noise, babe."

"Oh. Duh." Grinning, Ty bopped to the radio a bit, making Nick shake his head.

How had Ty survived all these years? He'd stopped to wonder that more than once since they'd met.

"I do okay. Just close your... well, no. You're driving. Don't close your eyes. Just think for a minute. Quiet your mind and think of a place with big showers and soft pillows. Then turn where your brain tells you to."

Nick thought it was a wad of bullshit, but he did his best, thinking of someone off on vacation with no dogs and a decent place for this part of town. He took two left turns and a right, and ended parked on a quiet street, one with trees in little planters, with little iron fences around the stoops.

Ty patted his thigh. "Way to go, Nick. We can't park here, though. Go down the block."

"How do you know this shit? I'm the one who does this shit for a living." He put the car in drive, though, didn't he? A half a block down there was another space, and this time the car he parked behind was an old clunker that looked a hell of a lot worse than theirs.

"I dunno." Seeming supremely unconcerned, Ty got out of the car and grabbed their snacks. "We should go in through the alley."

"So we should." Following, Nick stared at Ty's skinny ass, wondering what kind of wonderful things they could get up to in a big bed that had real pillows.

"I heard that." Ty gave a little wiggle, really giving him something to think about, since he was determinedly not thinking about the rest of their situation. It bore thinking about, or they were gonna get dead, and he knew it, but right now nothing was coming to mind as a solution.

Ty led the way to the back alley, pointing to the fire escape ladder, which hung just out of reach. "We need that."

"Give me your belt."

"Nick. I don't have one." Ty gave him this look, one that made Ty seem so young it hurt.

"Damn. I'll just have to have your shirt."

Laughing, Ty struggled out of the long-sleeved t-shirt, and Nick took his off and tied them together, tying his belt to one end to weight it. That ought to make a decent enough rope to pull the thing down.

It took three tries, but he got it, the squeal of rusty metal making him flinch. Christ, that was all they needed, someone catching them at breaking and entering. The pretty blond would be monitoring the police band, no doubt.

When no one came to investigate, Nick pushed Ty up and started climbing, taking the chance on pulling the ladder back up. The noise was less worrisome than someone in this neighborhood seeing the ladder down and reporting it.

It came as no surprise at all to him when Ty stopped at the third floor and pressed his hand to the window, the little latch on the inside sort of... melting open. They got the window up, and no dog appeared, and Nick shook his head.

There was a leather couch. The place had granite countertops in the kitchen.

That all boded pretty well for a big shower and real pillows.

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Ty danced in a little circle, his arms out, his head thrown back. "Look at the shower, Nick! Just look! Wow, it's nice."

"Uh-huh." Nick flipped through a little desk planner he'd found. "They won't be back for three more days. If we're careful we can stay tonight and tomorrow."

"Then we'll be careful." Oh, some people would say what they were doing was way wrong, but they weren't burglars or anything. More like uninvited house-sitters. They'd keep everyone else away.

Nick nodded, grinning a little, blue eyes bright. "Very careful. They even have a washer and dryer, so we can wash the sheets before we leave."

"See there? We're good Samaritans."

"Yeah. We're regular do-gooders. Come here, babe."

Ty took Nick's outstretched hand and moved close, until they were kind of dancing together. Ty loved to dance. He really did, and he'd never danced with Nick before.

"We should go clubbing when this is over," he said, letting his hips do a little grind against Nick's.

"We gonna hang out once this is over, babe?"

"Oh." Oh, shit. He was always saying the wrong thing. He tried to pull away, but Nick wouldn't let him.

"You didn't answer the question."

Ty ducked his head. "I want to."

"Cool."

Blinking, he stared up at Nick. "Cool?"

"Yep. Wanna try out that shower?"

"God, yes!" Pulling away, Ty started shedding clothes, letting them fall wherever, doing a little rite of spring dance. When Nick didn't undress too, just stood there staring, he flushed a little. "Uh. You coming with me?"

"I am. I was just enjoying the view."

"Oh." This time the 'oh' was a good thing, kind of breathless and happy as his dick got hard.

"Yeah. Come on." Nick undressed on the way to the shower, and Ty had the fleeting thought that if there was a washer and dryer, they could do laundry for them, too.

"If you can think about the laundry, I'm doing something wrong." Nick bent over to pull off his socks, and Ty almost had a heart attack at the pretty.

"No, no. This is just right." His hands itched to touch, but Nick slid away to start the water.

Steam. Look. Steam. It had been a long time since Ty had seen a bathroom so nice, had thought about getting this clean.

"Stop gawking and get in!" This time it was Nick who reached out to touch, pulling him into the shower and closing the door.

The water felt amazing. Ty had been getting tired and kinda chilly, but the stream of hot water made him feel ten feet tall. "Oh, Nick. My Nick. Just feel."

"Hot enough?"

"Oh, yeah." Blinking through his wet bangs, Ty stroked Nick's chest. "Not too hot for you?"

"Nah. You must be rubbing off on me. Feels good."

Now, there was an idea. "I could rub off on you now."

"You could, but that would lose us the chance to soap up and get clean."

Good point. Ty grabbed the fancy shower gel/shampoo combo and handed it to Nick.

"Dude. Must be a guy that lives here, huh?"

"Uh-huh. High-powered suit type, even. He's kinda an asshole."

"Then I don't feel so bad." Nick was doing more and more of that kind of mental grasping, and Ty didn't even think Nick noticed. It was both cool and scary.

"No, you feel good." Soapy hands slid over his skin, nothing sexy or anything, just getting him clean, but it felt wonderful.

Ty let his head fall back, let the spray rain down on him while Nick took care of him. Then he did the same for his Nick, getting his hands all lathered up and rubbing. Nick was lean, but he had fascinating muscles, and Ty traced each one, making sure he got Nick good and soapy.

They rinsed off slowly, the water starting to cool off before they were ready. It might be a nice big shower, but it was an old building. Damn it.

Nick turned off the water and got a big towel for him, smiling at him when he shivered a little. "I figure we don't want to undo all the good we did, huh?" Nick asked, rubbing the towel up and down his arms.

"No. This is good. Wait. You don't think he has feather pillows, do you? I'm allergic to feathers."

"Nope. I bet he has those memory foam things. But I also bet he's got squishy ones in the guest bedroom."

"Oh! We're guests, huh? We should stay in the guest bedroom." Ty thought that was the perfect solution. Then he wouldn't feel all oogie about sleeping in some strange guy's bed and making a mess and...

"Sure. We can do that. Come on."

Nick led the way out of the master, and there were *two* more bedrooms. One was an office, and his hands itched to touch the fancy desktop computer they found there, but that would be dangerous, he knew it. He'd send an email to Dave, and that horrible blond man would find them, and it would be all over, and he would lose Nick...

"Stop it." Hauling him to the other bedroom, Nick opened the door to a sleek double bed that had real pillows that didn't have feathers. Cool.

"This suit you, babe?" Nick asked, turning the covers down just like a maid would at a hotel or like a mom would for her child if they were a little cranky or tired or sick.

"It does. I think I could sleep." He wanted to do bad things to Nick, but all of a sudden he was so sleepy that he could hardly stand it. Like dead sleepy.

"No dying." Nick nudged him. "Go on, babe. Pick your side of the bed. We'll sleep. The rest can wait."

"Okay." He slid between the fancy sheets and settled down, pulling the comforter up over him and Nick, snuggling up and sharing warmth. They could rest, sleep. Let themselves go for a bit.

This being on the run thing was hard.

## Chapter Ten

Ty woke up warm and happy, his back against something soft, his front covered with something a lot harder, but just as happy making. Nick. His Nick. In a bed.

Oh, the shower and tub and all were amazing, almost like a battery re-charger, but it was Nick who made him happy. Who made him want. He loved Nick already, so much, and to have a real bed, even if it wasn't theirs, well, it was good.

Very, very good.

Maybe he should make pancakes. He'd bet there was the stuff to make pancakes, although there might not be milk. Still, the people who lived here might have the kind of pancake mix that you made with water. Ty remembered that from when he was a kid. You just added water and boom. Pastry. People who lived like this probably had real syrup, too.

Maybe butter.

Ty started stroking Nick's shoulder, pondering butter. It was a weird thing, how something so normal seemed like a luxury, but it did. He'd grown up on cheap margarine, the kind that came in the big tub and would feed a bunch of foster kids. The only time he'd gotten real butter was when his big brother or his new psychologist or someone would take him out for breakfast, someplace that had the little pats of butter wrapped in foil.

He only knew they called them pats because of Dr. Fry. She had believed that everything had a proper name, and that even poor and crazy kids needed to know what those names were, just in case.

Sitting at Denny's, Ty would unwrap one of those little butter thingees and pull out the butter, which was always ice cold, and put it on his pancakes to watch it melt. Once it got soft, Ty would cut it in half and spread part in between the pancakes, letting the rest kind of ooze on top, mixing it with the syrup.

Nick was like real butter. One of those luxuries that you had to enjoy while you could, because you never knew how long you would have it.

Nick stirred, snuffling a little, and Ty petted him back to sleep, wanting to ignore the world for just a while longer.

"You're thinking too loud to drown out, baby," Nick said, mumbling against his chest. "Try toning it down. It will help."

"Sorry. Sorry, Nick." Ty tried to slide out from under Nick, but it didn't work. Nick just clung to him, holding him in place.

"Don't be. You make a great pillow."

"Yeah? Cool." That made him smile, and Ty fell back on the feather pillow, laughing at the whooshing sound it made. That was so cool. It really was.

"You like that, huh? Maybe we'll have a pillow fight later."

"Oh, we so could. As long as we don't break the pillows."

"You're a good houseguest, Ty."

"I try. Do you want pancakes?"

"If we can find the stuff, sure." Nick sighed a little, rolling off him. "Guess you're awake now, huh?"

"I am. Sorry."

"Quit apologizing. Go on. I'll be out in a minute."

Ty bounced up, bending to kiss Nick before making a beeline for the bathroom. Huh. He always wondered why they said a "beeline". There had to be something about bees that made people say that, but when Ty saw bees they always flew around in circles, or bounced from flower to flower, and that wasn't really a line.

By the time he got to the kitchen, he had a mental image of a little bee chorus line, all side by side in a row, doing little kicks to some kind of bee musical.

It was going to be a good day. He could tell. Oh, look. Just add water shake and pour pancake mix. Real syrup.

Ty opened the refrigerator door with his eyes closed, hoping for butter, but wanting it to be a surprise.

Too fucking cool.

Waking up with Nick was like butter. For sure.

Maybe better.

\*\*\*

Butter.

Lord almighty, Ty could fixate. Still, Nick thought the whole butter monologue was the cutest thing ever. He was tempted to ask Ty if he wanted to use butter for lube; that way he could have his two favorite things together.

That would kinda be gross, though, so he didn't ask. Ty was likely to say yes.

"I would not!" Ty flipped another pancake, looking like some kind of expert chef or something, and it was a far cry from canned spaghetti. Hell, they'd found frozen sausage to heat up, too, so they had a feast.

"Well, I never know with you, kiddo.

Ty snorted. "Uh-huh. I am not the kinky one, Mr. I like it in a car."

"I do everything in my car." He did. Surveillance, eating, fucking. Well, he had done everything in his car. The new car wasn't quite as comfy.

"We should trade it in again," Ty agreed, without him ever having spoken that last part out loud. "If nothing else because the guy after us might have a feel for it now."

"I'll think about it. Hopefully we've lost him for a few. Ty..." Nick paused, not sure how to say what he had to say next. "This is getting kind of scary. I mean, someone is after you hard. And unlike you did when we first met, I don't think they're trying to kill you. I think they want you alive."

Sliding the pancake down on a plate, Ty nodded, starting to chew at his thumbnail now that he could let go of the pan.

"I know, Nick. I just don't know what else to do but run."

"Well, maybe if you explained your talent to me better. I might could dig around a little, see what's what."

Ty gave him an incredulous look. "What's there to explain? I make fire."

"Uh-huh. But how?"

"I don't know. From inside me. That's why I get so cold. It's like I use up all my heat to do it."

"Yeah, but."

"No." Leveling a finger at him, Ty shook his head. "How do you know the stuff you know? How do you use instincts so well? It's the same thing. It's just something I was born with, you know?"

"Honey, the hair standing up on the back of your neck when someone is waiting to try and mug you is one thing. Being able to set shit on fire with your mind is something else. There's no comparison."

Ty's mouth set in a hard line. "I don't want to talk about this anymore. Here's your pancakes."

He watched Ty move around, mixing up more batter, pouring another big pancake. The set of those thin shoulders told him that it didn't matter how much he poked; they weren't going to talk about it. So he just shrugged and dug into his food. It wasn't like he was going to leave Ty to fend for himself, one way or the other. He'd tried that. It hadn't worked out so well.

Shit, he didn't want to leave Ty now. The guy was becoming kind of addictive.

A warm, warm hand covered his, Ty's skin almost feverish. He looked up to meet those big brown eyes.

"Thank you, Nick. I'm sorry. I just don't know what to say that will help you understand."

"Hey, it's cool. Just eat your sausage, huh?"

"Okay. I was really hoping for bacon."

Still, Ty sucked two pieces down, didn't he? Nick hid a smile in his orange juice glass. Oh man, orange juice and syrup. Yuck.

Ty laughed at him. "I like that. The shuddery thing? I always liked to brush my teeth and then have orange juice, too."

"You're a weirdo, man." But Nick winked, loving the little things he was finding out about Ty.

"Well, duh." Finally turning off the stove, Ty sat down across from him and carefully spread butter on his pancakes, just like he had in his little internal speech that Nick had caught.

"So, what's your favorite food, Ty?" Nick planted his elbows on the table and stared, suddenly wanting to know everything there was to know about Ty.

"Hmm. Pizza, maybe. I mean, people take pizza for granted. You can't order it when you're broke, you know?"

"Yeah. I like a lot of stuff, myself. Like clam chowder. Is that weird? And I like those Caesar salads that you get at like, a steak house."

"Oh, those are good. Garlicky, huh?"

"You know it." They shared a grin. "We'll have to make something amazing for dinner, huh?"

"Oh, there's good stuff in the freezer. And canned mushrooms. I love those."

Nick nodded. Maybe they could make a pizza. There were cookbooks in the cabinet by the stove.

"Mmm. Pizza. Yeah. I like that."

"Cool." He got the dishes gathered up and started loading the dishwasher. A fucking dishwasher. Too neat. "Wanna watch a movie or something?"

"I do!" Ty bounced. "They have the Three Musketeers. The old one, with Oliver Reed. Have you ever seen it?"

"Nope." Swashbuckling. He could do that.

"You'll like it. It's way over the top." Dropping the last fork in the little silverware holder, Ty started the machine for him and grabbed his hand. "Come on! We can be lazy all day and just watch movies and lie on pillows."

"Sounds like a good plan, baby. Real good."

"Excellent." Ty spun around in the blink of an eye, giving him a big old kiss. "Love you, Nick."

Nick just blinked and stared, not sure what to say, but Ty wasn't waiting for an answer. He just bounded off to set up the DVD player, humming a little tune. Looked like his confession hadn't even fazed him.

Kind of amazing, considering that Nick felt like he'd been hit by a ton of bricks.

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Devon rolled over, groping for the phone that was ringing, a jolt running up and down his arm when his unprotected skin came into contact with metal and plastic.

"Yes, sir?" he said, trying for the obedient tone he knew was expected of him.

"I do not pay you to lie about and sleep, Devon," the old man barked into his ear.

Aiden, his latest playtoy, stirred and murmured querulously. Devon shushed him with a single touch. Poor love. He had been told to bring Devon in. Instead, he had taken a thrashing for letting Devon go his own way.

It seemed only polite to take the man to bed and love the hurt away.

"You don't pay me to burn out my talent, either. They're in magic town. I shall have to be at the top of my game. Let me recharge. They aren't going anywhere."

"I need him brought in, damn it! You don't understand."

"What I understand is that you've waited this long. You can wait a few more days."

Shifting against him, Aiden tried to take the phone away, his need obvious and insistent against Devon's thigh.

Devon growled a little warning, and his new lover backed off with appropriate speed. Good boy.

"Find them and bring them to me by tomorrow, damn it. You won't get another chance."

"I will do my job." He snarled a little into the phone, too, just for fun. "Do not bother me until tomorrow at five pm."

Ringling off, Devon tossed the phone off the bed, where he wouldn't inadvertently touch it. Then he reached for Aiden, who brought him pleasure, not pain. "Don't interrupt me again," he said, stroking Aiden's chest and belly, working down to the beautiful, stiff cock.

"No, sir. I promise." So obedient, even when those lovely eyes flashed defiant fire. Really, the contrast was addictive.

"Good. Good. Come here and kiss me."

Aiden rose up against him, eager and needy, kissing his mouth with a blind fury of passion, hips rocking that hard prick against his hand. Sometimes Devon wondered if he hadn't gone into the wrong business.

He could have made a fortune as a whore.

Ah, well, it was good to have something to fall back on. Especially if he couldn't track down his quarry.

Sighing, he pulled Aiden closer, biting hard enough to draw blood. He had plenty of time to think about that.

Later.

## Chapter 11

Ty bounced around, knowing this would have to be their last night in the borrowed house. His fingers wanted to scratch at his arms, his whole body vibrating with it. They were getting close again.

"Maybe it's time to take the fight to them, babe," Nick said from where he lay on the couch, dangling one leg over the edge.

"What do you mean?" That was crazy talk. Hell, he didn't even know for sure what the fight was about.

"I mean, between your mad skills and my little talents, maybe we could get the blond guy. We could get him to tell us who's behind all this, what they want."

"He has, like, an army. You ran away from him. This is not a good plan."

"So what are we going to do then?"

"I say we leave the city." Ty paced, waving a hand wildly. "I mean, they'll lose interest, right? There are a lot of talented people in magic town. If we go, they'll find someone else." There had to be someone else, damn it. Ty was tired of running, tired of being exhausted.

"They've been pretty persistent, babe. Pretty specific. I just say if we're tired of running, we go to the source."

Ty whirled and leveled a finger at Nick. "This is kind of a sudden change of heart, don't you think? You were the one who said we had to run, run, run. Go, go, go."

"I know." Nick stood and walked right over to him, getting into his space. "That was before I knew you loved me."

"Oh." He stared into Nick's eyes, the blue not so icy today, and felt his chest swell up, his heart racing. "I do."

Nick nodded, reaching out to touch his cheek. "I know. Makes a difference. To begin with, babe, this was just a favor. I figured I would get these guys off you and we'd go our separate ways."

He couldn't help but tense up at that, his lip quivering a little. "Now, though?"

"Now I figure you and me, we're a thing." Nick shrugged, but those eyes never wavered, never glanced away from his. "We're a team, huh? And what if this guy is like, your

family or something, and you're a threat to his name or whatever. People like that don't give up."

Ty tilted his head. "Me and the blond guy? Related? He's awfully pretty."

"No, dork. Whoever his boss is."

"Oh." He chewed his thumbnail. "I doubt it. My cousin would have told me that, right?"

"Maybe." Nick sighed, hugging him suddenly, pulling him close and loving on him. "I just want it over, and I have this feeling that it's not going to be as long as we run."

"No. I know that. I just don't know if now is the time." Ty looped his arms around Nick's neck. "We could just stay here and pretend a few more hours, huh?"

"We could." The smile almost reached Nick's eyes, just crinkling them up at the edges. "What did you have in mind?"

"Some snuggling? Maybe necking."

"Maybe fucking?" Nick pushed against him a little, hard as nails and so hot it almost burned. Him. The one who usually burned things.

"I could so go there."

"Come on, babe. Let's get busy for a while, then, forget the world. We have a few hours..."

"Yeah. Yeah, a few." That would be enough to make it all go away and then make a plan. He didn't think he'd go with Nick's plan.

That was just crazy talk.

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Nick pulled Ty down on his lap, kissing that mouth until they both grunted and had to come up for air. He was so hard he hurt, and he was still wearing his jeans. They both were.

It was like Ty was desperate to get him to forget that he'd even mentioned going after the blond, trying to get the fight out there in the open.

He was tired of hiding.

Nick wanted to settle back into life. He missed having a place of his own, missed having a routine, and okay, so his job wasn't the best for security or whatever, but it was his, and he was good at it.

"You're not focusing," Ty said, hands on his cheeks, those dark eyes staring into his as that skinny body rode his.

"Sorry, babe. Trust me, I'm with you."

He was, too. Really. He just needed to get his zipper open so they could really get busy.

"I can do that." Grinning, Ty slid to the floor between his knees, opening his fly and pulling his cock free. His back arched, his head falling back, and sure enough, Ty took him in, hot mouth closing around his dick.

Moaning, Nick reached down, his fingers touching Ty's stretched lips, and they both grunted, Ty licking at him, sucking him. It felt so good that he wanted it to last forever, even if he knew it would probably be minutes, maybe seconds.

Ty's hands flattened on Nick's thighs, and his baby went to town, really giving him what for. His cock throbbed, his thigh muscles like steel, his hips starting to pump. His belly felt like you could bounce quarters off it. That mouth felt like heaven.

Like always, Ty seemed to hear his thoughts, and gave him more and more. Hot, wet, and so good, Ty's mouth sealed around him, giving him the best kind of friction. When Ty reached down and pressed his balls up against the base of his cock, it was all over. Nick came like the proverbial ton of bricks, his breath wheezing in his chest.

The only word that would come out of his mouth was Ty's name.

Sucking hard, Ty cleaned him off, working him until he was almost too sensitive. Then Ty crawled back up on his lap and pushed those jeans right down, pushing up against his belly.

"Please, Nick. Please."

He heard what Ty didn't say. Please make me forget. Please make it all go away for like, five minutes. Nick could do that, and he wrapped his fingers around Ty's cock, thumb running up and down the underside. He wanted to make Ty feel just as good as he did, just as melted and loved.

Stroking up and down, he pulled at Ty's cock and leaned down to kiss Ty hard, putting everything he felt but hadn't said into it, wanting Ty to know.

He could swear he heard Ty in his head, saying he understood.

Moaning again, Nick pulled harder, urging Ty on, feeling the silkiness of the skin beneath his, feeling the strength of Ty's heartbeat right there.

God.

Jerking, gasping, Ty came for him, wet and hot and perfect. He rubbed his hand against Ty's belly, kissing lazily now, licking at that hot mouth, tasting himself.

Nick rubbed his nose against Ty's, smiling a little. "Love you, too, kiddo."

Ty smiled back, eyes heavy-lidded. "I know."

"Cool." Now all they had to do was make a plan.

Whether Ty liked it or not.

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"I have them, sir. Third floor. West facing windows." Aiden sounded efficient, completely in charge, and ready for action.

It was something of a turn on, Devon decided. Most of his lovers were far too dependent. Aiden had a delicious mix of strong and needy.

"Excellent. They will run, as you well know. I want to be where they're most likely to come out of their little hole."

He had to admit, the two runaways had picked a lovely little hideout. No one was home in the apartment, they had a bed and a relatively easy way out through the fire escape. He'd felt them when he touched the rusty metal earlier, felt them in the throes of pleasure so strong that it nearly brought him to his knees.

It had very nearly had him dragging Aiden back to that ridiculous tactical van that his employer had insisted he have, as well. Gracious. As if he needed a SWAT team like that after the last fiasco. No, Devon much preferred to handle this himself.

"The team is in place, sir. Shall we flush them out?"

"Yes. Come here."

Aiden came to him, combat boots thumping against the pavement of the alley between the buildings. "Sir?"

Devon reached out and touched the bare skin of Aiden's wrist, holding on long enough and hard enough that his fingers made impressions in Aiden's skin. "I need you to be my eyes, my dear. Now, go do your job."

Aiden's eyes rolled back for a moment, but he nodded, trotting off to lead his team up the front stairs. That would flush the little birds out the back, and Devon had his hands and a few back-up team members. It would take nothing at all to subdue the two targets.

The stairwell was dark and cool, the stairs creaking under Aiden's boots. The men climbed at Aiden's back, as silent as possible. Through Aiden, he could see the dust motes dance on the sun that came through the high dormer window on the second floor landing, could see how dark it became once the men passed that window. The sun was going down, after all.

When the men got to the door of the hideout, Devon knew that the runaways were already trying to escape. They knew. He broke the connection with Aiden, not wanting to be distracted, and started scanning the fire escape, his hand on the iron, waiting for vibrations.

"Keep an eye out, sharply," he murmured to his crew, watching, waiting.

"They've gone out the window, sir," Aiden said in his earpiece.

"They're not coming down." Damn it. "Try up. Try the roof!"

"Yes, sir."

"I want the team at their car to disable the vehicle."

Devon felt nothing through the fire escape. Nothing. Moving down the alley, he touched everything from bricks to random pieces of... "The drainage pipe. They've climbed that drainage pipe to the roof!"

Suddenly everything was a flurry of motion, the teams moving with more alacrity than they'd shown in days, all of them trying to figure out where the little birds would land. Devon knew that they'd decided to abandon the car, that the skinny one wanted to run, that the other one wanted to fight.

Now, if he could only decide where they'd come to ground.

Closing his eyes, Devon concentrated hard, biting at his lower lip. He could separate the thoughts if he only tried. He knew he could.

There. They would have to come down two buildings over. There wasn't an easy way across to the next rooftop.

"There." Devon pointed out the big brick building, motioning for the team to cross the street, waving the van on. "Aiden, two buildings down!"

"Yes, sir."

Devon hustled, knowing he was cutting it dangerously close to his deadline, knowing that for all of his bravado, he would make a very serious enemy in his employer if he failed one more time.

He got to the bottom of the fire escape just as the bigger of the two targets did. Devon felt the incredible heat as the smaller one worked up his power, preparing to let fly with whatever hellfire he could produce. He lunged, knowing that he had to act quickly, watching the way the pupils of the one in front of him dilated.

"No!" The one still above screamed it, the sound echoing in the alley, bouncing crazily off the walls.

"Yes," Devon hissed, putting his hands on the one in front of him, concentrating on sending him deep into sleep.

The big one slumped, and Devon caught him, the sound of rounds chambering in weapons loud in his ears. He swung the limp body of his target around to face the skinny one, who had just landed on the ground.

"You try anything and it will fry him first," Devon said, taking the chance that the young one was really as much in love as he thought he was.

"No. Nick. Please. He doesn't have to be involved. It's me he wants. I'll go with you."

Devon smiled, watching Aiden close in on the young one from behind. "Oh, you'll both come with me. And you'll come quietly, or your friend here will never wake up. Do you understand?"

The little bird's shoulders slumped, all of the fire going out of him all at once. "Yeah. Yeah, I understand. Let's go."

"That's the spirit. Aiden? Let's get them in the van. I have a phone call to make."

## Chapter Twelve

"You got them. Excellent, Devon. You know where to deliver them."

The voice on the phone had taken on the unctuous tone that he hated, making his hackles rise. "I trust the money will be transferred to my account. In fact, I insist upon it before I deliver the subjects."

Devon watched the two captives, the little bird vibrating, rocking, arms around his knees. The other was still out cold, Devon's touch having done exactly the job he had intended it to. The toe of the little one's shoe just touched the other man's limp body. It was as pitiful as anything Devon had ever seen, and he marveled at the touch of guilt he felt before he shook it off.

"You impertinent pup! You bring them to me, or I will hunt you down like the mad dog you are. Do you hear me?"

"I could hardly miss it. You are shouting at me, after all."

"Then do your job. I have been patient with you long enough."

"They will be delivered to you right away."

The phone clicked off, and Devon bit his lip, staring again at the two lads he was so blithely sending to the old man. Really, it was completely unlike him to have a conscience, so he had to assume that his sudden attack of nerves was based on something that was going to happen to him.

Foreshadowing, as it were.

"Stop the van."

The smaller captive's head popped up, those unusually dark eyes going wide. The kid opened his mouth to speak, but subsided with one look at Devon's face. His mouth snapped shut, and he put his head down once more.

Devon nodded sharply at Aiden, who went up to the driver and repeated the order a bit more forcibly. With a gun to the back of the neck.

The van slowed, then stopped, and all of the men went to ready status. It took more than a small push to get them to stand down. It took both hands on the walls of the vehicle, and nearly all of the strength Devon still possessed after such a long day of using his talents.

Aiden opened the door and stepped out, holding out a hand for him, which he took gratefully. Devon glanced over his shoulder at the driver. "Take them to the old man. Tell him I had some pressing business elsewhere. I will expect to get paid."

The door slammed shut under Aiden's deft touch, and the van went on without them. Devon glanced about. Now all he had to do was to decide where they were. And what they were going to do next.

\*\*\*

Ty sat and tried not to shake. He tried to will Nick to wake up, especially now that the icy dude was gone. That one had been the only one with power, the only one who could shut Ty's fire down, but it wouldn't do any good to try and escape with Nick out cold.

There were lots of guys still left to fight. Ty would need help.

Come on, Nick. Ty squeezed his eyes shut and prayed. Come on. We need to go.

Nick didn't stir, and Ty didn't feel a thing pushing back against the mental shove he'd put into his words. Whatever that asshole had done to his Nick, it was deep. Deep where sleep lived.

Sighing, Ty huddled in on himself even more, tightening his arms around his knees. Maybe he could blow the van up; of course that would be stupid since he and Nick were still in it.

Suddenly, the guy next to the driver got very busy on the radio, and Ty knew he'd have to make a move soon. They had to be close. They'd been riding a long time since blondie boy had jumped ship, taking a lot of turns once they slowed down and got off the highway.

If he was going to get them out of this, he'd have to do it now.

"You do know what I can do, right?" Ty murmured to the closest muscle. He glanced up from his knees, meeting the guy's lizard eyes. "They did tell you, right?"

"Shut up."

"No, really. I can hurt you."

The guy sneered. "Then why don't you?"

Ty took a deep breath, tensing every muscle in his body and letting out a tremendous mental scream.

*NICK!*

Then he reached out and grabbed the closest man, letting the fire build up in his body until he was ready to explode. When the guy started screaming, Ty let go and went for the next one.

By the time he got to Nick, he ought to be too cold to hurt anyone.

\*\*\*

Nick snapped awake when the van turned over on its side.

He landed hard on his shoulder, and something metal fell against him, slamming into his cheek. It was so hot it almost burned him, but it was solid, and he grabbed it finding out that it was a gun about the time he made it upright.

Ty. Where the fuck was Ty?

Screaming, shouting and the sound of tearing metal drowned everything else out, but Nick knew Ty had called out to him. Obviously they were in some very deep and fucked up shit.

The sickening sliding motion finally stopped, and Nick bounced up, feeling bruised, but strangely energized. Maybe that was what happened when you slept through your own kidnapping.

A scream drew his attention behind him, and Nick whirled, ready to shoot down whoever might be hurting Ty. It wasn't Ty screaming, though. It was the guy Ty had a hold of.

"Ty! Stop. We got to go, baby. Now."

Head snapping around, Ty stared at him, eyes like holes in a blanket. They looked huge and dark and pupil-less, which kinda freaked Nick out a little, making him recoil.

"Nick. C-cold."

It came out as a whisper, Ty's lips barely moving, and Nick cursed, knowing he'd have to move fast, or Ty would collapse. He'd expended most of his energy. Good thing Nick had taken a little nap.

Springing into action, Nick whacked the nearest guy across the face with the rifle, reaching for Ty. His free hand clamped down around one thin wrist, his muscles bunching as he pulled. He aimed the gun in his other hand at the door of the van, which was, thankfully, up, not down, and started blowing holes in it.

The next few minutes were a cacophony of sound and heat and fury. Then the two guys next to the door went down, and Nick popped up, dragging Ty with him.

"Time to go, baby. Come on."

They had to crawl out of the van, and Nick didn't think Ty was gonna make it there for a minute. He was breathing like he'd run the four minute mile, and his skin was fucking clammy and pale as a ghost's. The kid did it, though, staggering along behind him, whimpering.

The neighborhood was frighteningly posh. Like scary, gated yard neighborhood, with fancy security posh. He searched the street, looking for a car to snatch, but this wasn't the kind of place where people parked junkers out by the sidewalk.

Damn it.

"Ty! Come on, Ty, I need one last thing from you."

"W-what? I can d-do it."

"We need a smokescreen. Something for them to focus on when we run. The neighborhood, I mean. We need a fire."

"O-okay."

Ty's skin was taking on that icy feel, and those poor lips were blue. Just fucking blue. They had to hurry, had to get Ty somewhere safe, where they could warm him up.

Looking around wildly, Ty led him two doors down, where a fancy hedgerow hid one of the big houses from sight. Yeah. Yeah, that would make a lot of smoke. Confusion.

The shrubs went up like dry scrub under Ty's lightest touch. Nick had never seen Ty at full power like that, and if he thought about it too hard it would make his balls shrivel up. So he dragged Ty down the street, ducking into gated drives when people started running toward the fire and screaming.

They'd get away, this time. He knew it.

But man, that had been way too close. Maybe it was time to do what Ty wanted and leave the city.

For good.

\*\*\*

"You lost them. How could you lose them?"

"We didn't have Devon, sir. He said he had another capture to do for you. Left us mid-town."

The Englishman gritted his teeth, his hands clenching into tight fists. Damnation. What was Devon trying to pull? He had been given explicit instructions. There was no way the little bastard could have known that his own death was imminent.

"They cannot hide for long in this part of town," he snapped. "Surely you can find two scrungy boys."

"There's the fire, sir. It's locked down the whole area with fire and police personnel. It's going to be hard to canvas the area and be discreet."

"Well, do it anyway. That's what I pay you for!" He roared the last into the phone, slamming it back into its cradle. Really, this one was beginning to be a problem of epic proportions. How hard could it be to capture one scrawny firebug?

Clearly it was more difficult than he'd anticipated.

### Chapter Thirteen

Nick paced. He fretted. He dunked Ty in hot water repeatedly.

They were in some kind of carriage house, still in the neighborhood where they'd gone down in the van, but on the fringes, out where the gates didn't lock anymore, and where weeds were taking over the sides of the road, instead of fancy boxwoods and roses.

He wasn't sure how he'd known the little guest house would be empty, but he had, and damned if the door hadn't been unlocked. Who left the door to their carriage house unlocked, especially when it had a fully stocked kitchen and cable?

Not that Nick was gonna complain.

Sighing, he went to the microwave and heated up another towel, putting it on Ty's chest. The poor guy was still shivering, still unconscious. It made Nick a little sick to his stomach to think of how Ty had been forced to fight those guys all alone, how he'd had to use his power full blast.

Nick knew the easiest way to get Ty up and running would be to curl up with him and give him warmth, but he also knew that would put both of them down for the count, and one of them needed to be awake and aware. They were still in enemy territory.

They needed a car. They needed to get away from the city, he saw that now. That whole hiding in plain sight thing wasn't going to work. Neither was finding out who was after them or why. Nick didn't give a shit anymore.

He just wanted to run. To keep Ty safe. Somehow, going back to his life and his job just didn't seem important anymore. Only Ty did.

The towel eased Ty a little bit more, every application of wet and dry heat making those wiry muscles relax, making that thin body stop quaking. They still had a long way to go, though, and no time to do it in.

A sound at the back door that led through the little kitchenette had Nick tensing, pulling out the gun he'd stolen from the van when they'd fled. It probably only had a few rounds left, but just the look of it would be enough to scare off a suburban housewife or a maid.

He got his body between the couch where Ty lay and the door, watching, his whole body going still as a stone.

"Ah. Yes. I've been waiting on you boys." An older man with a shock of white hair and some crazy assed white eyebrows stuck his head through the door, and then the rest of his stocky body, hands held at shoulder height. "Now, now, don't shoot me. I'm on your side."

No one was on their side, and Nick didn't relax a bit. "I don't know who you are, Mister, or what you want, but we're pretty much a contained unit. We're just looking to hide out until things settle and it gets dark."

Waiting on them. Yeah. Sure.

“Of course, of course.” The old man gave him a smile, moving carefully around him, and Nick turned, tracking the guy with the gun, wondering if he could do it, if he could just shoot the man point blank if he had to.

“Of course you can, if you have to in order to protect this one. You’re very much in love with him.”

The words shocked him enough that the gun’s barrel dipped, and Nick felt his jaw drop open. Which was, of course, when the old man moved way faster than he would have believed possible, going to Ty’s side and laying hands on Ty’s skin.

Just about the time he was about to shoot the guy, though, Ty’s eyes popped open, dark and foggy, but clearly open and awake.

Ty yawned, rubbing at his face a little. “Hey, Nick. Are we alive?”

Nick pointed the gun at the man who had done in two seconds what he’d been trying to do for two hours. He very deliberately let the gun drop to his side, dangling in lax fingers.

“Yeah, baby. We’re alive. And this nice man is going to explain everything.”

Ty blinked at the gray haired guy, looking owlsh. “Oh. Cool.”

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Ty really didn’t think anyone could explain anything anymore. He wasn’t sure he wanted an explanation. Maybe, just maybe, he and Nick could just go away, run away, maybe Nick would be ready now. They could go to Aruba. Fiji. Guam.

The grandpa looking guy laughed. “I’m not sure you would like Guam. Why don’t you both come up to the house. I have hot food and a much softer bed.”

“Why don’t you explain?” Nick said, sounding a little on edge. His poor Nick. It had been a tough couple of days.

“It’s rather a long story,” the man said. “I’m Alan, by the way. I used to work for the man who wants you so badly.”

Huh. That could be very good, or very bad. “I’m Ty. He’s Nick. Do you have waffles?”

“Ty!”

Ty stuck his tongue out at Nick. “I’m tired. I want waffles and a bed and a hot shower. Is that so bad?”

“Of course it’s not,” Alan said, smiling. “Come on, then. I’ll take you up to the house. We’ll go through my little hedge maze, so no one will see.”

Nick grimaced, but nodded finally after Ty sent him the best pout, complete with quivering lip. Nick just couldn't resist him. It kind of gave Ty a happy.

They followed Alan out of the house, Ty feeling as wobbly as a newborn colt. He took the hand Nick offered him when he stumbled, feeling the untapped warmth, right there. He wasn't sure what Alan had done, but he didn't really need to pull strength from Nick.

He just wanted to because he knew it felt so good. No one played Energizer bunny for him better than his Nick.

"Interesting, how you've thought of him as yours from the very beginning, isn't it?"

"Huh?" Ty felt his cheeks heating, his ears as hot as could be. "Oh. Well..."

"Nothing to be embarrassed about, man. Sometimes a strong talent like yours needs a focus. I think Nick is your focus."

"I think that's a load of hooey," Nick said. "I don't mind being his lover, though."

Ty's smile stretched his cheeks until he thought he would bust. "That works for me."

He would much rather believe it was something real, and not just a byproduct of magic, what he and Nick had. Whatever it was they had.

"Cool." Nick squeezed his hand, sending warmth all through him, making his cock twitch, which could be really inconvenient at the moment.

Alan chuckled, shrugging. "However you want to explain it, that's fine."

"Look, what are we doing here? Where are we going?" Nick was starting to balk, slowing down, holding him back.

"I told you. We're going to the main house where I can get you some food and you can have a shower and a rest. I promise, I'm not working with the old man."

"The old man. This is the guy who wants Ty so bad?"

They got moving again, finally heading around the last of the bushes to find themselves at the back of a large house, all painted white with brown beams criss-crossing it. There was a name for that, but Ty couldn't for the life of him remember what it was.

"Tudor," Alan said, making Ty jump almost a foot off the ground.

"How did you?"

"You're not the only one with talent." Alan winked, ushering them inside. "Now, what would you like first? Food, or a shower?"

“I’d like some food.” Nick sounded completely reasonable, but there was something brewing underneath the surface. Ty could tell. “I’ve been dunking Ty every half hour or so, so I’m squeaky clean.”

“Very well, then. Have a seat.” Alan waved them to seats at the kitchen counter, which had that fancy rock surface and all. “Eggs and bacon?”

“I like bacon,” Ty said, grinning a little, the prospect of food outweighing the bad of all the rest, at least for now.

“Sure.” Nick rolled his shoulders, glancing around. “Sure is nicer inside.”

“Yes, well. The slightly shabby exterior keeps the neighbors from wanting to get to know me. Genteel poverty is so passé.”

Ty snorted, his fingers stroking the cool stone counter. “Can I have a Coke?”

“Sure, son. There’s soda, juice and tea in the fridge.”

“He’s not your son. Right?” Nick gave Alan a hard look.

“No. No, it’s a figure of speech.”

Oh, good. He didn’t want to think about Alan maybe being his dad. That was freaky, and he’d had enough of freaky. Freaky was on the bus, heading out of town. Zoom.

“So, who’s this old man?”

Alan pulled out pans and forks, opening the fridge to get out eggs and hand Ty a Coke. “Tea for you, Nick?”

“Yeah. You didn’t answer me.”

Ty looked from one to the other, biting his fingernail. He didn’t want anyone to fight.

“I know.” Stopping, Alan stared right into Nick’s eyes. “I will tell you everything I know. I just think you both need to eat and rest.”

Nick searched Alan’s eyes, and then seemed to relax. “Okay. Iced tea, then.”

“Good. Now, let me get you some food.”

Ty knew it was probably too good to be true, but he wanted to trust Alan, wanted to relax, even if was just for a little while. So he watched Nick and smelled bacon frying and let himself have the little fantasy that this was normal, that there were no guys with guns or people who wanted to kill him.

It wouldn’t last, but it worked for him as long as he had it.

## Chapter Fourteen

Nick felt a heck of a lot better after he had some food and all, but he still wanted answers out of Alan. Too bad he didn't get any before the man shooed them off to bed. Okay, so Ty had been yawning hugely, and making these incredibly cute sleepy noises, but Nick had been ready to give the guy the third degree.

Damn it.

He lay staring at Ty, wondering how all this had happened. Then he decided that was no use, and started tallying up what he knew. Ty had a special talent. A very special one in a city known for special talents. Someone, a man Alan called the old man, was after Ty for that talent. Somehow, Ty knew a little something about why, but they were close enough now that Nick could almost see Ty's thoughts, and the knowledge was a half formed thing. Something Ty didn't really know why he knew.

Then there was the cold blond who had hunted them down, but bailed before they were delivered. The robot paramilitary guy with him had been nothing but a drone, but could be dangerous.

Then there was Alan. What the hell was this guy about? Secret programs. Business associations gone bad.

It was all a little much to take in.

Nick turned over, facing the window, which was covered with heavy blackout drapes. It was damned hard to tell whether they were coming or going.

Maybe he should go talk to Alan now, while Ty was still snoozing.

He started to get out of bed, but Ty put a hand on his hip, making shushing noises, pulling him back down.

"Shh. Sleeping."

"Ty. Babe. I need to go talk to Alan."

"No. He won't answer any questions until he's ready. Sleep now."

"I can't." It would be nice if he could, but he guessed he'd slept long enough as it was. Passed out and all.

"Oh." Ty blinked at him when he turned over to stare. "Well, I could help you."

"You're not awake enough, babe."

"Sure I am." Ty grinned at him, reaching down to push one hand into the soft sweats Alan had given him.

"Well, if you're sure." It would help him sleep, he was pretty certain.

"I am." Ty stroked him, that hand like solid fire against his skin, pulling him to hardness in no time.

"Then knock yourself out." He spread his legs and pushed into the touches, wanting more and more all the time.

Ty laughed at him. “No, no. Then I’d be back asleep, and you’d be lonely.”

“Wouldn’t want that.”

“Nope.” Wiggling, Ty slid down his body, lips moving down the center of his chest, all the way down to the waistband of his sweats. “Lift up.”

He did, and Ty pulled his sweats down, his cock springing free, fully hard now, and leaking. Oh, yeah. Ty’s mouth felt amazing around him, so hot and wet that he could hardly stand it. Ty sucked at him, lips sealing tight, sliding up and down the shaft of his cock.

Nick let his head fall back, let his fingers slide through Ty’s hair. He knew it was probably selfish as hell, but he let Ty take care of him. That mouth, those hands, they worked his cock and his balls, one finger sliding back to tease his ass.

God, it felt fucking fine.

Ty started moving faster, going all the way down to the root before popping back up, and damn. Just damn. His balls drew up, his back going tight, and Nick came, his breath hitching in his chest. Goddamn.

Leaning against his belly, Ty stroked his thighs. “Better?”

“I will be in a minute. Come up here.” Ty would be needing, too, and then they could have a nap.

Ty scrambled up, pushing against him and begging a kiss. He gave it easily, happily, not even questioning their connection now. He grabbed Ty’s hot cock while their lips met, all hot and wet and tasting like his come. God.

Just... Yeah.

“Nick. My Nick.” Ty said it against his mouth as he came, wet heat spreading between them, and he chuckled as he thought it was a good thing he’d taken off Alan’s sweats.

Somehow he figured it was bad form to get come all over your host’s clothes.

They settled in, both of them shivering a little as they cooled off, and Ty pulled the covers up over them, patting him sleepily. “You good?”

“I am.”

“Coo...” Ty was back asleep before he finished the word, and Nick chuckled.

He really wasn’t really all that sleepy still, but he was much more likely to relax. A good orgasm was always the thing for insomnia.

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Ty woke up with the niggling feeling that something wasn’t right.

Like really, really not right.

He didn’t know why, because Nick was asleep beside him, and there were no weird noises or anything. No one was busting in with guns or knives, and no one was trying to stuff him into a bag.

So what was the deal?

Yawning, he crawled out from under Nick's arm and headed to the bathroom, grabbing the sweats Nick had worn, just in case he met Alan in the hall. No need to shock the man with his danglies.

He was halfway there when something caught his attention. Something. A feeling that he knew he'd had before. A presence.

Shit. Whatever it was, it was chilling him to the bone.

He thought about waking Nick, but he didn't want to if he was just being paranoid, so he crept down the hall instead, peeking into Alan's living room.

His eyes widened, and his mouth dropped open. That was... Dude. That was the guy. The blond guy who kept trying to kill him. Sitting on Alan's couch and sipping tea, calm and pretty as you please.

Ty didn't think. He just acted, running into the room and throwing himself at Alan, arms and legs flying. "You bastard! You said we'd be safe here! You said! And now he's here! He tries to hurt us. "

Nick. He screamed that one word in his mind, calling for the one solid thing in his world. Just Nick.

"Ty!" Two voices said it at once, Nick screaming for him from the back hall, Alan trying to get him to stop flailing.

"Ty," Alan said. "Stop. Devon has been forced to change sides. He means you no harm."

"Bullshit! He can change again. He's an asshole."

He kept whacking at Alan until a hand landed on his shoulder and his arms went limp, like that touch had told them to stop working.

"You could at least hear me out," that snotty British voice said.

A loud, sharp click behind Devon told him that Nick was on the scene, and that somewhere, somehow he'd found a gun.

"Sure, Blondie. We'll hear you out," Nick growled, pressing the gun to Devon's head. "I think you, and Alan, had better start talking."

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Devon sat calmly, legs crossed, sipping at his tea.

Gracious, the two targets were so... emotional.

"So, how the hell did you find us?" Nick, the light one, was asking.

"I have a luxury my former employer does not" Devon replied, holding up his hands. "Psychometry."

"So you touch things and know shit. No wonder you always found us."

“Indeed. When I heard from a clairvoyant friend that the old man had put a kill order out on me, as well, I decided to find you and tell you what I know.”

“So we can do your dirty work and get rid of him?” That came from the fire user, the one with the huge talent.

“If needs be.”

“No one here is doing any dirty work,” Alan said, giving them all a repressive look. “He’s unlikely to look for you here, so we have time to make a plan.”

“Why is he so unlikely?” Nick asked, crossing his arms.

“Because people rarely look for anything right under their own noses, hmm?” Devon raised a brow at Alan, smiling a little.

“Exactly.”

Nick’s expression hardened into something that Devon could respect. It had an aspect of real danger. “I think it’s time you all did some talking.”

Alan sighed, looking old all of a sudden. “Yes, Nick. I think you’re right.”

Devon rolled his eyes, settling back with his tea. Now for the drama.

Oh, goodie.

## Chapter Fifteen

Nick sat and stared while the blond and Alan glanced at one another, obviously trying to figure out where to begin. Looked like it was going to be quite a stand-off, and he really didn't have the patience for that right now.

He pressed the gun against the back of the shining blond head. "You first."

Devon, that was the guy's name, sighed. "Very well. I was hired by the old man to find the fire user."

"My name is Ty."

"Yes, very well. I'm sure you understand why I generally make it a policy not to get to know my targets. At any rate, he had sent more than one team to take you, Ty, and they had all failed. Naturally, they were all para-military types with no talent to speak of, because they work far more cheaply than I do."

Alan snorted, drawing all their eyes for a moment. "Naturally."

"Are you ready to let me go on?" At Alan's nod, Devon shrugged. "When I was brought in, my initial instructions were to take Ty and kill the extra. No offense."

"None taken," Nick said. It would be hypocritical of him to object, considering what he did for a living. "When did that change?"

"When I reported back to my employer that the two of you had some sort of bond, and that you had talent as well, Nick. He seemed most intrigued."

"Great. Intriguing. That's me."

"I think you are, Nick," Ty said, chewing his thumbnail. That was always a sign of nervousness with Ty, and Nick wanted to go to him, but he felt way more comfortable behind Devon, holding the only gun in the room.

"Thanks, babe. So why did he want Ty in the first place?"

"I think I'm better qualified to answer that," Alan said, crossing his arms over his chest. "I told you that I was once an associate of the old man's. I was. We worked on a program together, one that was built to take advantage of the city's natural resource of psychic talent. Call it whatever you want, fey line or fairy deposits or whatever, but people born in this town have always had a high aptitude."

"Take advantage of how?" Nick muttered, feeling a little queasy.

"Genetic manipulation. Under the guise of pharmaceutical research."

“So you guys all worked to make talents stronger or something?”

“To simplify greatly, yes. Ty is a product of this manipulation.”

Ty looked sick as a dog. “You mean I was like, a test tube baby?”

“No. Your mother carried you to term. She was the test subject, you see. She showed a great deal of raw psychic talent and energy.”

“Wait. You shot his mom up with gene therapy when she was pregnant?” Nick growled. “You are so not one of the good guys, no matter what you say.”

“Does that mean you want to go hold the gun on him?” Devon murmured. “You’re more than welcome to.”

“Shut up.” Nick prodded a little, just because it felt good to do it.

Alan sighed heavily. “I’m not proud of it. You must understand, I thought all of our test subjects were willing. We were paying people to take what we called an experimental new drug, which was a neuro-enhancer. I had no idea about people such as your mother, Ty. You might say you were why we had a falling out.”

“I was?” Ty sat up straight, staring back and forth between him and Alan, biting his lip.

“What the hell does that mean?” Nick asked, shaking his head.

“It means when I found out about Ty, I decided to end my association with the project. It took me nearly two years, and a great deal of toeing the line before I managed to get away, but I did. And I took Ty with me.”

Well, shit. Now things were really starting to hit the fan.

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Ty stared.

“You knew my mom? Were you the one who took me to foster care?”

“I was one of five people who left the program at that time. We all had a hand in your life, all of us at different stages of the game so no one of us would know where you were.”

“So I was a genetic experiment? Was I a success or a failure?” He couldn’t help it, the words tasted bitter in his mouth, and they came out just as sour.

Alan stared at him, looking tired, his eyes kind. "I think you could be qualified as both, Ty. You have exactly the gift the old man wanted you to have. Unfortunately, it can only be used at great physical cost to you. That makes it less than viable for what the program intended."

"So what would have happened once the old guy figured that out?" Nick asked, staring at Alan grimly.

"Ty would have been killed, naturally. By the time he started to develop his talent at age five or so."

Devon chuckled. "How lucky you were to know at age five. Mine did not develop until puberty."

"Lucky." Ty glared at everyone impartially, even Nick, who was like, all normal and shit compared to all of them. "Yeah, I was lucky. I mean, I knew the people who wanted me needed my talent. And my cousin... wait. Is he even my cousin?"

Tears pricked at his eyes at the thought that what little family he had wasn't even his family.

"He is, actually," Alan said. "Though he was your father's cousin."

His father. Wow. Wrapping his arms around his chest, Ty tried to ward off the shivers. "Nick? Can we just go? Please?"

"I shouldn't think that was such a wise idea," the blond guy said with a sneer. "He will only keep chasing you. You're something of a trophy now."

"So what do we do?" Ty stared at Nick a little desperately, needing to know that Nick didn't think he was a gross, deformed freak now, that his Nick wasn't going to run away.

Nick smiled a little, drawing the gun away from Devon's head before staring right into his eyes. "I say we get all the information we can. And then we take the fight to him. What do you say, baby?"

Ty blinked. Then he grinned, nodding, even as Alan protested and Devon chuckled. "I say that's a great idea, Nick. We're much better at that than we are running, huh?"

Nick nodded, the warmth in those pale eyes almost more than he could stand without bursting into tears or making for a tackle hug. "Much better. Anything for you, kiddo."

"How touching," Devon said, drawling the words out.

Ty glanced at Nick, who winked at him, even as they spoke in unison. "Shut up, Devon."

## Chapter Sixteen

They had been in research mode for hours. Nick had to admit, he was a little freaked out to know that the place they were heading for when they escaped the van wasn't that far away. Oh, Alan had said it was the same neighborhood, but it was like, way closer than that.

"What if he's got other folks with more psychic talents out looking for us," Nick had asked, in what he thought was a perfectly reasonable tone, especially since he was still having trouble wrapping his mind around it all.

"We're reasonably well shielded, especially now that we have Devon," Alan had replied.

"So, what kind of information do we gather?" Ty had chimed in with a tiny bounce, and they were off and running.

Six hours later, Nick was listening to his neck crack and his stomach rumble. He reached over to grab Ty's hand, frowning at how cold Ty's skin was.

"Babe, you want to come with me and make some food?"

"Huh? Oh, sure. Sure, Nick." The bright smile belied the dark circles under Ty's eyes, and when Alan would have come with them, Nick glared the man down. He wanted to be alone with Ty for a moment.

At least.

They went, hand in hand, and Nick started opening cabinets, looking for something to heat Ty up. Soup, maybe. Toast. Ty liked toast, he was pretty sure.

"I do," Ty said, coming to put a hand on his shoulder. "I know you're hungry, huh? Could we go snuggle after, though?"

Ty's teeth were chattering, and that thin body was shaking, goose bumps peppering Ty's skin.

"Sure we can, babe. Look, popcorn." He pulled a couple of bags of microwave popcorn out of the cabinet, dangling them.

"I like popcorn." Ty grabbed one bag from him, pulling the plastic wrap off and tossing it in the microwave. "You think we could make hot tea?"

"I'm sure the Brit has some stashed somewhere. Will that warm you up some?"

"Yeah." Ty gave him a smile, and if it trembled a little, well, Nick would pretend not to notice.

They found tea, and heated water, and in no time they had a feast. The parmesan popcorn made a great main course followed by the kettle corn stuff, and the tea was spicy and hot. By the time they ate and drank, Ty had regained some of the color in his cheeks.

"Why don't you go start us a nice hot shower, babe?" he said, touching the back of Ty's neck.

"Okay. What are you going to do?"

"I'm just going to tell Alan and Devon that we need a rest, okay?"

That smile widened into something blinding. "Sure. Anything you say, Nick."

He bent to give Ty a kiss, feeling those pretty lips warm up under his. Then he patted Ty on the ass and headed back to the study, intent on having some time alone to recharge Ty's battery.

"Find anything new?" he asked when Alan and Devon both glanced up.

"Possibly a few useful things." Alan studied him for a moment. "You going to take a nap?"

"Yeah. If you need us, holler, but we need to let him rest up."

"Naturally. His talent has a great many side effects, hmm?"

"It does. Later."

Hell, he knew he should be looking up shit on the sexy little laptop Alan was letting him use, or he should be poring over the stacks of records Alan had about the program. Some things were more important, though.

Ty was his big priority now.

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Ty sang a little under his breath, some eighties tune that he really didn't know. Just the chorus. Something about sunglasses at nighttime. It was weird, how sometimes he knew shit, even though his foster mom had never let him listen to the radio.

She had made him popcorn a lot, though. He wondered if he should tell Nick that, how their little feast had taken him back to many a night spent in front of a game table, munching buttery goodness.

The shower felt good, but it felt even better when Nick slipped into the bathtub with him, hands sliding on his naked skin. Wet, naked, Nick. Oh, that was his favorite treat. Ty turned, letting his arms slide up around Nick's shoulders.

"Hey, my Nick."

"Hey, babe. Better already, huh? You're feeling warmer." Nick's hands slid down his back to his ass, squeezing and lifting him up. Oh, yes. Yes please.

"Mmm. So much better. Needed to get away from them. Especially Devon. He makes me cold."

"Well, we can't have that, huh?" Nick kissed him, lips wet with the water from the shower, little droplets clinging to Nick's eyelashes.

"Nope. He's scary, Nick. Like, lizard brain scary."

"But he's not the bad guy anymore, right?"

Ty tilted his head, thinking about that a moment. "He could be, if his life was on the line. Otherwise, he's not for sale anymore. Not to the old man, anyway."

"That's what I thought. Now, can we not think about Devon?" Nick kissed him again, deeper this time, tongue pushing into his mouth to taste him.

It worked, didn't it? Made everything else in his mind fly right out, leaving only the taste and feel and smell of Nick. That was just fucking perfect.

"Love how you feel, Ty," Nick murmured when they broke for air. "Love how hot you are on the inside."

"I was getting cold." Somehow that seemed important, but only kind of. Peripherally. Nick was just all around him, skin sliding on his skin, and he wasn't cold, he was burning up.

Well, not really, because Ty knew he could probably do that if he actually needed to. Spontaneous combustion.

"Something tells me you aren't really paying attention, babe," Nick said, reaching down to push one hand around his cock, stroking up and down.

Ty gasped, going up on tiptoe, his breath catching in his throat when he slipped a little on the wet tile. "I am now."

"You sure?" Nick's other hand slid down his ass, finding his balls from beneath and pressing them up. "I need to know I've got your full attention."

"You do. You so do, Nick."

"Good." Pushing him back against the wall, Nick stroked him, the weird angle of their bodies putting all sorts of pressure on his cock and balls. It had him grunting, pushing against Nick, his hands trying to find places to touch.

He couldn't quite get a hold of anything. His thumbs slid over Nick's nipples, then down over the flat belly, glancing off Nick's cock, but the space was too tight to really get in and feel.

They rocked together, Nick's hands making him whimper and buck, the water adding heat to an already steamy thing... Thing? Could he call this a thing? That seemed like a pale word for what... Oh. More kisses.

Nick's kisses overwhelmed him, made his lips tingle, made his eyes flutter closed. He wanted to sink into Nick completely, to hide inside him and be safe. Of course, he also wanted to explode into a million pieces, his cock so hard it could cut glass.

Ty humped harder, pushing into Nick's fingers, making these little noises that Nick seemed to love, seemed to want to soak in through his lips and tongue.

"Come on, babe. Come on. You need to come for me, need to get all warm and happy."

"Will you -- will you come for me, too?" He clutched at Nick's upper arms, his balls on fire.

"I will. I'll jerk off for you, Ty. Give you a show."

"Oh, God." Okay. Okay, for that he would come like a ton of bricks, anytime Nick wanted him to. Like now. Like right when Nick squeezed Ty's balls and thumbed the slit of his cock at the same time. Just like that.

Shouting, Ty shot, his hips rocking back and forth, the feeling of Nick pressing him in two places more than he could take anymore.

"Now you," Ty gasped, leaning back against the shower wall, hands flat behind him.

"Yeah." Nick grinned wildly, taking a step back and reaching down, grabbing that hard cock and stroking.

Ty watched, unable to look away, his breath coming in great gasps as he tried to catch enough air. Nick. His Nick was so fucking hot, lean muscles standing out, cock red and hard and straining...

When Nick shot for him, Ty's balls tried to push out another orgasm, his cock throbbing a little in sympathy.

"My pretty Nick."

"Yours, babe." Gently, slowly, Nick pulled him away from the wall and rinsed them off, both of them shaking a little now with fatigue. "Let's go rest."

"Yeah. Live to fight another day, huh?" That was what they were going to have to do. Fight.

"You know it, babe. Come on. Snuggle time."

Somehow Nick had gotten to know him so well, could read him so perfectly. When this was all over it might scare him.

Then again, maybe he would fight to keep it. No matter what the cost.

## Chapter Seventeen

Devon stared at Adam once the two wunderkind left the room, tapping one finger against the underside of his chin. "Is this whole research charade really necessary, my good man? Why can you not just tell them what you know?"

One gray eyebrow went up, Adam staring right back at him. The man was almost as good at it as Devon himself. "I'm not sure what you mean, Devon. I think you assume I was far more involved with the program than I was. I am doing my best by Ty."

"Are you?" He tapped the tip of his finger under his bottom lip, a habit he had tried to give up and failed at many times. "Then what is it you're hiding? I can tell there's something, but you keep a very tight lid on it indeed."

"Do I? Well, then, maybe youngsters such as you should leave it be, hmm?"

Devon laughed. "That may work on the child and his muscle, but I have been older than my years for a very long time, Adam."

"Be that as it may, I'm not giving up my secrets, especially to the likes of you. That would be dangerous and foolish, hmm?"

"Or vice versa." Smiling, Devon rose, stretching tall. "In that case, I believe some rest is called for in my direction as well. You keep up the good work and all of that."

Adam gave him a shrewd look. "Your companion is waiting for you in your rooms, by the by."

"Is he?" Devon could not even begin to explain his attraction, or perhaps near obsession, with Aidan. Really, it was ridiculous how much the man eased the constant coil of tension Devon held balled up inside him.

"He is." Adam's laughter trailed down the hall after him, and Devon felt as though he was the one divulging secrets, not the one ferreting them out.

He stopped at the door to Ty and Nick's room, pushing one hand against the wood panel, listening with his ears as well as his extra senses. His ears only found the faint sound of water running, but his touch conveyed a searing cold, one that shook him all the way down to the tips of his toes.

"Whatever you are," he murmured, "I am glad I am not like you." Continuing down the hall, Devon made his way to his own room, finding Aidan there, waiting for him, as promised. Rising Aidan smiled at him, one hand outstretched. "You found what you were searching for, sir?"

"Not exactly, no. We will win the day, though. I am confident."

"You always are. I find that to be one of your most attractive attributes."

There was a tiny curve to Aidan's lower lip that spoke of irony, one Devon had never seen before. Somehow, it just made the young man all that more intriguing.

"What is my most attractive one, then?" he asked, playing along with a slow batting of his eyelashes.

"Your cock," Aidan answered promptly. "I love the way it tastes. The way it smells."

“Well, that was certainly honest.” His cock rose in answer to Aidan’s spoken admiration, making him smile at the thought of what it would do in answer to some physical adoration. “Would you like to suck it now, then?”

Aidan moved close, something rather dark and dangerous flashing in his eyes. “If you would like me to, yes.”

Devon put a hand on Aidan’s hip, feeling rather than hearing the moan his touch brought forth. It vibrated the whole muscular body that stood so close to him. Aidan still shook at his touch when he commanded, which excited him nearly beyond bearing.

“I would like that very much, yes. Very much indeed.” Smiling, Devon moved even closer still, smiling into Aidan’s dazed eyes. “I would like that very much, right now.”

Aidan sank to his knees, smiling up as nimble fingers found Devon’s button and zipper, working Devon’s cock free. “Then I will.”

That hot mouth closed over him, and Devon sank his hands into Aidan’s hair, letting the moan out that demanded freedom. Let Adam keep his secrets and be damned. For now. Devon would recharge, and rest, and then he would set to figuring things out again.

Somehow, he knew he’d need all his wits to survive this. A niggling sense of danger simply wouldn’t let him alone. Perhaps he ought to get Aidan to put a chair in front of the door. A survivor always hedged their bets.

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“We could just go.”

Ty knew they were hiding in the bedroom, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. Somehow, he knew that Adam was waiting for them, alone and all, wanting to talk. Devon was off with his young soldier, or guard, or whatever. There was a lot of moaning going on.

That kind of made him smile, even if he didn’t want to know about some of the creepy things that those two did together. It was kinky and not the kind of kinky he wanted to get up to with Nick.

Everyone deserved someone. Ty wondered if Adam had someone. Or if he’d had someone, once upon a time. Was that someone a guy, or a girl? Dude, what if Adam and the old man had...

“You’re thinking loud enough to wake the dead again, baby.”

“You’re not dead.” Thank God. Ty poked Nick a little, just to make sure he was warm and alive and all.

“Ow. What the heck was that for?” Nick wiggled, all sorts of Nick parts rubbing against him.

“Um. Just to make sure.” Ty poked again, to see if Nick would do that neat wiggle thing again. That made him sigh and grin.

Nick did it again, humming for him a little, legs sliding against his.

“Love how you feel, my Nick. Do we have to go back out there and talk to them?”

“Not right now, no.” Nick was quiet a moment, then he rose up on one elbow. “We could just go.”

“What?” Ty stared, not quite sure what he was hearing. “What do you mean? I have to know. They’ll just keep coming after me.”

“That’s what they say, but how do we know? If we just leave town.”

God, that was really tempting. Really. They’d had this discussion before, though. “Nah. We’ll tough it out.”

Nick cupped one hand to Ty’s cheek. “What can I do to make it better, then?”

“Kiss me?” Nick kisses made everything better. Everything.

“I can do that, baby. I so can.”

Somehow he’d gone from kiddo to babe to baby in no time. That made him hard as a rock, and shaking with need suddenly. He leaned into the kiss, holding on hard and tight, not wanting anything to intrude on this moment. Not one little thing.

Ty knew he never should have thought that. Not ever. Then he knew he was right, because the door burst open, and it wasn’t Adam or Devon who came thundering in like a herd of avenging angels.

Damn it, he’d really been enjoying hiding from the world.

Too bad the good things never lasted in life, huh?

## Chapter Eighteen

The house was quiet.

Too quiet.

Nick hated to be all doom and gloom, but he knew about the calm before the storm. Devon was in with his boy toy, all making with the smoochies. Ty was asleep, eyelashes dark against his cheeks. Adam was puttering around, singing some tuneless song that made him want to bash the man's head in.

Hell, he didn't even know how he knew all this stuff, except about Ty, who slept beside him, snoring the tiniest bit.

Rolling to his back, Nick stared at the ceiling, trying to rid himself of the niggling feeling of doubt. Of danger. Damn it.

He'd meant it when he'd said they could just go. He could take Ty and run. Ty was right, though. They would just keep coming. They would follow Ty anywhere. How could they not? A talent like Ty's could be incredibly dangerous in the wrong hands. And it was definitely the wrong hands that wanted him.

Nick closed his eyes, letting his mind wander, and suddenly he could hear voices, could hear the sound of feet crunching over dry grass and rock. The sound of shrubs breaking.

Damn it. Damn it, damn it, damn it.

He rolled out of bed, going to peek out the window. No one there. No voices or shoes. Sighing, he looked back at Ty.

Then he pulled on his pants and slipped out of the room, going to knock on Devon's door.

The icy blond opened the door, staring at him, looking thoroughly nonplussed. "Well, well. What may I do for you?"

"Probably nothing, but I want to pow-wow. Get rid of the boy-toy."

One perfectly groomed eyebrow went up. "Excuse me?"

"A private pow-wow."

"Very well. I'll come with you, shall I?" Devon turned, holding up one hand. "No, Aidan, I'll be fine."

They went down the hall, neither of them saying a word until they were safely in a garish pink guest room. Then Devon turned to him, crossing his arms over his chest.

"So?"

"So. They're coming, huh? How soon?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I thought we were taking the fight to them. Your words."

Nick rolled his eyes. "Sure, but you know they'll come before we're ready. You're touchy feely guy. You must know. All you have to do is touch the ground."

"Touch the..." Devon's laughter rang out, making him the next target for head bashing.

"Yeah. Come on. How long?"

"No later than tomorrow morning."

"Shit." That was a lot sooner than he wanted it to be. Then again, it was more time than he'd thought he'd have when he woke up next to Ty, having that tingly feeling in his extremities.

"Yes, exactly. If I thought that running would do me a bit of good, I would. I would take Aidan and go. He wouldn't only look for me, however. The Old Man will have a grudge now."

"A grudge." Yeah. Huh. Well, Nick was starting to develop one of those.

"Yes. Very much so. I betrayed him, you see. He will stop at nothing to have my head."

"And Ty's."

"Oh, he wants Ty intact."

"I figured that. What can you tell me that Adam can't?"

That brow crept up again. "Why should I tell you anything?"

"Because I can help keep your head attached."

"Ah. Good point." Devon nodded once, smiling. "Let's talk."

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Ty dreamed about ice fishing. He dreamed about being on a frozen tundra somewhere, wishing he had a fur-lined hood and a pair of gloves. He was so cold. So cold.

He hated being cold.

When he realized he was dreaming he reached for Nick, trying to find him, trying to get to that amazing warmth, for the loving that sustained him in the hardest times he could ever remember.

He found empty sheets.

The dream turned back on itself until he was in a shiny silver lab, strapped to a table, where ice water was being pumped into his veins through an IV. It had to be ice water. Nothing else could be that cold.

Every time he shivered, little bubbles would push back up into the hanging bottle, like tiny little farts in a bathtub.

"Nick?" He tried to talk, tried to make his mouth move, but his lips were frozen together. They had to be, because they wouldn't move. Wouldn't let him use his tongue to make sound.

Where was his Nick?

Ty hated being alone more than he hated being cold.

He started thrashing, trying to pull the IV out of his arm, and the needle seemed to burrow deeper, seemed to push its way into his muscle, then down into his bone.

That was when his lips and tongue thawed out. That was when he started screaming, the fire building inside him, fighting the cold. It built and built until he couldn't take it anymore, couldn't contain it, and the curtains on the window across the room burst into flames.

It was the smoke alarm that woke him up. It was the smoke alarm that let him know he's actually set Adam's house on fire.

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Devon heard it before he smelled it. The tiny dinging of an alarm, somewhere down the hall.

"Is that the smoke alarm?" he asked, rising to his feet. He and Nick had been talking, making plans, for nearly half an hour.

"Shit!" Nick leaped to his feet, running for the door, feet slipping on the tiled floor in the hall. "Shit! I smell smoke. Get the fucking fire extinguisher!"

This wasn't a public building. The closest fire extinguisher would be in the kitchen. Devon ran the other way, shouting as he did. "Adam! Aidan! Fire. Ty and Nick's room!"

He heard Aidan slam out of the room behind him, the sound of footsteps going to help Nick. Adam met him at the turn off to the kitchen, fire extinguisher in hand. Devon ripped it from his grasp.

"Get water. First aid kit."

Adam nodded, face pale as milk, and Devon pelted down the hallway, ready to put out a blaze.

When he got there, Nick and Aidan had the fire out, and Nick was holding a shivering, blue-lipped Ty. "Please don't let them put me in a lab," Ty stammered. "Please, Nick."

"I won't, baby," Nick said, staring at the charred mess on the wall. "I promise."

No, Devon thought. No labs. Ty was even more dangerous than he'd known.

If nothing else, they would have to kill the boy before the old man got a hold of him.

## Chapter Nineteen

Another alarm started blaring, and Ty closed his eyes, trying not to lose his shit all over the place. The smell of burned wood and plaster stung his nose and eyes, and he wanted to cry out and pound on things.

"You have to hold it together, babe," Nick told him. "You can't lose it on me now."

"What in bloody blazes is that noise?" Devlin snarled, whirling around and poking Adam in the chest.

"It's my security system. We have a breach."

"You're joking."

"Afraid not." Adam looked like he was going to freak out, too, which didn't make Ty feel a whole lot better. That really didn't bode well for the security system, or whatever.

"Aidan."

"Yes, sir." The pretty guy who was there with Devon turned and ran, and Ty pondered just what one man thought he was going to do. Maybe he had a Gatlin gun stashed away. That would be cool. A rain of hellfire. Oh! Maybe a bazooka.

Blam.

"Focus, baby." Nick shook him a little. "If you don't want them to get us, you're going to have to do more than scorch the wall."

Ty tilted his head. "I'm already cold, Nick."

Nick nodded, lips set in a thin line. "I'm here. You can use some of my energy. When they break through, because they will get past Aidan, you need to take them down."

Devon rumbled, still carrying the fire extinguisher. "I shall help Aidan hold them off as long as possible. Do wait to blast them until after we're safely out of the way, hmm?"

"Make sure you have a big enough head start," Nick said, sounding so not like him. So... well. Like he did this shit for a living, which Ty knew very well that Nick did, but it kept fading into the background, and really, he should be grateful for it about now.

"Come on, Ty. Adam. You're with us. What's the most defensible room?"

"I have a store of weapons back in the master." Adam led the way, checking the hall carefully before slipping out.

Nick pulled Ty along, hauling him to Adam's bedroom, but it was all becoming a blur. He shivered, his body shaking, his hands clenching and unclenching. He had to hold on, had to protect his Nick at all costs.

He had to.

There was no way he was going to let anyone take them. He wasn't going to let Devon kill him, either.

Nick gave him a surprised look. "You heard that, too, huh?"

"He was thinking very loud." Ty tried to shrug, but it came out more of a shimmy. "I won't let anything happen to us."

"I know, baby. You and me both. I promise."

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What a cluster fuck. Nick got Ty safely behind the closed door of Adam's room, and turned on the man. "Weapons. Now."

"Yeah. Yeah. They. I..."

"Stop dithering, goddamn it!" Jesus. Nick needed everyone to be in on this, one hundred percent. "What have you got?"

Adam finally snapped out of his stutter and went to the closet, pushing through the back wall. Oh, yeah. There was a decent little armory there.

"Too bad you didn't think to put in a secret passage."

That actually netted him a chuckle. "I haven't had time. I did think about it. Handguns, right?"

"Unless you h-have a f-flamethrower." Ty was looking, and sounding, rough. Bless his heart. They needed to get this over with.

The sound of gunfire made everyone jump, and Nick picked a Glock, checking the clip and making sure the round in the chamber was good to go. Safety off.

"You know how to use any of this, or did you just collect for a rainy day?"

"I can do it." Adam picked up a gun, handling it competently enough, and they set up a watch just outside the closet door. If they had to, they could barricade the door once Devlin and Aidan got to them, and use up their arsenal a little at a time.

It wasn't the perfect solution, but it would do.

"Come on, Ty. Take my hand, baby." He held out the hand not holding the gun to Ty, knowing they'd have to warm the kid up to get him to work.

"No flamethrowers?" Ty asked, trying to smile for him.

"Just you, babe."

"I don't want to hurt you, Nick."

It would be okay. Somehow he knew it. At least the touching would.

"It's all right. Come on, babe. Now. We need to get you revved."

"O-okay." Ty sighed, shoulders rounding. "I'm s-sorry."

"Stop it. No apologizing. Just be glad I'm not pushing you at Adam." Come on, baby, Nick thought. You can be strong just a little bit longer.

"Yeah. I'd burn him out like a firefly." Poor Ty bucked up, reaching out and taking his hand. "Oh, God. So warm."

"That's it, baby. That's it." Strangely enough, it didn't feel like Ty was sapping his heat, or his strength. He was burning up, and he felt like he could leap tall buildings with a single bound.

"Mmm. Too bad we can't snuggle."

"Isn't it though?" Adam said. "Too bad we need to be on alert."

"Yeah, yeah, man. We get it. We're ready." He wasn't sure they'd ever be ready for whatever walked through that door, but they didn't have a choice.

They would just have to make due.

\*\*\*

Devon had to admire Adian's efficiency as a soldier.

His lover had armed himself and gone to the kitchen, where the breach had occurred. Devon could hear the men thinking when he touched the wall. Well, if one could call that blind, slavish devotion to orders thinking.

The old man had developed some fascinating mind control drugs.

The men had submachine guns and chemical grenades. Aidan had one handgun. Devon truly disliked the odds, especially as he had gotten quite used to having Aidan around.

“Retreat, love!” Devon had no guns, but he had his hands, and he would use them the best he could. That vase, for example. He could make it appear bomb-like with a simple glamour.

That might give them enough time to join up with the others and regroup.

Aidan backed up until they were side by side, and Devon spared him a glance. “Be ready to run.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Not sir. Not now. One, two...” Devon tossed his “bomb” and Aidan laid down cover fire, sending the men shooting at them scrambling for cover.

They retreated down the hall from the living room, and their attackers were slow to follow. They slid through the door to Adam’s bedroom just as the first few bullets pinged against the wall beside them.

“Don’t shoot!” Aidan’s voice at full volume was as impressive as his aim, and sure enough, Nick and Adam stopped extending their arms.

“Looks like you made it,” Nick said with a wild grin, Ty attached to his free hand like some sort of freakish Siamese twin.

“I am not a freak!” Ty shouted over the din of gunfire, and Devon shook his head.

It was going to be one long day, no matter how you sliced it.

Really, he needed to get a new, and far more boring, job.

## Chapter Twenty

Ty watched Devon and Aidan get positioned by the door, ready for anyone who might pop through. He held on to Nick's hand, revving up, just like Nick had said. God, Nick could feed him like no one else ever had, and Nick looked fine. Just fine, like Ty wasn't hurting him a bit.

Soon it would be time to hurt someone, though. It wouldn't be long before someone burst through the door, and then the smackdown would start. He almost chortled. Smackdown sounded so much like something Nick would say.

Maybe he was absorbing Nick speak through their skin.

Nick chuckled, which was an unexpected sound in that tense moment, and then everything slowed down into some sort of nightmare movie shot. The door burst open, two men in tactical gear rolling through, assault rifles at the ready.

The power strained at him, building up behind his eyes, at the base of his skull. Ty waited, waited, wanting more foot-soldiers to come in, wanting to take out as many as he could. He shifted from foot to foot, nearly dancing with impatience.

"Not yet, babe," Nick shouted, pulling him back behind the layer of cover fire Devon and Aidan provided. Adam was yelling, too, but no one could hear him.

"Wait for it. Wait for it..."

More men tumbled through the door, five of them, setting up like a line of British riflemen in the Revolutionary war, shooting from standing and kneeling positions. Gunfire sounded like popcorn.

Really loud popcorn.

The angry sound of bullets flying past him made him flinch, but somehow or another, no one got hit. Well, none of his people.

That was good, but weird. Weird, but really good. Maybe it was Devon. He had some scary magic. Maybe scarier than Ty's.

"Now, baby!" Nick pulled him around in front, wielding him like a weapon. Ty didn't let himself think; he just let loose with a wave of energy, the fire raging too hard and deep inside him to be held back anymore.

He heard screams, terrible screams, and he felt Nick pulling at him, moving him back, away from the door. Toward the closet, where Adam was pushing them to hide out.

Then his vision narrowed down to two tiny pinpoints, sparks and heat shining for a brief moment, right before he blacked out.

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Nick dragged Ty through the door of the closet, hunkering down, waiting for the fire to burn out. Too bad there wasn't a damned back way out of the closet. Luckily, it was good sized, and Devlin and Aidan were still holding off the few stragglers that were sending bullets through the flames, and they had to find away to keep from getting overwhelmed by the smoke.

Still, it could have been worse. A lot worse.

They weren't out of the woods yet. There were more men out there. Outside, waiting. Nick could hear them in his head like they were talking to each other right next to his ear. They weren't sure what was happening inside, and they'd been told to wait in case someone escaped.

So, they'd have to take those assholes down, too.

"Here," Adam croaked, handing him a wet towel. "I was in the bathroom. That was what I was shouting about."

"I need one more." He wrapped the towel around his nose and mouth, smelling tap water, which always felt oily and mineral-laden to him.

Adam slapped another towel into his hand, and Nick tied it on Ty, dragging the limp form closer to the back wall of the closet. Poor baby. He'd really let it all hang out, and they didn't have time to try to revive him with hot water or Nick's energy or anything else.

He'd have to carry Ty when they left. They would leave. If all of those bullets managed to miss them? They were going to get out of there.

"I believe it would be expedient to leave now," Devlin said, poking his head into the closet. "Aidan has cleared a path to the window. Come along."

Well, go Aidan and his bad self. Nick had a feeling that Aidan was far more than he seemed at first glance. Nick stooped and picked Ty up, marveling at how small and bird-like his lover felt when he was drained, when the burning power of his talent was depleted for a while.

Ty felt so fucking fragile that it left him a little afraid to touch.

He did anyway. They lumbered out, Adam helping him by carrying part of Ty's weight. They headed for the window, and he would swear he saw Aidan doing something like throwing up an invisible shield when Devlin tossed them out the window.

Now, that was something he'd have to think about a little when they got somewhere safe. Maybe ask about. Maybe beat the crap out of Aidan and find out who he was, to have such a damned big talent they hadn't known about before.

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They were the last to leave.

Devon grunted when he landed on the ground, the air pushing out of his lungs. What there was left in there, at any rate. Aidan had tossed him like he was no more than a sack of potatoes. Really. Who knew the lad had such strength? Such determination.

Crawling, Devon got as far from the window as he could, deep into the overgrown hedge that surrounded the house. Just about the time he was going to poke his head out and see where the rest of the motley band of beggars had got to, someone poked the barrel of a gun in toward his face.

"Stop right there, blondie. Hands in the air."

His hands. Gracious, he had all but forgotten his hands. He reached out and touched the man's wrists, sending all of his adrenaline and fear right in through the skin.

The man collapsed immediately. Perfect.

Devon crawled some more, searching for Adian, for Nick or Adam, or anyone who might be able to help watch his back. The bushes rustled, parted, and there was Ty, rolling toward him like an outré oriental rug.

"Take him!" Nick shouted. "We have to get him out of here."

"Yes." Yes, they had to get all of them out of there. Now. Devon grabbed Ty, who moaned, hands coming up to try to push him away.

Devon growled. They didn't have time for this. He sent a rush of sleep thoughts to Ty's brain, making the lad go limp as a rag, barely breathing, but still perfectly alive deep down in his brain.

The move proved timely when the bushes parted one more time, a group of seven men with guns surrounding him, Nick and Ty's dead weight.

"Don't move." The voice was deep, compelling, and Devon knew it was one of the Old Man's bioengineered talents. Knew it deep down. "We want the fire-maker, Devon. That's all we want."

Yes. Naturally. Devon looked at Nick, ready to lie like he hadn't since he was a child. "Well. You got here too late, my friend," he said, trying to make Nick understand it wasn't the truth. "I never fail to do a job I've been paid to do. You can tell our employer that I've just killed him."

## Chapter Twenty-One

Nick knew Ty wasn't dead. Knew it, and still it gave him a moment of blind panic when Ty went limp under Devon's hand, when that thin chest barely rose and fell. Goddamn it, why was it Ty that always had to suffer when something went tits up?

"You killed him?" the guy with the voice asked. Nick had noticed that the guy's voice made him want to do whatever it ordered. Good thing he had an authority issue.

"Why, yes. What else was I to do? The old man said he wanted the lad, no matter the cost." Devon was drawling the words out, as offensive as possible.

"He wanted the kid alive!"

"Take me to him. I shall explain."

Nick tensed, knowing that they had to do this, hoping it wouldn't get him and Adam shot.

"Well, at least the other one is alive. He wanted that one, too."

"Yes. Shall we?"

The whole world seemed to teeter on the brink of the man's answer. Then the guy nodded, rolling his shoulders. "Bring them all, including the dead one. Let the old man sort them out."

Oh. Thank God. They had time. Maybe not much time, but a little. Nick made a big show of jerking away from the soldier type who prodded him in the shoulder with a gun muzzle. Fuckers.

They got herded to another one of those vans that the old man seemed so damned fond of. Shit, at this point Nick was looking forward to meeting the guy, just so he could spit in the bastard's eye.

Adam, well, he looked a little worse for wear. Pale, sweaty, he was panting, eyes wild. "I can't go back. I can't go back. He'll kill me."

"Of course he will. You're worse than an experiment gone bad. You're a traitor."

Man, Devon was laying it on thick. At least he hoped all that eye rolling and shit Devon had done was about telling him to play along. Nick held Ty's limp body, and he couldn't feel Ty breathing, couldn't check for a pulse.

What he could feel was the incredible heat Ty was generating, like all of that pent up fire hadn't been released before. Like it was still waiting to be let out. That could be handy. Real handy.

They didn't go far. Just like before, they were amazed at how close the bad guys had been all along.

Jesus. Nick hoped to God that Devon had a plan. He sure didn't know what the hell to do next.

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Devon had no idea what to do next.

Nick was looking like a fractious pony, Aidan was nowhere to be seen, and Ty was out cold. Adam would be no help. The man had deflated completely. God help him, all he had was his hands and possibly Ty if he could wake the lad and point and shoot him.

The van rolled to a stop and the door opened, but there was no daylight. Just the dimness of a garage or an underground parking area. The cool air was a balm after the stuffy heat of the van. Ty could raise the temperature hugely just by breathing.

"Come on, Twinkletoes," Mr. Voice said. "He's waiting."

"Lovely."

Devon went, however, hands where they could be plainly seen. Nick followed, together with Adam dragging Ty along. Adam was keeping up a steady litany of fearful words, but Devon tuned it out. He had to have all of his wits about him.

"Well, Devon. It's about time you returned." The oily, yet somehow clipped voice sent shivers down his spine. His former employer was still as off-putting as ever.

"Conventional methods were failing to work. I had to find another way."

"Indeed? I suppose you expect to get paid?"

"Not exactly, no. I'm afraid I killed the boy. I would simply prefer to be allowed to leave."

A wet chuckle broke the silence after a few moments. "You kill him and I am meant to keep you alive?"

"He killed the boy with his hands. I thought you said he was only a touch-know."

That came from the voice, who really didn't seem afraid of the old man. Maybe they could use that.

"Why did you want this one so much?" Devon finally asked when the old man sat still and silent, staring at Ty where he dangled from Nick's hands.

"Because he was the most extreme case of talent we have ever produced. And he was taken from me."

"Taken, put in foster care, yes? How entertaining."

"I am not here to entertain you." The old man stood, coming around to look at Ty. "He's not dead. Take him to the lab."

Nick went stiff, curling over Ty protectively. "You don't touch him. No one touches him. You've done enough fucking damage to him."

"You're quite the conundrum, aren't you, boy?" The old man leaned in to peer into Nick's face. "A natural talent, a compliment to the subject here, and quite out of the range of my plans. What am I to do with you?"

"Not a goddamned thing."

"Oh, I think we shall have to test you all. Take them to the lab." The old man turned his back, waving a hand at Devon. "Take him as well."

There were only four guards. The rest had left. Now was the time. It had to be the time. Devon didn't really care what the old man wanted with Ty, and he didn't care how many freaks of nature were running around out in the world. It was time to take the fucking bastard down.

For good.

Monologuing was for amateurs.

As if someone had read his mind, the door burst open and gunfire rang out, Aidan coming to his rescue like an avenging angel. What a stroke of genius it had been on his part to make love to the man.

Nick shouted, and Devon turned just in time to see the man stagger back, blood blooming high on his shoulder. His hands fell away from Ty, who began to fall.

Everything turned into a kaleidoscope of motion and sound and color, shots ringing out, people shouting. Then Ty's knees hit the floor, those bright eyes opened, and Ty screamed, the sound supersonic, shaping Nick's name.

Devon dove to one side, toward Aidan, trying to get them down to the floor before the blast of fire tore through the room.

Whatever the old man wanted with Ty was going to be forever a mystery, apparently. The old chap had just burst into flames.

Ah, well. He wasn't going to get paid for this job, at any rate.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

"Nick. Nick! Oh, God. Nick." Ty was babbling, hands on Nick's shoulder, pressing down. He was trying to stop the flow of blood, but there was so much of it. So much, and it just kept coming.

Nick was struggling against his hold, trying to get up. "Ty. Baby. The place is on fire. We have to get out of here."

Ty glanced around and shrugged a little. The fire couldn't touch him. Not really. The smell of blistered skin was ugly, though. Maybe he was in shock. Shouldn't Nick be the one in shock?

"Come along, you two!" Devon laid hands on him, and Ty very nearly incinerated the man. Only Nick's hand on his stopped him.

"You can stop the bleeding, baby. Just put your hand on me and think hot thoughts."

"That will hurt!" He wouldn't hurt Nick. Not intentionally.

"Not as much as if he burns to death, or more of the old man's guards show up to put out the fire!" Devon snarled, actually snarled, lip curling up over bared teeth.

Dude.

"Ty." Nick's hands landed on his arms, turning him so he met those icy blue eyes. "Now, babe. You have to do it now."

"Okay." Nodding, he set one hand over the hole in Nick's shoulder. "What if the bullet is still in there?"

Devon reached over, touching Nick's arm. "It is, but if we get out of here, we can get it out before he gets blood poisoning. We have to go. Now!"

Something popped in the room, a flare of flame rolling toward them, oily and searing. Ty blinked it back, watching it retreat before turning back to Nick.

"I'm sorry, Nick." He felt Nick's skin sizzle under his fingers, and Ty bit his lip when Nick cried out, writhing under the pain of it.

He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to hide from it all, from the fact that this was all his fault.

"Come on, baby." Nick was panting, but he was up and moving, dragging Ty with him. "You did good. You did so good. I promise, we'll have a nice hot bath..."

Ty didn't know whether to laugh or cry, but he got up and moved, clinging to Nick's good hand like the lifeline it was. They ran, shambling along like two children in a three-legged race. Nick was unsteady, leaning on him, but Devon was right behind them, urging them on, the guy with the gun bringing up the rear.

Thank goodness for the guy with the gun. Devon's boy toy. Aidan? That was it.

He'd really saved their bacon.

Their crispy fried bacon.

Ty started to laugh, even as he ran. He wasn't sure he could stop. Man, it had been a rough coupe of weeks.

Maybe when this whole running thing was over, they could rest.

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Nick groaned, easing himself to the floor of the van that Devon had appropriated for them. One touch of those talented hands had started it, and Aidan was driving.

Adam was trying to clean out the semi-cauterized wound on Nick's shoulder while Ty hugged himself and rocked, dark eyes huge in his pale, thin face,

God, that fucking hurt.

Nick tried to focus on something, anything but the rough digging and poking.

"So -- what now? With Ty. Will they keep looking for him?"

Fingers pausing, Adam glanced up, smiling a little. "Most likely not. The old man was all that was holding the organization together. Its time had passed."

Ty jerked, mouth opening and closing.

"So what? It's like, kill the Emperor, no more death star?"

Devon's lips quirked. "Quite. He was the force behind it all. The rest of the brains had left the operation quite some time ago. Like Adam here."

"That's a lot of resources and money and shit to just stop." Nick found it damned hard to believe that cutting off the head of a hydra would shut it down, but he had to allow that Adam might know more than he did. "Ow!"

"Sorry." Adam sighed. "I need a place that's not moving, and a much thinner probe than a screwdriver."

"Yes, well, none of us is in any shape to waltz into the stores and pick out supplies." Devon gave them a shark's smile. "Aidan, love? Where can we go?"

"I know a place." The van veered off the highway onto an off ramp, the tires squealing when they sped around a curve.

Nick swallowed the bile that rose up, the motion making him even more queasy.

Ty seemed to snap out of his trance at that. "Nick? You need water. Or ginger ale. My foster mom used to give me ginger ale when I was all urky."

"Thanks, baby. When we get stopped, I'll send Aidan to get some."

Aidan nodded, glancing at them in the rearview mirror before negotiating another series of turns. "I can't guarantee this will be a great safe house, but I believe it will do."

Snorting, Nick shared a grin with Devon, nudging Ty with the toe of his boot. "The way you saved the day, guns blazing? I'll trust you on this one, man."

The back of Aidan's neck went red, making them all laugh. Nick moaned right after, though, because Adam poked at him again.

"Shit, Adam. I thought you said you were gonna stop."

"I can feel it. Just below here."

Yeah. So could Nick. The thin screwdriver kept grinding against the slug. Luckily, there wasn't a major organ there for Adam to push the damned thing into.

He'd never been so glad of anything when the van stopped.

"Here we are," Aidan said. "I'll be right back."

"Here" ended up being a temperature controlled storage facility. That was damned smart. Nick would have to remember it. Apparently, Aidan had two units. One to park the van in, one stocked out as a personal bomb shelter.

Fucking A.

"What a clever boy," Devon said, patting Aidan's butt as they stumbled into the second unit, which was tricked out with a mattress, bottled water, dry and canned food stuffs, and battery operated lamps and fans.

"Thanks." Aidan ducked his head. "It pays to be ready in our line of work."

"That might be the most words you've ever said at one time," Ty piped up, teeth chattering.

Nick frowned. "Got a medical kit? I need you to patch me up, Adam. Now."

Ty was going to need him. Soon. That suited him. If the kid knocked him out to get warm, he could sleep and heal.

"Yes. Here." Aidan dug out the med kit, and Adam went to work.

Ty came over to hover above him, face pale, looking anxious. "You okay, Nick?"

"Not exactly, baby." He might just scream, it hurt so bad. "You're cold."

"Well, of course I am." It came out so fucking peeved that Nick had to laugh.

"Sure. You could warm up from me. I'm a little feverish."

"I won't hurt you," Ty said, fiercely. "I won't."

He squeezed Ty's hand as best he could. "It would help me, kiddo. It would let me sleep." Nick met Ty's gaze one more time, head on. "Please."

Ty took a deep breath before nodding, a little sob escaping him. "I love you, Nick. Be here when you wake up."

Then the cold washed over him, draining away the burning pain of his wound, and Nick started to just drift away. Thank God.

Hell, he still had a lot of questions, but honestly hoped that Ty would be the only one there when he woke up. The whole crowd was getting to be a bit too much.

Nick had always worked alone.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Ty chewed his thumbnail, watching Nick sleep.

What if he had taken too much? What if he had hurt Nick to the point where Nick would never wake up again? What if... what if he was going to be alone for the rest of his life because the one person who understood him and liked him was dead?

"You're thinking loud enough to wake even the dead, baby." Nick opened blue-blue eyes and stared at him. "You never take too much."

"Are you sure?" Nick slept so hard after. Ty stroke Nick's skin, fingers sliding over the healing scar on Nick's shoulder. "I just worry so much."

"It's good, Ty. You know I don't sleep well. I think it's part of the cycle. I sleep so I can heal, so I can help you again."

"Maybe." That didn't sound very fair, but then Ty was able to sleep pretty easily, so maybe Nick did have a point. He'd take it; it eased his mind to believe it.

"Want a bath?"

"Oh, yes." Nick bounced. Baths were better than sugar. They had a place to live, now, together. It was not the most expensive place, and they were sharing with a couple of tough-looking punk rockers with mohawks, but they had their own bath, and a door that locked, so it was all good.

Sometimes the thing with the old man seemed like it had never happened. He and Nick had woken in the storage unit three days after the final showdown to find themselves alone. Devon and Aidan were gone, and so was anything but food, blankets and medical supplies.

Adam had left them a wad of cash, along with a card. The card had a phone number and a single line of script in ball point pen. "Call if they come back."

Hopefully there wasn't anyone left to come back. Unless Adam meant to call if Devon and Aidan came back, but that didn't make any sense. He had to mean the old man's men. Or women. Or robots. Whatever.

"They weren't robots."

Ty gave Nick a sideways look. "You don't know that. They could have been. It makes as much sense as flame-throwing people and stuff. Maybe more than mind-readers and shit."

Nick reached over and pinched his ass. "I am not a mind-reader. I can just hear you. No surprise, you think so loud."

"Yeah, yeah. I don't share my thoughts with anyone but you."

"Good." There was a wealth of satisfaction in Nick's voice. Nick bent to turn on the water in the old cast iron tub they had scrubbed until it gleamed, giving him a fine view of a fine ass.

"Possessive much?" His hands reached right out and touched, without Ty even having to think about it. He squeezed the tight muscles, frowning a bit at how thin Nick still was. "We need to fatten you up."

"Fat?" Nick straightened, glaring at him over one shoulder. "Why?"

"No, I just mean you're still too thin." He wanted Nick healthy, just in case they had to run again. Just in case there was trouble.

"I'm fine, babe. Mitch is a good cook." The biggest punk of the house was a good cook, and it was way cooler to pay for groceries than it was to eat lots of ramen. Mitch had a way with stretching their dollars.

Mitch was like Devon. He was British. It was kind of cool.

"Stop that. We're about to get all naked and wet. Think of me, not Mitch."

"Right. Think of Nick." Ty pressed up against Nick's back, his arms sliding around the lean ribcage so he could reach down and touch Nick's cock. "Nick good."

"Ty good," Nick said with a breathless laugh.

The flesh under his hands rose easily, hard and hot, proving that Nick was certainly recovered from giving Ty his energy and heat. Steam started to rise around them, the water filling the tub, beckoning to him.

It was funny how much hotter the water could be now. Nick could tolerate huge extremes in heat without his skin even turning red. Ty figured it was like a side affect. Like how sometimes he had a premonition, which was usually Nick's thing.

"Come on, babe. In the water." Nick slid into the tub, and Ty pushed into his lap. He let Nick hold him, let his head loll against Nick's shoulder. So good. It felt so good. To begin with they'd had trouble relaxing together, both of them associating sex with being on the run. The adrenaline had been hard to take.

Now? Now, they could go to bed after a bath and some hot one on one action and just snuggle and talk and sleep.

Ty thought it rocked.

Nick did, too. Ty didn't have to wonder; he could hear the contented hum of Nick's thoughts, every time they got happy.

"Do you think they'll ever come back?" Ty finally asked, swirling his fingers through the water as it stilled, the faucet twisting shut under Nick's hand.

"No, baby." Nick kissed his shoulder. "I think someone else may come eventually. You're too good at what you do not to get noticed."

"No!" The water bubbled a little until Nick started stroking his back. "No. I won't use it again until I have to. For you."

"But you will have to. I'm trouble, babe." Nick laughed, the sound rusty, sexy. "And I have to support us somehow. I'll have to take jobs."

"Well, you don't have to take the kind you used to." They could do other things.

"If you say so."

Ty rubbed his ass against Nick's cock, feeling it swell against his skin. "I do. I say we go to Borneo and tell fortunes."

"Sure, Ty. You got it."

Nick was humoring him. It was cute. "I don't really care what we do," Ty finally said, after he'd given it some real thought. "As long as we do it together."

"Well, there you go." Nick moved him around just a bit, cock slipping along his ass crack. "I think that's the best idea you've had in ages." Nick's hand landed low on his belly. "I'm not sure you'll ever be able to tame this fire inside."

Ty nodded, feeling the burn of his need for Nick deep within, along with the more volatile volcano he knew he could be.

"Probably not. But as long as I have you, I don't have to try to do it alone."

Nick turned his head and kissed Ty, showing him without words what a good idea Nick thought that was, too.

The whole mess with the old man had almost killed him, but Ty was still grateful to the guy for one thing.

It had brought him the most important person in his whole life.

Ty burned just for Nick these days.

End