



FINDING *LOVE*

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Finding Love

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

FINDING LOVE

Simone Anderson

Dedication

For Chel, Chris, Tim and Lynne for unfailing support.
For Margaret for being the voice of reason.

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Vicodin: Knoll Pharmaceutical Company

Tylenol: Tylenol Company

Mitsubishi Eclipse: Mitsubishi Jukogyo Kabushiki Kaisha

United States Postal Service: United States Postal Service

Coke: The Coca-Cola Company

Chapter One

A shrill ring sang out from the cell phone tucked in Nick Jackson's pocket, echoing loudly in his Lieutenant's cramped office.

Nick yanked the phone out of his pocket, intent on silencing it before asking his boss to let him come back to duty early from medical leave. While he didn't relish pushing papers, it beat sitting at home alone. Glancing at the display, he swore. Scowling, he flipped open the phone.

"Sheriff Daniels, to what do I owe this surprise? And how in the hell did you get this number?" Craig Daniels was the sheriff in his hometown of Harbour Springs and a friend from high school. One of the few straight friends Nick had retained from that time.

"Nick, the dojo was broken into a couple hours ago—"

"So call why are you calling me?" Nick demanded.

"We can't find Tristan. He isn't answering either of his phones, and you're still on the lease," Craig stated flatly, his voice giving away his regret, one cop to another.

Nick's heart stopped, and he dropped into the seat behind him. "What do you mean you can't find him?"

"Just that, Nick. He's not at the house, not at the dojo, and not answering his phone. And his sister wants to file a missing persons report. She claims he hasn't been answering his phone for a couple days."

"Amberlee's involved? I'll be there tonight."

"There's storm coming in."

"It's winter. There usually is." Nick snapped shut the phone and ran his hands through his hair. Unadulterated fear coursed through his veins, demanding he return to Harbour Springs immediately. His mind raced with myriad details that had to be accomplished if he wanted to leave within the hour.

"What happened?"

Nick looked up, stunned to see Lieutenant Tony Simmons sitting on the corner of his desk, the door closed, concern etched in the hard edges of his eyes. It was a look Nick had

seen before, the look of a concerned father when one of his kids screwed up or was in trouble.

“Um, Tristan, my ex, is missing. I need to go home,” Nick answered, stumbling through the words.

“In that case, take the time you need, keep us posted and your request to return to work early has been denied,” Tony answered easily. “Go home and find him.”

* * * *

Had it been a week since that call? Nick looked from the Glock in his lap to the sleeping form on the bed. They’d found Tristan McTavish, his boyfriend – no his ex-boyfriend – that night in an abandoned one-room shack seven hundred metres behind the log cabin Nick and Tristan had once shared. Tristan had been disoriented and shaking, his body over-sensitised.

Nick rubbed a hand over his face, trying to scrub away the memory. Tristan had been chained naked to a wall, his face encased in a leather hood, a wool blanket thrown over him. A space heater had been turned on, but it hadn’t been enough to warm the shack, and hypothermia had set in.

The phone on the nightstand next to Nick began to vibrate, pulling him from the memory. “What’s up, Craig?” Nick asked, peering at his watch.

“Gamma Hydroxybutric Acid.”

“GHB? That’s what was in the baggie?” Nick jumped to his feet and padded out of the master bedroom not wanting to wake Tristan. “Are they sure?”

“Yes. There weren’t any traces in Tristan’s blood or urine, but it only lasts about twelve hours in the system.”

“Well, that explains the amnesia. What about the rape kit?” Nick asked, checking all of the locks on the doors and windows.

“Nothing.”

“I don’t think rape was the intention. It would have been easier to rape him at the house,” Nick said, returning to Tristan’s bedroom. “We know he put up a fight once chained. They might have used the drugs to get him to come along peacefully.”

“Makes sense. There weren’t any prints in the cabin or on the cuffs. Which means the attacker either used gloves or —”

“Or doesn’t sweat enough to leave them,” Nick finished, returning to the wingback chair he and Craig had moved into the bedroom when Tristan returned home from the hospital. “Probably gloves. Maybe thick winter ones. It would add to the confusion, especially if Tristan were to remember anything from then.”

“Yup.”

“Plenty to think about. Thanks.”

Nick hung up the phone and propped his feet up on the ottoman.

The results confirmed what he’d suspected, someone was terrorising Tristan. The question was why. The quick search he and Craig had done of the house when he’d first arrived in town had yielded a box containing several photos and a bloodstained shirt.

The shirt was Nick’s, but he knew the blood wasn’t. He’d been in uniform when he’d been shot, but Tristan wouldn’t have known that. Everything had been sent to the lab in Grand Rapids for analysis, priority had been given, but there was no guarantee when they would get back the results, or if there were anything useable.

The photos were more than a little disturbing. They were of his apartment, him in the hospital, leaving the building when he’d been shot, and at the station some time beforehand. For that one, someone had had drawn a bulls-eye target around his head.

The notes he and Craig had found ranged from a simple demand to leave town to more graphic promises of torment and torture. Logically, he knew everyone was a suspect. The first to enter his mind were Tristan’s father and three of his brothers – Paul, Mike, and John Jr. He couldn’t dismiss a jealous lover or jilted one. He still wasn’t sure if Tristan had a boyfriend or lover, but he felt certain he did. Of course, it could be Amberlee, also, using the missing person routine as a ruse. He still couldn’t pinpoint a reason. If someone were trying to win Tristan’s affections, there were much easier ways, ones that didn’t include Nick. Why bring an ex-lover back into the picture, even if they were after him, it didn’t make sense for Tristan to be a target.

* * * *

Grey light peered in at him through a slit in the curtains, and Nick shifted. A blanket fell to his waist, and the scent of coffee wafted up the stairs. The empty bed came sharply into view. Nick cursed, flung the blanket away, jumped up, and was almost out the door when Tristan stepped out onto the landing at the top of the stairs and into view.

“Back. I brought food and coffee.”

Nick pulled the tray from Tristan’s hands and nodded towards the bed.

“You need to let me up and get things done. You’ve handled the clean up at the dojo and rearranged everything. I’m beginning to feel like an invalid,” Tristan said, the tension in his voice rising as he moved towards the bed. Sitting down, his robe fell open. “I’m fine now, Nick.”

“I don’t need to do anything,” Nick replied automatically. Where Tristan was concerned, he gave orders, he didn’t follow them.

Nick swallowed his moan, his cock hardening at the sight of the naked skin beneath the dark blue robe. Thankful he was wearing jeans, he set down the tray on the edge of the bed. He scrubbed a hand over his face and sighed. It wasn’t fair to Tristan to keep him locked up like a criminal, but the thought of anything happening to him was enough to want to attempt it. Instincts Nick hadn’t been aware of having had kicked into overdrive when they’d found Tristan in somebody else’s chains, against his will. How often had Nick sat in his apartment, wondering what Tristan was doing, wondering if things could’ve gone differently. Nick cared about Tristan, wanted to see where things would lead to, but Nick hadn’t loved him, and he couldn’t lie about it, not about something like that. Even if he’d truly believed in love, he couldn’t have said he loved Tristan.

“Nick?” Tristan asked, his jade-green eyes filled with concern as they peered out under wavy, shoulder-length, dark-brown hair.

“Craig and I found the box – the one in your office.”

Tristan swallowed hard and let Nick pull the sheet over him. “And?”

“Craig called last night. There was GHB left in the cabin where we found you.”

Tristan shrunk back against the headboard. “I don’t remember –”

“One of the side effects. You won’t remember a lot of things. It doesn’t appear that you were raped, either.”

“Then why the drugs?”

“Maybe because you’re six-two, two hundred and twenty pounds and a seventh degree black belt with your own dojo,” Nick replied. “The drug makes you compliant, willing to do things you normally wouldn’t. Like leave the cabin without a coat or be chained and hooded in that kind of environment with someone you didn’t trust.”

Tristan nodded.

Nick handed him a mug of coffee and took one for himself, while Tristan digested the information.

“Listen, I didn’t mean to dump it on you like that. If it makes you feel better, it wasn’t my blood on the shirt.”

“But it is your shirt. I recognised it. It’s the one I gave you for your birthday.”

“Yes, it’s my shirt,” he admitted. It was the last thing Tristan had given him, and it was still his favourite.

“Whose blood then?”

“Most likely synthetic. Besides, the blood is inconsistent with the wounds I received.”

“Which were?”

“One to the arm and one to the leg.”

Tristan nodded. He’d been out of the hospital for three days, and Nick still refused to let him get up. Tristan had wanted to argue, but there was something in his lover’s—ex-lover’s—dark-brown eyes that made Tristan relent and relinquish control. Nick had been fiercely protective of him, allowing him privacy and time. Nick was patient with him, but Tristan knew, underneath the calm, brewed a storm. It’d been in Nick’s eyes for an unguarded moment—cold fury and a promise of retribution.

Anger and relief intermingled in Tristan. He’d been relieved when Nick had found him, but at the same time, Tristan had wanted to find the people responsible. He wanted them to feel everything he had, the fear, the humiliation, the hatred, and the helplessness. He wanted to unleash his anger on them. He’d been in chains before, Nick’s chains, but it’d been his choice, and he’d always been safe. Nick was a good top and was never deliberately cruel.

“We’ll figure it out,” Nick said, sitting down on the edge of the bed. He brushed a lock of hair away from Tristan’s face.

Tristan’s cock hardened at the contact.

"How?" he asked, staring past Nick. He could tell Nick had put more muscle on his already muscular six-foot-three-inch frame. His normally perfectly groomed, short, brown hair had a sexy sleep-tussled appearance that made Tristan want to forget everything and let Nick take him right then.

The edges of sleep crept in, and Tristan yawned. It bordered on cowardice to succumb to sleep and made it easy to pretend he saw love, not guilt and obligation, in Nick's eyes. Tristan had paid a price though. The events that had led to Nick's return had played themselves out nightly in his dreams, intertwining and growing steadily worse. So far, he'd been able to keep the nightmares to himself. Nick hadn't pressed him, and Tristan hadn't volunteered.

"Everyone makes mistakes," Nick replied, running his fingertips along Tristan's jaw line. "Your sensitivity has returned to normal?"

Tristan nodded. "Thankfully."

"Good." Nick smiled weakly. "Craig has pulled the watch. However, he increased the patrols."

"He's reached a dead end then?"

"Yes. Everything in the photos and notes is available at any drugstore or supermarket," Nick shrugged. "And my shirt is worthless. Besides, with cops here around the clock, the stalker is less likely to leave any more packages."

"I'm not surprised," Tristan replied flatly. "Nick, I'm really okay now. Thank you for finding me and taking care of me, but what happened wasn't your fault. I'm sure you have responsibilities in the city that need to be tended to."

"Do you want me to go?"

"I don't want to you feel obligated." Tristan warred with himself. No, he didn't want Nick to go. He'd never wanted Nick to go. Nick was scared of few things, but love and commitment were two of his biggest fears. That coupled with always working and taking on extra shifts had left Tristan lonely, bitter, and tired of always worrying about Nick.

"You didn't answer my question," Nick replied, grabbing Tristan's hand. "Do you want me to go?"

Tristan turned his head away. "You don't need to stay."

Nick gently pulled his face back, kissing him tentatively first, then hard and urgent. Desire drove every sane thought from Tristan's head. His chest tightened in anticipation. He'd missed this, Nick's touch, his ferocity and possessiveness.

"And if I want to stay?" Nick asked softly, releasing him.

"I...I...you..." Tristan panted, his heart racing, his body pulsing with need. He craved what only Nick could provide. His heart shattered. He'd never stopped loving Nick, had never stopped caring about him. He'd never be completely free from Nick's pull. It took nothing to start hoping for what would never be again. "You don't need to take care of me. I can take care of myself."

He clenched and unclenched his fists. His ire rose, battling his desire. He wanted Nick, wanted him to stay, but he didn't want to be an obligation. He didn't want to be second to Nick's job. Not again. It would happen. It always would. It would be small things at first, little inconveniences that would gradually push him away until all that was left was a shell of a man with a broken heart. He didn't want Nick's resentment because he wanted time with him, too.

"I disagree." Nick leaned back, his hand brushed down the hard plane of Tristan's abdomen and over his stiff cock.

Tristan gasped, inhaling sharply. "I'm not going to break."

Nick crushed his mouth over Tristan's. Nick's tongue teased Tristan's, pushing past the barrier of teeth. Nick let his hands wander over Tristan's exposed chest and arched his back as Tristan raked his fingers over it.

"Damn it!" Nick swore.

Chapter Two

“No. Wrong. You need rest. Sleep. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have started this,” Nick ground out.

His emotions roiled. He couldn’t do this to Tristan. He was here to help him recover. Deliberately, Nick flooded his mind with images of the bloody shirt, work, and the tiny cabin where they’d found Tristan. Reluctantly, he pulled away and fled the room.

He ran down the steps, through the house and into the basement where he’d helped Tristan put in a home gym. Cursing himself, he stripped down to his blue jeans and strode over to the heavy bag hanging from the ceiling. Balling his fist, he hammered the bag, willing control over his body, willing his desire to die. He pounded until pain began shooting down his shoulder through his arm. Jamming a hand through his hair, he headed back upstairs, grabbed a bottle of water then headed for the shower.

Refreshed, he donned a clean pair of jeans and a black T-shirt before padding barefoot into Tristan’s room. He peered down at the sleeping form before dropping into the chair with his gun in his lap. He had the deep-seated need to reclaim Tristan as his and his alone, to enjoy Tristan’s pleasure as he beat Tristan’s ass red, but for the first time, he was unwilling to bring Tristan fully into a scene. His confidence as a Dom was shaken with the combination of Tristan’s experience and his own past.

* * * *

Screams pierced the air.

Nick bolted upright, weapon in hand.

Tristan thrashed on the bed. Nick shoved the gun into the back waistband of his jeans and ran across the room. He turned on the lamp then sat on the edge of the king-sized bed. Pain etched Tristan’s face.

“Tristan! Wake up!” Nick commanded, shaking the other man hard. “Tristan! Wake up! Now!” He couldn’t recall nightmares before. “Tristan! Love! Wake up!” He shook him again.

"Wha-what... What's wrong, Nick? Did something happen?" Tristan asked, blinking awake.

"Are you okay?" Nick asked, sweeping a strand of hair from Tristan's eyes. "You were having a nightmare. What was it about?"

"N-nothing. It's nothing," Tristan replied, shivering. "I've had them before."

"You didn't tell me that. What was it about?" Nick pulled the blankets back up onto the bed and covered Tristan, violently tamping a lid on his own anger and worry.

"It's nothing."

"Tristan –"

"It's nothing."

"Bullshit. You were fighting and yelling. What the hell was going on?" Nick demanded, searching Tristan's eyes for clues. Nick's heart clenched at the pain etched in Tristan's dark green eyes. He gathered the man in his arms and hugged him tight, Tristan's body stiffening before relaxing. Nick couldn't bear to see Tristan in this kind of pain. It was emotional as well as physical, not meant to elicit pleasure. "Talk to me, love."

"Images at first. A cabin, snow, a city, shadows of people, and blood. So much blood. It was everywhere. Your blood—your body. So many bullet holes. At first, I was watching helpless then the gun was in my hands. You were dead. I killed you. It didn't matter what I did. None of it mattered. Leaving didn't matter," Tristan said quietly. "I killed you."

"Shh... I'm here. I'm here. I'm alive. It's okay, baby," Nick said quietly, pulling Tristan closer to him. "Honey, why would you think you killed me?"

"I shot you."

"No, you didn't." Nick rubbed his fingers lightly over Tristan's back. "I've never seen you pick up a gun, let alone point it at someone. What makes you think you killed me?"

"If I'd just listened, you wouldn't have been shot. I'm sorry, Nick. I'm sorry," Tristan said, burying his head in Nick's shoulder.

"I was shot on duty," Nick replied, forcing Tristan's head up. Tristan kept his eyes lowered. Nick tipped his chin up slightly and captured Tristan's gaze. "Listen to me. It's not your fault."

Tristan broke away.

“Hush now. Don’t think about it anymore,” Nick said, kissing him softly on the cheek. “I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere.”

He kissed Tristan’s forehead. They would talk about it tomorrow. Tristan was blaming himself for Nick’s injuries, but there was no way Tristan was responsible. If he’d wanted Nick dead, he’d have done it, face to face, and pulverised him in the process.

Soft kisses on Nick’s shoulder and neck brought his attention back to Tristan. Tristan kissed Nick’s jaw, and Nick wrapped his fingers in Tristan’s shoulder-length hair. Nick turned his head as Tristan kissed him again, catching him on his lips. Nick deepened the kiss, and their tongues tangled. Nick pulled Tristan closer, his hands explored the hard planes of Tristan’s back while he nibbled on Tristan’s bottom lip, along his jaw line to his ear. Tristan groaned and raked his fingers across Nick’s back.

The tight rein Nick had on his emotions slipped. Anger, worry, and fear intermingled with a desperate longing that had never left him. Lost in the moment, Nick fought to regain control and failed. He slanted his mouth over Tristan’s and kissed the other man. Tristan responded, hard and insistent. Nick’s cock throbbed with anticipation and need. Pulling the gun from the waistband of his jeans, he set it on the nightstand before he unbuttoned his jeans and tugged at them. Tristan’s hands replaced his, shoving the jeans down Nick’s thighs. Kicking out of them, Nick broke the kiss long enough for Tristan to pull off his shirt. Nick reached over and grabbed a condom and the lube from the drawer in the nightstand. Tearing open the package, he rolled on the condom on and squeezed a generous amount of lube into his hand and onto his throbbing penis.

Climbing onto the bed, he shoved the blankets aside. Nick wedged his knee between Tristan’s legs. Tristan opened them wider then ran his hands down Nick to cup his cock and balls. Nick pushed a lubed finger into Tristan’s hole, capturing Tristan’s gasp in his kiss. Nick worked his way down Tristan’s chest, laving a nipple, while he inserted a second finger then a third. Biting Tristan’s nipple, he inserted a fourth finger. A moan escaped from deep in Tristan’s throat.

Nick lifted Tristan’s legs, placing one on each shoulder. He withdrew his fingers then positioned his cock at the entrance to Tristan’s ass. Tristan stared up at him through slitted eyes as Nick thrust forward, burying himself halfway. He paused, allowing Tristan to

accommodate him. Tristan groaned. Nick slid almost all the way out and thrust completely in.

“Argh!” Nick cried out. Tristan was as tight as he remembered. It was like coming home, the feelings intense and extraordinary.

Tristan grabbed at Nick’s hands and arms, pulling him closer, hanging on to him. Nick held Tristan’s hips as he built a rhythm. He was rough, needing to know Tristan was safe, needing to release the pent-up tension and overwrought emotions. Tristan pushed up off the bed and bit one of Nick’s nipples.

Nick grabbed Tristan’s shaft, stroking it, repeatedly bringing him to the edge. He increased his pace, determined to send them both over at the same time, his thrusts were hard and powerful.

Tristan blew gently across Nick’s ear.

Nick shuddered. He came hard. Tristan’s cock pulsed in his hand and his balls drew up, releasing his load and covering them both.

Nick collapsed on top of Tristan and kissed the corner of his mouth.

“Oh, God!” Nick exclaimed, rolling off him. “Damn it! Damn it!”

He sat up and bolted off the bed. He shook his head, cursing himself, and stormed from the room and into the guestroom he’d claimed as his until he headed back to Chicago then slammed the door. Pulling off the condom, he tossed it into the trashcan. He should have stopped himself. He was losing control of himself and his emotions. But Tristan had felt so good, so right. Restless, he paced the hardwood floor then, growling with the urge to hit something, preferably himself, he sat down on the edge of the bed and dropped his head into his hands. Tristan’s scent wrapped around him, enveloping him, a reminder of their lovemaking. His muscles tensed.

“How could I?”

Bare feet padded into the room.

“You shouldn’t be up, Tristan,” Nick ground out.

“I could’ve said no.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered right then.” The words slipped out before Nick could process them, before he could censor them. The reality of his admission tore at his heart. He knew the truth. Bile rose in his throat. He had sworn to protect Tristan not hurt him and

certainly not add to his nightmare. *Monster. I'm a monster. No better than the ones who kidnapped him. Worse. I'm way worse. I knew better. I took advantage of him.* Nick swallowed. He reached for his gun or cell phone and found neither.

"Why?" Tristan demanded, his eyes flashing with untold emotion. "You have never lost control. Not over any scene, not over your body and not over your emotions. Never."

"I did lose control. Over my body and my emotions. You were safe. Back where you belong. And I lost it," Nick said flatly. "I'm no better than the assholes who took you. I'm worse. Much worse.

Tristan knelt between Nick's legs and stared into his face. "Did you relax at all until that moment? Did you grieve or accept what was going on? Did you let your guard down even for an instant before that?" Tristan asked quietly, grabbing Nick's hands, tightly. "You are not a monster. You're a man who asks more of himself than can be delivered by a mere mortal. How long have we been together? How long have I been your sub? Do you think it's been so long that I wouldn't know how to read you? That I wouldn't know that you hadn't let go of your emotions at all during that time? Give me more credit than that. I will always know how to read you, Nick."

Nick raised his eyes and met Tristan's gaze. Confusion ran rampant in his mind. Tristan had reacted to his advances, but he would. He was Nick's sub. He would always react. Nick shook his head. He knew better. He'd made a horrible situation worse. He'd taken advantage of Tristan when he was vulnerable, when he was supposed to be protecting him.

"Nick, I knew what you were doing. You wanted it. I wanted it. You needed the release. I needed to know I had the power and control to do it. I know how to push you over the edge, too. I'm a submissive--*your* submissive, but I'm not powerless. You of all people know that," Tristan said, pulling Nick towards him. "You think too much."

Cheeky sub.

There was a time when they wouldn't have had this conversation. When both of them had known their roles, and neither one had doubted them. Now, Nick questioned his every action and thought.

"And you used to call me Master," Nick reminded him.

"I...I'm not ready."

“Fair enough.” Nick nodded, his heart disagreeing and wanting to hear Tristan call for him when he was lost in the pleasurable torment of his passion.

Kissing him deeply, Tristan captured Nick’s gasp of surprise. He took Nick’s cock and balls in his hands, cupping them gently. He wanted – needed – to erase the anger and pain he could see in Nick’s eyes. He smiled. Nick’s practised gaze and calm exterior belied the passionate man within. Tristan had learned to read his features, to see beyond the cold façade Nick had thrown up against the world.

Tristan gently bit on Nick’s ear, eliciting a small groan. Moving lower, he flicked his tongue across Nick’s erect nipple. He shifted his weight and sat back on his heels then took Nick’s penis in his mouth, swirling his tongue around the tip. Nick growled. Tristan took the full length of Nick’s cock into his mouth. Nick’s hands braided themselves into Tristan’s hair. Tristan laved the shaft and let it slide almost completely out of his mouth before taking it back, his tongue never resting. He raked his fingers along Nick’s back and sides.

He turned his gaze up to Nick.

“Bed,” Nick rasped.

Tristan nodded, released Nick’s cock and stood. Gently, he pushed on Nick’s shoulders and followed him onto the bed. He straddled Nick’s legs and kissed him. Nick wrapped his arms around him and in one swift motion flipped them over.

“My turn,” Nick whispered, nipping on Tristan’s ear.

A moaned escaped his lips as Nick laved attention on the sensitive part of his ear. Shock waves of pleasure ripped through his body. He reached between them and stroked Nick’s cock. Nick shook his head and grabbed Tristan’s hand. His heart pounded in his chest, his body trembled and he jerked his hand back, fear threatening to consume him. Nick let go immediately, swore and started to get up.

“Nick...” It came as a whispered plea. He didn’t want Nick to stop. He needed him. Wanted him.

“I’m sorry. I...I—” Nick jammed a hand through his hair. “Damn.”

“Please don’t stop. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—” Tristan pleaded. Nick paced the floor, running a hand through his hair, his gaze never meeting Tristan’s.

“This was a mistake Tristan. You weren’t ready for this. I’m not ready for this. You need to leave. Now,” Nick ground out, pulling Tristan to his feet.

Nodding, Tristan returned to his room with Nick following and staying only long enough to grab his gun and phone.

Chapter Three

Tristan leaned against the wall of the shower the next morning and let the water run over his body. His stomach twisted into knots. Once, he'd thought Nick Jackson was out of his life forever. He'd spent the months after their break-up burying himself in his work. His dojo was a success, and he'd been contemplating expansion. He'd gone to the clubs and bars, dated a few times, but his partners had left him unsatisfied. Tournaments, renovations on the house, and friends had kept him busy – and Nick out of his mind, but not out of his heart. Then the notes had started to come. The first note with its cut-out letters from different magazines and newspapers, so clichéd he'd laughed, had brought Nick back to the forefront of his mind.

Near relief at not having to worry about Nick's safety and if he'd be coming home after work each night was replaced with constant fear. Fear that Nick would be killed or injured. Fear that Tristan wouldn't find out about it until too late. Fear that Nick would reject him again and any warning he might send. And now, after he'd pleaded with Nick not to feel guilty for making love to him, he'd screwed everything up. One simple move Nick had done a hundred times and he'd freaked out and messed things up. The look in Nick's eyes told him what the man hadn't said – what he'd never say.

Nick was a cop. It was in his blood, and he was good at his job. He would never hold Tristan accountable for what happened. It wasn't his way. He'd treat Tristan with kid gloves until it was safe to leave. Tristan knew Nick would wait until he felt Tristan would be okay alone or in someone else's care, but he wouldn't stay. Tristan couldn't delude himself that Nick would. Nick would help people out of any number of situations, and had, but he didn't want the hassle of caring for the results of the damage people inflicted on one another.

And Tristan was damaged. Tristan had tried to save Nick, but the price was higher than he could've imagined. It had cost him any chance there might have been for them. Tristan scrubbed his hand over his face and turned off the water. He pulled open the shower curtain and dried off with a thick towel before donning jeans and a sweater.

Panic had threatened to consume him in the last moments of their ruined lovemaking. It had rushed over him the moment Nick had grabbed his wrist. Tristan knew it wouldn't be any different if it had been another man. It'd probably have been worse. For one terrified moment, he was back in the cabin, struggling to free himself. The chains had been strong and had never budged. Whoever had been responsible for his kidnapping had planned it ahead of time.

But why involve Nick?

The question had plagued Tristan almost from the beginning. Nick's reactions told him that he wasn't involved. The man couldn't lie to Tristan. No, if Nick had played any part in Tristan's kidnapping, Tristan would've known. He ran a hand through his hair. Maybe Craig had a new lead by now, someone or something they could both direct their anger at.

Padding on bare feet across the cold hardwood floors, Tristan made his way down the stairs and into the kitchen. He smelled the rich aroma of the gourmet coffee Nick preferred even before he entered the kitchen. Tristan flipped through the mail Nick had left piled on the end of the counter. A twinge of regret tugged at him. It had annoyed him before when Nick had tossed the mail on the counter instead of putting it in the bill box in his office. Now, it was one of those things he missed. Tossing the stack of envelopes back on the counter, he walked to the refrigerator and the six-pack he knew would be there.

"Coffee," Nick's rugged voice ground out.

Tristan ignored him and reached for the emerald green bottle of Heineken. Nick's hand covered his, stopping him. Tristan's body tightened. His muscles tensed with a mixture of anticipation and hesitation, and he clenched his jaw and clamped down on his emotions.

"You're going to want coffee," Nick reiterated.

"No, I'm pretty sure I want a beer," Tristan answered, pulling out a bottle.

"Craig's on his way."

"So? I deserve one after the couple of weeks I've had," Tristan replied, retrieving a bottle opener.

"Nobody is arguing that. If you want to drink yourself into oblivion, that's your choice. I can't stop you," Nick said, pouring a cup of coffee. "But if this goes to trial and it comes out—and it will—you'll look like a drunk. One who in his stupor either made it all up or wanted it to happen."

“What? How can you say that? I’m the one who was kidnapped. I’m the one with hazy memories and missing time. Do you think I wanted this to happen? That I asked for it?” Tristan demanded rounding on Nick. “Do you think I arranged this?”

Tristan forced himself to take a deep breath, trying to calm his quickly rising anger.

“No, I don’t think anything of the sort. But you will be the one to stand trial, not the asshole behind this,” Nick answered, laying a hand on his arm. “As soon as this is over, we’ll leave – go on vacation somewhere. Anywhere you want.”

“A vacation isn’t going to make this go away,” Tristan said firmly, shaking his head.

“Nothing will,” Nick agreed, wrapping Tristan in his arms.

Tristan inhaled softly, taking in Nick’s scent. He’d ached for the comfort of Nick’s arms, but that time had passed before Nick left Harbour Springs, back in the beginning, when there were still possibilities. When there was still a future for them. He pushed the thoughts from his mind. There were no more possibilities. The sooner his heart understood that, the better.

“Keep the beer. Keep the coffee. And keep the bloody vacation, Nick Jackson,” Tristan said, pushing away. He put the unopened bottle back in the refrigerator and slammed the door shut.

“Trist –”

“Stay away from me, Nick, just stay away!” Tristan yelled. Anger, hot and searing rushed through him. Unbidden, tears formed. He bit down hard on the inside of his lip. He might owe Nick for finding him, but he didn’t owe him tears.

“Tristan, hon –” Nick reached for his arm.

“Leave me be!” Tristan demanded, yanking his arm from Nick’s grasp. “I’ll play your game your way. I’ll behave and hide the horrors away. Pretend they don’t exist, that they never happened. In the meantime, you can go back home. Back to your precious city and the SWAT team or whatever the hell you call yourselves. You can find yourself an undamaged man, one who doesn’t mind worrying, night after night, if you’re safe or going to come home or not.”

Nick stopped. “I’m not leaving until the doctor says you can be left alone.”

The chimes of the doorbell rang, echoing throughout the house. Tristan turned to leave the kitchen.

"I'm a big boy. And this is my house not the doctor's, not the hospital, and sure in the hell not yours. I can take care of myself."

"Sure you can." Nick muttered sarcastically.

Tristan turned, took two steps then rounded on Nick. His fist connected with the other man's jaw. Nick grunted and stumbled back, hitting the refrigerator. The coffee cup dropped from his hand, shattering on the floor. Blood trickled down his chin from the corner of his mouth.

"Fuck!" Nick ground out. He shook his head and stepped forward.

Tristan rocked on the balls of his feet. He waited until Nick moved in, dropped into a wide-legged stance and punched him with both fists in the gut. Nick let out a whoosh and landed on the tile floor with a thud before scrambling to his feet. Tristan shifted his weight to his back leg. Nick drew his arm back. Tristan kicked.

A uniformed police officer grabbed Nick's arms from behind.

"Enough!"

Tristan pulled the kick, missing Nick's face by inches. Regaining his balance, he took a step back, dividing his weight evenly. Craig Daniels and a young cop Tristan recognised from the hospital had entered in the kitchen unheard. The uniformed police officer had his arms wrapped beneath Nick's, his hands threaded behind Nick's neck, while Craig stood between them.

"You two really need to find a different place to spar," Craig said, shaking his head. "Release him."

"Are you sure?" the officer asked raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, Nick is a cop up from Chicago and is going to conduct himself accordingly," Craig replied. "Good control, Tristan. Thought they only did that in the movies."

"I felt the wind blow with that one," the officer retorted, shaking his head.

"What the hell?" Nick asked, stretching his neck, after he'd been released.

"I told you I was coming by. When you didn't answer the door, Jenkins went around to the back and saw you two fighting so we came in. Your door was unlocked," Craig answered. "I'm assuming you were sparring, because if you were fighting, that makes this a domestic assault, and that's not really going to look good for either of you."

“Unlocked?” Tristan raised a questioning eyebrow at Nick. “Why wasn’t the door locked?”

“Must’ve forgotten to lock it when I retrieved the mail,” Nick replied rubbing his jaw.

“We were just sparring,” Tristan replied, crossing to the counter and retrieving four mugs. “Coffee?”

Both men nodded. Tristan filled them as Nick cleaned up shards of ceramic and spilled coffee. Choosing a mug, Tristan sat down at the dining room table. The others did the same.

“You know this isn’t a social call,” Craig answered.

“I figured as much.” Tristan nodded.

“What have you been able to find out?” Nick asked, grabbing a mug and standing behind Tristan.

“Not a lot, unfortunately. There was only a partial print on one of the photographs. No hits.”

“So you can’t find out who sent the notes or the pictures?” Tristan asked.

“No. Unlike TV, not all crimes come with footnotes and clear but subtle clues leading to the downfall of some misguided dimwit.”

“No shit. I dated a cop, remember?” Tristan retorted, dark fury swept through him. “Do you have any suspects or ideas?”

“We may not be able to find out who did this. It’ll be given a bit a more attention by myself or Jenkins here, but—”

“Jenkins? He looks like a rookie,” Tristan said, setting his mug down hard.

“He’s all I can spare and still keep the case active,” Craig answered, lowering his own mug. “I’m sorry, Tristan. The notes don’t reveal anything, and while they took you, the letters point to Nick being the target. It’s being pushed to the back burner for now.”

Nick shook his head. “I was the bait.”

“Nick got shot, I was kidnapped, and all you can do is put one bloody rookie on it. One. And say you’re sorry.”

“I am. I truly am. Nick’s shooting is out of my jurisdiction. I will inform his Lieutenant of the evidence we have, but there are—”

“No guarantees. No promises,” Tristan finished. “I get it. Please leave. *Everyone*. Now.”

“We’ll be in touch,” Craig said, setting the mug on the table. Jenkins followed.

Tristan nodded.

“Do you want me to leave?” Nick asked once they were alone. Tristan heard the caution in his voice.

“Please. I need to be alone for a while,” Tristan answered, his voice flat and cold. His heart screamed in protest. “I need to process everything in my own way. I don’t need a babysitter anymore.”

Nick nodded, turned and left. Tristan heard the search for keys and coat then winced as the door slammed shut, the sound reverberating throughout the house.

Chapter Four

Nick stomped through knee-deep snow to his truck, still clear from his early morning run to the grocery store. Jamming the key into the ignition, he turned on the truck and threw it into reverse. With no clear direction in mind, he pulled out of the small quiet neighbourhood and drove.

He was half tempted to return to Chicago but decided against it, knowing he'd be stuck at home in his tiny one-bedroom apartment for a few more weeks while he recovered. He'd lost interest in the clubs and bars within a month of settling in. The patrons were mediocre carbon copies of one semi-intelligent but boring original, and those who weren't reminded him of Tristan, his ex-lover and partner, who'd been willing to explore and test the limits of his submission with Nick. It had been enough then.

Still warring within himself, wanting to stay and leave at the same time, he veered right and followed the main road leading to the harbour with its century-and-half-old lighthouse and whitecaps rolling in off Lake Michigan. He parked the truck and walked the remaining several hundred feet along the pier, pausing to look out over the barren, frigid water.

He wasn't sure why he'd come. It was here, at the beginning of last summer, against a warm pastel sunset with the water, pier, and surrounding beach teeming with life, Tristan had asked him for a commitment. Not an until-death-do-us-part commitment, but after almost three years together, he'd wanted to hear three simple words. And Nick had frozen.

He'd prided himself on never lying to Tristan, before or since, not even to spare the man's feelings. Tristan had let the subject drop but remained quiet and distant until well after they'd gotten home. They'd fought. Tristan, his submissive Tristan, had put his foot down and demanded Nick admit his feelings or leave. In the end, Tristan had thrown him out. Packed his bags and thrown them into the middle of the yard. Nick had tried to call him, to talk to him, but Tristan had refused. Nick couldn't admit what he didn't feel. He'd tried to order Tristan to listen, but it had done no good. Nick's sister had called him a fool who'd gotten what was coming to him when Tristan had relayed the job offer from the Chicago PD through her. She couldn't believe Nick hadn't told Tristan that he'd applied for a job in

Chicago. She'd ripped him apart for an hour, explaining in graphic detail what she'd have done to her husband if he'd done something that stupid and asinine.

Large, fat snowflakes began to fall now. Nick shivered. His sister's place was a few miles from the lighthouse. She'd let him stay there tonight, and he could figure out his strategy in the morning. He'd have to see Tristan, at the very least to retrieve his belongings, but if Tristan wanted him gone permanently, he would have to face Nick and explain what in the hell he was thinking. Ice crunched beneath heavy boots. Nick froze, slowly reaching into his jacket for the holstered Glock and silently swore, remembering too late he'd left it in his bedroom.

"Thought I'd find you here," Craig's familiar voice called out.

Nick relaxed and turned around. "Where's Jenkins?"

"Station. Paperwork," Craig shrugged.

"Convenient."

"So, what happened between you two? And don't tell me you were sparring, not even Jenkins believed it," Craig said, joining him.

"Will you believe me if I said we were blowing off steam?"

"Not likely. You two haven't fought like that before, and the last time you came close, Tristan broke it off. What did you do that set him off?"

Nick shook his head. "Drop it. I don't want to talk about it."

The truth was, he didn't know how to handle the situation. He was in completely unknown territory. He liked simple, easy and predictable. Direct. This kidnapping with Tristan and the repercussions were more than he'd imagined. He wasn't sure if he was capable of dealing with it on any long-term basis. The realisation made him cringe. Did that make him a coward? What did Tristan think of him? Did he see him as a coward or despicable? Both?

"You're a fool."

"Yeah, my sister told me that before."

"When was that?"

Nick shrugged. "When I took the job in Chicago. She called me an asshole. She stopped speaking to me after Tristan and I broke it off, for something like six months."

Craig nodded. His radio crackled to life. Nick stiffened as the code was delivered. Instinctively, he knew it was about Tristan even before the address was given. Nick sprang into action, moving across the icy pavement as fast as he dared. Craig matched his pace.

"Roger. Have Jenkins meet me there along with a lab tech and his kit. Advise Mr. McTavish not to touch the package any more than he already has. I'm on my way. Daniels out," Craig ordered. "Wait," Craig said, laying a firm hand on Nick's shoulder when they'd reached the vehicles.

Nick stopped and turned.

"Follow me. I go in first," Craig told him, his voice warning.

"No. Tristan is mine. I go. I want to know he's safe. I will be there," Nick argued.

It was more than a want. He needed to know Tristan was safe. In that moment, he understood. Tristan wasn't just his lover, his sub, or even his boyfriend. He'd become the very air Nick breathed. His reason for living. For getting up. For wanting to come home at night. He'd been existing, running on adrenaline, but not truly living. Had it always been that way? He shook his head. No, it had only been since he'd left for Chicago. "Tristan is mine."

"I'm not arguing that. But you're unarmed."

"So is Tristan."

He waited impatiently for Craig to pull out of the parking space. A moment of relief tugged at him when his friend flipped on his lights and sirens, making it easy to slice through midday traffic. Nick flipped on his hazard lights and followed Craig closely. Two blocks from the house, they slowed down, and the lights and sirens came to an abrupt end. Nick was part way out of the truck before it completely stopped. He turned off the engine, reminding himself to take a deep breath while yanking the key from the ignition. A second squad car pulled up to the house, and Jenkins got out.

Nick wished again for his gun and slowly shut the truck door and scanned the area. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary, but that didn't mean anything. He needed to get into the house. Craig spoke to Jenkins before joining him. Silently, Craig handed him his clinch piece. As a pair, he and Craig approached the steps of the bungalow carefully, their gazes never resting. One on each side of the doorway, Nick reached over and tried the door.

Locked. He withdrew a key and unlocked the door then nodded at Craig and opened the door. With their weapons drawn, Craig entered the door first followed by Nick.

They found a solitary Tristan sitting on one of the wingback chairs in the living room with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. His head snapped up, his look one of accusation. Nick shook his head when he started to speak. Separating, he and Craig moved through the house searching, before returning to Tristan. Nick returned Craig's gun.

"Nick, what are you doing here? Why aren't you half way to Chicago by now?" Tristan asked, leaning back in the chair.

Nick crossed the hardwood floor and enveloped Tristan in his arms. Tristan relaxed momentarily before stiffening and pulling away. Nick pulled tighter, unable to let go. He didn't want Tristan's brave front, he preferred angry or hurt. He wanted him safe. He wanted him back in his chains.

"I'm here," Nick said quietly.

"Let go," Tristan said, shrugging out of Nick's grasp

Behind him Craig cleared his throat. The front door creaked open. Footfalls announced the arrival of the lab tech. "Sounds like the cavalry has arrived."

"They're late," Tristan said, managing a half laugh.

"Where is it now?" Craig asked.

"On the counter. It...it w-was..." Tristan said, taking a deep breath. "I found it on the back steps after Sue and Amberlee left."

"Let's see it," Craig said firmly. "You should have waited to move it. EOD should have been called."

"Maybe, but it's the same type of box as the others," Tristan replied shrugging. "A bomb is impersonal. Besides, it's too light for a bomb."

"You don't know that for sure," Nick stated. "Make the call."

* * * *

"All clear, Sheriff. You can go in now," a technician said, walking up to them.

They watched until the bomb disposal squad packed up their equipment and left before heading back into the house with a lab tech.

“By the way, what were Sue and Amberlee doing here?” Nick demanded, leading the way into the kitchen. A mug of cold coffee sat next to a plain white box with the logo for the U.S. Postal Service printed on the top. He guided Tristan to a chair, poured him a new cup of coffee and stood behind him. Susan Montgomery had been a friend since high school, at one time having a crush on Tristan. She’d introduced them at an end of the summer party five years ago and had been thrilled when they’d gotten together. He’d only seen her once since he’d left for Chicago, when she came to visit Tristan in the hospital.

“They just stopped by to visit. They were sorry they missed you and said they might come by later.”

Nick nodded. “Which way did they leave?”

“Arrived and left together. At the same time at least, I’m not sure if they’re friends or what. I know they don’t hang out with the same people, or at least they didn’t. They went in and out the front door.”

“We should get the package back to the lab and process it there,” the female lab tech said.

“You should, and this isn’t my jurisdiction, but Craig, you know damn well I’m not going to wait.”

Craig nodded. “Give him a pair of gloves. Save what we can,” he said to the lab tech.

“Listen, give me the gloves. I’ll let you finish opening it, print it, whatever, but I want to know what’s in it before you leave this house,” Nick said flatly.

The lab tech nodded and handed him a pair of gloves. Nick tried to get Tristan to go lie down or at least go into the living room, but he wouldn’t leave. In the end, they sat at the kitchen table, watching and waiting while the lab tech printed and bagged what she could save.

Nick squeezed Tristan’s hand.

The technician slowly lifted out the contents and placed them in plastic bags. First was a single sheet of paper with a computer-generated message. The second was a black leather hood with zippered eye and mouth holes. She handed both to Craig.

“Have either of you been in the backyard?” Jenkins asked, walking into the kitchen, snow cresting the shoulders of his uniform.

“No, Nick’s been—” Tristan replied, pausing for a moment. “Protective. I’m starting to get cabin fever, but I haven’t gone out. Yet.”

Nick looked at Tristan and shook his head. “Tristan’s been inside since he was released from the hospital, at least while I’ve been here. I’ve been out a few times, but no, we haven’t been in the backyard. We almost always use the front door. Why?”

“Fresh tracks. Two sets, one large and one small. They’re recent enough not to be covered with snow. It’s hard to say if they were male or female. Might be one of each.”

“Why did you look out the backdoor?” Craig asked, aiming a cautious gaze at Tristan.

“Doorbell. Sometimes people use the backdoor, like kids or the UPS guy,” Jenkins answered.

Nick stood next to Tristan, his hand on his shoulder. His jade-green eyes were flat and cold. The hood was identical to one Nick and Tristan had stashed in their toy box and had used on a semi-regular basis. Adrenaline and rage raced through Nick’s body. He nearly missed the rest of the bags the tech put on the table—a set of cuffs and a collar. Anger powered forward. To create a sense of fear by using something that had brought Tristan pleasure was unforgivable. Nick clenched and unclenched his fist. His body tensed, and a murderous rage slid through him until it nearly consumed him.

“Get him out of here, Nick,” Craig ordered. His gaze flicked from Nick to Tristan and back to Nick.

“No. Don’t baby me. I don’t need it or want it,” Tristan denied hotly.

Nick nodded and squeezed Tristan’s shoulder, needing the contact. He needed to protect him. He inhaled sharply. He wanted to be needed. He wanted Tristan to need him. “Let me see the note then you can take this whole mess back to your lab and find out who is tormenting him and why.”

“How much time do you have before you have to be back to work?” Craig asked, holding the letter.

“I’ve been trying to get back since I got out of the hospital, but I can probably finagle another couple of weeks at least. Why?”

“Get it. Use it.” Craig handed him the bagged note.

Nick stared at the printed note, his rage building. After accusing him of being incapable of love, using Tristan, and only coming back because both Amberlee and the police

demanded it, the letter went into excruciating detail about what would happen if Tristan didn't kick Nick out immediately. After forcing Tristan to watch Nick die, the bastard described various punishments and sexual scenes that went beyond Tristan's boundaries, ending with the promise that if he didn't pick the appropriate partner he would lose the right to choose permanently.

"Shit!" Nick yelled. "I'm going to—"

Jenkins pulled the note away from him.

"Let us do our jobs," Jenkins said firmly. "You do yours."

"I'm part of Chicago's target response team," Nick said matter-of-factly.

"Not today you aren't," Craig replied, taking back the bagged note.

Chapter Five

"Is that the only reason you returned to Harbour Springs? Because Craig and Amberlee called? Because they made you?" Tristan asked when they were alone again.

Nick stood and paced the room, his nerves taut. He retrieved mugs of coffee for them and continued to pace. "No one made me come back. I never talked to Amberlee. She never left a message on my machine, though there were a dozen or so hang-ups. I found out you were missing when Craig called me about the dojo break-in. I left about an hour later. There might be messages now though."

"So why did you come back?"

Fear. Nick struggled to clamp down on that emotion. Fear had sent him flying back to Harbour Springs, ignoring his own pain and most of the speed limits. "Because you've never walked away from anything. Not once in all the time I've known you," he replied flatly.

"I see."

"Don't—"

"Don't what?" Tristan jumped to his feet. "Get mad or angry? I should just act like everything is fine, like I'm not hurt or scared? Well, tough shit. You don't want to feel, that's your prerogative, but don't tell me what to feel or how to feel it. And don't lie to me."

"I haven't lied to you," Nick answered, remembering a time when Tristan hadn't argued with him, when they had talked about everything since he always needed to know what his sub was thinking or feeling. If Tristan had disagreed with something, they'd talked about it until both of them were satisfied.

"You didn't tell the truth. Not to me. Why did I have to find out you'd been shot when your bloody shirt arrived in a fucking box on my front porch? I didn't know how serious it was or if you were even alive."

"I didn't tell anyone," Nick admitted. It simply hadn't occurred to him to call.

"Yeah, I know that, too."

"Tris—"

“Stop.” He held up a hand. “Whatever your reasons, they’re yours. The best thing we can do now is to figure out who’s behind this so you can go back to Chicago and I can move on with my life. One with fewer cops in it.”

“Fine. I’ll call my sister and stay there tonight.” Nick turned to leave.

“No, you can’t. You’ll have to stay here tonight.”

Nick stopped and turned back around. “Why can’t I stay with Crysta?”

“She called earlier, while you were out. Told me to tell you that since the kids were gone for the weekend to Todd’s parent, she and Todd were having a weekend in, and if you had done something stupid again, you’d be better off sleeping in your truck, because you’re not going to be allowed over there.”

“Convenient.”

“She’s your sister and a romantic. And if they’re having a night in, the phone will off the hook the whole time. Besides, a storm is supposed to hit tonight. Stay here. Leave when it’s safe out.”

Tristan placed his empty mug in the sink and went downstairs to work out. The physical exertion combined with the emotional drain would hopefully be enough to stave off any nightmares lurking about. He hoped. And as long as he could keep his heart off Nick, he might even succeed. His head understood, but his heart refused to cooperate.

It was almost midnight when he dragged himself back upstairs, passing Nick’s room on his way to take a shower. He paused at the light beckoning from under the door, shook his head and continued on.

The bloody shirt had bothered him, but not nearly as much as the implication that they’d left him alive intentionally. Attached to one photo, one of Nick the day he’d been shot, someone had written the words *‘he deserves to die, but he has not suffered enough yet’*. It was the one photo that Tristan had hidden. As much as Nick’s rejection would hurt, losing him permanently to death would destroy him. In the end, he had convinced himself to leave in order to protect Nick and had ended up trapped and chained in a cabin, drawing him in anyway.

Tristan took his time in the shower, needing to clear his head. Anger coursed through him, displacing the last shreds of fear and panic. He needed to find out who was behind the

anonymous threats and why. He turned the information over in his mind while the hot water washed over him. The letters, except for the first one, were printed on plain white paper with a laser printer, making it virtually untraceable. It wouldn't be a priority with the police—murder trumped stalkers. It was personal, the notes, the clothing, even the bondage equipment—identical to what he and Nick had kept stashed in the closet. It all made this personal to him, so why bring Nick into it.

Their break-up wasn't a secret. Nick had left the state, living three hundred miles away. They hadn't spoken since he'd left, and Tristan hadn't told anyone about the letters or packages, until they'd been found when he'd been kidnapped. Tristan shivered at the bits and pieces of memories tumbling forth then ruthlessly shoved them aside. Until Tristan had been kidnapped, Nick had been out of the picture then some primeval instinct had drawn him back. Who started it? When? Why?

Tristan turned off the water and dried himself. Wrapping the towel around his waist, he made his way to Nick's room. The light peeked out under the door. He knocked once before walking in.

"When?"

"What the—" Nick started, sitting up and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. The book he'd been reading fell to the floor with a thud.

"When did she call?"

"Back up. What are you talking about?" Nick asked, scrubbing his hands over his face.

"When did Amberlee call you?" Tristan asked, leaning against the door jam. "When did the hang-ups start?"

"Um, there were a couple Friday night. The rest happened on Saturday and Sunday. I saw them when I got home."

"From work or the hospital?"

"Neither, a Super Bowl party at one of the guy's place."

Tristan raised an eyebrow.

Nick shrugged. "I didn't know she knew how to reach me. It's not like I'm listed or anything."

"Crysta know it?"

"Yes. She didn't say anything about giving out my number when I talked to her."

"Has she ever?" Tristan asked.

"Couple of times, early December. Tony and Sue each wanted it."

Tristan nodded.

"What are you saying? According to the police records and Craig, Amberlee and Paul got into it at Sullivan's. I don't think she's in on it."

"I don't know. But I doubt only one person was responsible. There are just too many variables," Tristan answered. "Thoughts?"

Nick swallowed. "Love, I'm not thinking about anything right now. Not with you standing there in nothing but a towel."

Tristan moved. Nick bolted, pinning him in place between his arms. Tristan stood, captivated by the heat rolling off him. Nick wedged a knee between his. The lightweight fabric of Nick's sleep-pants grazed against Tristan's thigh. He shuddered. Nick flicked a tongue across his ear, nipping at it lightly. Tristan braced his hands flat on Nick's chest.

"No." Nick breathed capturing Tristan's mouth. "Don't push me away. Not tonight. Not like earlier."

Tristan's blood boiled and pooled in his groin. The eternity they'd been apart vanished. He would never get Nick out of his soul. Even when he left again, he'd still be there, tempting and desiring. Nick possessed him in a way no one else had, no one else ever could.

"I'll never have enough of you," Tristan breathed out.

Tristan's heart shuddered as Nick trailed hot kisses down his neck. His cock strained against the flimsy cotton fabric of the towel. Nick rolled a nipple between his fingers, pinching slightly. Tristan gasped at the exquisite torture and raked his fingers along Nick's back and sides. There was a tug at his waist, and the towel gave, freeing his burgeoning erection. Nick released his nipple, trailed his fingers lightly across his skin then cupped his cock and balls. He ran his thumb across the skin. Tristan growled and arched his body.

Nick captured his mouth, his tongue pushing into Tristan's. Tristan pushed back. Nick's gentle caresses sent exquisite sensations careening through Tristan's body. Nick lightly grabbed his wrists and pulled them over his head. Tristan stiffened, dug into the kiss and let his body and mind float away on the feeling.

"Be mine. Tonight," Nick whispered against his jaw.

Tristan nodded. Tension released from his body as his heart obeyed the plea ripped from the depths of Nick's soul. Nick released him but retained a light grasp on one wrist. Nick brought it to his mouth and kissed it lightly, flicking the tip of his tongue across the same spot.

Tristan moaned. His body shuddered.

He moved, led from Nick's room to his. The bedside lamp was turned on, and Nick pushed him back onto the bed and followed him, assaulting Tristan with kisses and caresses. Tristan arched up, begging for more. His body was hot and screamed with every movement. When Nick stopped, the absence of contact magnified the delicious silkiness of the sheets. In the distance, he heard the closet door open and the scraping of plastic then smiled.

The blackness of panic and fear tried to grab hold but slid off on the heightened awareness of his body. He looked across the room. In the dim light, he saw Nick's nude form bending and moving, and he wondered briefly where Nick's clothes had gone before closing his eyes in anticipation.

Silk, lightweight and smooth as water, was dragged slowly up one leg, across Tristan's cock, over his torso, and down one arm. It draped over one wrist. A second sheet of liquid sensation moved from his arm, across his neck, down his body, and ended at an ankle. Twice more silk grazed his skin, driving all sane thought from his head.

Nick kissed him, alternating between rough and taking and soft and giving, heightening Tristan's sensitivity and keeping him on the edge. He missed the heat of Nick's body immediately.

Silk slid around Tristan's ankle and pulled. He obeyed, moving his body first to the centre of the bed then allowing the silent commands to guide his movements. He knew what Nick had grabbed from the toy bin. Four long, black silk scarves, ties that would bind him for as long as he chose or release him if needed. Rough leather thongs, braided and knotted intermingled with more silk, slid across his body. Tristan arched his back, craving touch, craving Nick. The weight of the thongs stopped, resting over his cock.

Silk tightened, his body spread open, helpless. Tendrils of panic began to insinuate themselves. Tristan tested his bonds. They gave. He relaxed, the crippling blackness dissipating. This was one of the reasons Nick had always been a good top. He pushed

Tristan, tested his limits, but never more than he could handle. A loop of thick, rough rope dragged across his chest sending silvers of pleasure cascading through his body.

Tristan gasped and moaned when the next sensation was feather light. Nick's fingers trailed over Tristan's skin, from his legs, up to his fingers, before returning to his abdomen and playing a silent game that made every nerve stand up, listen, and feel, sensitised as never before. Anticipation. Need. Desire. The weight of Nick's hand left Tristan, but the heat remained, his body clenching and demanding relief. The leather thongs, a cat-of-nine-tails, moved. The weight of its absence left his cock hard, needing release. Nick trailed the rough ends of the whip across Tristan, sending waves of excitement coursing through Tristan.

"You come only when you're told to tonight," Nick whispered in his ear, trailing kisses across his jaw.

"As you wish," Tristan answered, his voice husky with need.

The bed shifted under additional weight, and he resisted the temptation to look down. Calloused hands cupped his balls and pulled at his penis. Nick's tongue grazed the tip. Tristan let out a strangled cry that turned into a growl as Nick took him into his mouth. He swirled his tongue around Tristan's length, gently rolling his balls in one hand. Nick took his full length then withdrew slowly, laved the velvety underside, and blew gently across the tip.

"Argh!" Tristan cried out, arching his body into Nick.

Nick took his time, bringing Tristan to the brink before relenting, only to return to his ministrations.

"Please. Nick."

"What do you want?"

"To come. Please, now."

"A bit demanding, aren't we?" Nick asked, his voice low and sultry, flicking a nipple with his fingers.

"Argh! Please. Please, Nick, please let me come," Tristan begged.

Nick enveloped him once again. Tristan opened his eyes and looked down to see Nick's head bobbing up and down. Body tense, Tristan strained against his bonds. Waves of feeling and sensation boiled right beneath the surface. He clamped his jaw shut, fighting his release.

"Now. Come for me now."

Tristan bucked his hips in response to Nick's skilled mouth and tongue, ceding Nick's command. Nick pumped Tristan's cock and he came, shooting semen across the bed. He relaxed against his bonds.

Nick got off the bed and walked around beside him. He bent over and kissed him deeply. His fingers ran across Tristan's cheekbone then down to his chest where he pinched a nipple. He nipped Tristan's earlobe, his neck, nipples, across his abdomen, and down his thighs. Tristan arched his back. His cock hardened, his body tortured by Nick's skilful fingers. Minutes stretched into eternity. Nick moved back to Tristan's nipple and laved it, sucking on it, alternating between hard and soft. He kissed Tristan, running his hands through the other man's hair, before turning away.

The whip struck, splaying its thongs across Tristan's body. He called out, lifting off from the bed. Groans turned to growls as Nick flipped the whip lightly, over and over again, attacking Tristan's already hypersensitive body.

The combination of pain and pleasure threatened to overwhelm him and send him careening over the edge again. He saw Nick reach for lube and a condom, using both before slowly inserting one finger into Tristan. Tristan inhaled sharply and bucked his hips, crying out when a clamp was placed on one nipple. Nick added a second and a third finger, pumping into him and opening him.

"Please Nick, please," Tristan begged.

Nick obliged, lifting Tristan's hips off from the bed. He placed the tip of his penis at the entrance of Tristan's ass and waited.

"Please, Master, please."

Nick thrust forward, the full length of his cock filling Tristan's ass. Tristan cried out as Nick built his rhythm, bringing them to the brink before easing back only to surge again. Tristan felt himself slipping over the precipice. Gritting his teeth, he wrapped his hands around the silk ties, preventing himself from ripping the tenuous bonds. He bucked his hips. Nick swelled inside him.

"Come with me!" Nick commanded, thrusting as hard and deep as he could.

"Argh!" The cry ripped from Tristan's throat as Nick's erupted in him, and his own climax followed, his seed shooting all over them.

Nick collapsed on top of him. Exhaustion rolled over them in thick, greedy waves. Nick kissed him deeply. Tristan put all of his pent up emotion into the kiss, his frustration, fear, anger, faith, hope, and love, and prayed Nick understood.

"Mine," Nick whispered, nipping the corner of Tristan's mouth. He rolled off Tristan, disappearing into the bathroom and returning moments later with a warm washcloth. Sitting down on the edge of the bed, he washed Tristan's body, kissing it softly, before releasing him from his bonds. Nick released his feet first, and instinctively, Tristan pulled them closer to his body, shivers of delight still shock-waving through him.

"Not yet," Nick ordered, his voice sexy and firm.

Tristan moved them back, knowing that disobedience deserved punishment. Both hoping and fearing it, but knowing Nick wouldn't take it too far. He trusted Nick as he had never trusted another person and doubted he could or would trust again anyone else. Nick untied the silk from Tristan's wrists, and he waited, riding out the last waves of sensation.

"Can you stand?" Nick asked gently, caressing his face.

"Do I have to?"

"Probably. If you keep this up, I'm liable to take you again," Nick teased, kissing him. "God, you're beautiful."

"I bet you say that to all the boys." Tristan smiled.

Nick stiffened then took a deep breath and relaxed.

Tristan pulled his limbs in, turned, and wrapped himself around Nick. "What is it?"

Nick pulled back.

Tristan sat up and faced him, a leg on either side of the man who'd just made glorious love to him. "God, you aren't HIV positive are you?"

Nick shook his head. "No, nothing like that. I get tested every few months, just like we always have. No, it just really hit me how gorgeous you are, inside and out."

Tristan felt himself blush.

"Come on, let's get under the covers. It's winter still you know."

"Nope, no idea. The three-foot snowdrifts completely confounded me," Nick retorted, forcing a laugh. He was hiding something, something that had spooked him.

Tristan stood, his limbs shaky and pulled back the covers. He smiled when Nick lay down then pulled him close and drew the covers up over them.

“Nick, is there a chance? Were you careless even once?” Tristan asked, fear coursing through him. He knew there wasn’t a problem for him, he hadn’t slept with anybody since Nick. He could count his lovers on less than one hand. But, Nick had had all of Chicago to play in and none of his emotional ties.

“No. I would never put you in danger. Go to sleep, love.”

Chapter Six

Nick cast a wary glance at Tristan's sleeping form then padded down the hall to his room and the bag of bandages, tape, and pain pills he'd stashed there. He'd brought them as he'd promised his Lieutenant when Tony had called halfway through Indiana. At the time, Nick had doubted he'd need them, now, as a thin trail of blood snaked down the side of his leg and both limbs throbbed with pain, he was glad he'd had the mini first aid kit with him.

He dug into his duffle bag and retrieved the supplies. Dumping them on the bed, he sat down, his body rebelling against the constant strain. Nick peeled away the bloody bandage from his leg and tossed it next to him on the bed. Would Tristan have come to Chicago if he had known? Would Nick have let him into his hospital room? Would he have believed Tristan if he'd told him about the threat before hand? Would he have stayed home from work that day? Any day? Nick shook his head. Tristan had been right about one thing. Nick wouldn't have believed it. He'd have gone to work that day, and he'd have still gone in first. He was a cop. It was what he'd always wanted to be, the only thing he knew how to be.

"Son of a —"

The gruff voice, swimming with irritation, fatigue, and annoyance, snapped Nick from his thoughts. He'd be a dead cop if he didn't stop analysing everything.

"Go back to bed, Tristan," Nick said, removing a leftover piece of white medical tape from his leg.

"Like hell."

Nick opened his mouth, looked up and shut it. Tristan stood before him, dressed in his favourite blue-and-green plaid flannel sleep pants, anger flashing in his eyes.

"Excellent idea," Tristan growled, kneeling in front of him.

"Tris, love, it's fine. I just need to replace the bandages."

Tristan ignored him. Nick gasped, stifling a groan while Tristan pushed his leg one way then the other, before abruptly standing and leaving. Inspecting the four-inch wound, Nick reached for the gauze. Tristan appeared at the edge of his peripheral sight, carrying a small blue plastic tub, towel, and a washcloth.

"What are those for?"

"Thought you were a cop. That's a dumb question," Tristan retorted, kneeling in front of him.

Nick bit his tongue.

Tristan's hands were warm sensuality on his injured body, despite the rough handling. "It needs to be cleaned, you dolt, because you are a lot rougher on your body than you should be. If infection sets in, you could lose that leg."

"It doesn't hurt," Nick replied, wincing more from the small lie than from the cool peroxide Tristan poured over the red and irritated area surrounding the neat row of tiny stitches. "Besides, you don't know that."

Tristan glared up at him, yanking slightly on his leg. "It will hurt. And if it doesn't now, it might have something to do with that high pain tolerance of yours, which since you won't insist on taking it easy, may lead to more problems."

"Tristan, we've had this discussion before."

They had. He'd lost track of the exact numbers, but every time he'd gotten injured, he'd push it and Tristan would yell at him over it. An infection now could keep him in Harbour Springs longer, but it could also cost him his leg, life or job. Or all three. Exhaling loudly, he let Tristan poke, prod, and smother the four-inch incision used to remove the bullet and repair as much of the damage to his thigh muscles as possible.

"That should about do it," Tristan said, placing the last piece of tape over gauze and skin. "You lose every time, too."

"Thanks," Nick said, moving to stand.

Tristan pushed him back onto the bed. "I didn't say I was finished."

Tristan moved to Nick's left arm and repeated the procedure. Nick winced as peroxide bubbled on the surface of the wound. He waited in silence, while Tristan worked, anger cracking between them. Nick remained on the edge of the bed when Tristan was done. He cleaned up then returned with a glass of water and two pills.

Nick raised an eyebrow.

"Take them voluntarily, or I'll make you," Tristan threatened, slightly amused.

"You think you could make me?" Nick taunted, taking the pills. He had no doubts about the other man's abilities and knew that even in top condition, he would be hard pressed to beat Tristan.

"Try it. I'd love to take a crack at your pretty face tonight."

"What are they?" Nick asked, tossing them into his mouth and drinking the water Tristan had given him.

"If you'd looked at the bottles the doctor had given you, you'd already know the answer," Tristan replied, his arms crossed, staring down at Nick. "An antibiotic and something for pain."

"What!" Nick jumped up. He hated taking pills, and he drew the line at pain medications. His mother had deliberately OD'd on prescription pills and, before that, had always been popping them. She'd call them her happy pills. But she wasn't happy. She was mostly depressed and moody, and the slightest thing set her into a rage. A red haze intruded, erasing the memory and disturbing his vision.

"Relax, they're nothing major, though you have Vicodin in there. This was a T3—Tylenol with codeine. It will take the edge off the pain you're unsuccessfully trying to hide."

"And you just had to point out."

Tristan nodded. "Go to bed."

"You could have just given me an extra strength Tylenol," Nick retorted, his anger subsiding. He should have realised that Tristan would remember that he didn't take pain meds, at least not voluntarily. If he'd been another week along in his recovery, he might have argued, but the look in Tristan's eyes was enough to quell his own demons. "Are you coming?"

"I'm going. It's three-thirty in the bleeding morning."

Nick sat stunned as Tristan, turned and walked away. He'd heard the anger and irritation again, but this time he thought he'd heard guilt. Getting to his feet, he turned out the lights, followed Tristan in his room and stood in the doorway.

"Are you going to kick me out?" he asked.

"I should, but no, I won't," Tristan replied, his voice, coming from the bed. "How many times?"

"What?" Nick asked, lifting the covers.

"How many sets of stitches have you gone through?" Tristan asked, rolling over to face Nick as he climbed into bed.

"Only two."

"Too bad the doctor didn't threaten to put a cast on it or something."

"Who's to say he didn't?" Nick asked, pulling Tristan into him. He released him long enough to allow him roll over, before capturing him again.

"So he did threaten you?" Tristan asked over his shoulder, his hand sliding over Nick's bare hip.

"I believe his words were something to the effect of 'if I see you in here one more time having your stitches replaced, I will have you admitted for the duration of your recovery'."

"Good thing he didn't." Tristan's hand manoeuvred between them, his fingers scraping along the length of Nick's shaft.

"I left the next day," Nick ground out. "Tris, love, you need to stop."

He wriggled his ass and laughed softly. "I don't wanna."

Nick gnashed his teeth together, his hands moving to Tristan's hips. "Tristan, stop. If you don't, I don't know that I can, and your body can't take it."

Tristan stilled.

Nick relaxed and started to pull away. Tristan's hand tightened around his cock.

"I will be the judge of what my body can handle," Tristan said flatly, turning over and pushing Nick onto his back.

Nick's eyes widen in surprise. Tristan hadn't taken an interest in leading in bed since Nick had discovered the submissive side of him.

"You will not hurt yourself," Nick ordered, instantly.

"But you can hurt yourself?" Tristan questioned, straddling his thighs.

Nick ran his hands over Tristan's hips. Tristan bent down, nipped at his mouth and kissed him. Nick savoured his taste. Tristan's tongue darted in and out. Teasing him. Punishing him. Tristan released him, turning his tongue and teeth on Nick's nipples.

"Argh!" Nick ground out.

Tristan slid down Nick's legs and held his cock, stroking it. He shifted, losing his grip on Nick.

Nick tugged at the waistband of the sleep pants. His breath caught, and his cock hardened painfully at the sight of Tristan's kneeling form silhouetted in the dark. Tristan swatted at his hand and removed the offensive material, tossing it into the corner. Nick replaced his hands, his fingertips exploring Tristan's body.

"Not this time," Tristan said, grabbing his wrists and forcing them over his head.

Nick started to protest, but Tristan kissed him into silence.

"Keep them there," Tristan ordered.

Nick nodded. "As you wish."

Tristan's hand slid over Nick's cock, covering him with a thin layer of lubricant. Tristan knelt over him and slowly lowered himself onto Nick's hard-on. Nick strained to keep his grip on the edge of the mattress, needing to let Tristan take whatever he wanted, whatever he needed. He bucked his hips to Tristan's demanding onslaught. Tristan rode him hard and fast, his muscled ass alternately squeezing and releasing Nick, quickly pulling him towards orgasm.

"I'm going to come!" Nick called out, unable to withstand Tristan's sensual torture any longer.

"So am I!"

Nick came at the same time he clamped a hand around the base of Tristan's cock. "No," he said collapsing against the bed. "My turn. I want you to fuck me. Now. Hard."

Tristan nodded. "Hands."

Obediently, Nick grabbed the head of the bed. Tristan's fingers trailed over his body, wreaking havoc on his senses until all he could think about was Tristan and having his magnificent cock slamming into him.

"Now!" Nick shouted, his order coming out little more than a plea as Tristan slipped a finger into his ass and fucked him with it. Nick lifted his hips. Tristan inserted a second finger then a third, and fourth, his pace alternating between fast and slow, the motion sending blood back to Nick's spent cock.

Tristan lifted Nick's legs onto his shoulders and teased his ass with his the head of his cock. Growling, Nick thrust his ass back. Tristan groaned and slid in his cock.. Nick relaxed slightly. Tristan moved slowly.

The sensations ricocheted through Nick's body. He'd nearly forgotten what Tristan could do to him. The man moved with infinite patience, until the whole length of his cock was in Nick's ass. He pulled out then returned. His grip tightened around Nick's ass then he pulled out and plunged in deep.

Nick moaned. Through half-lidded eyes he saw Tristan waffling between pain from the extra sensations and excitement. Unable to resist any longer, he brought his hands down, dragging the tips of his fingers along Tristan's hands and arms. Tristan cried out and surged faster. His body stiffened and shuddered, and with two final strokes, his seed emptied into Nick's ass.

Removing his legs from Tristan's shoulders, he caught Tristan as he collapsed, rolling them both onto their sides. He held Tristan as his body shook with aftershocks and fought the urge to pull Tristan tight to him and never let go. He let his arm fall, when Tristan moved away from him.

"Nick..."

"Thank you, love," Nick whispered, kissing Tristan's ear. "Go to sleep. Rest. Relax."

"You, too."

* * * *

Tristan rolled over, the empty coolness of the bed snapping him awake. Pushing himself to a sitting position, he glanced around the dim room. Quickly, he found his sleep pants and pulled them on. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he made his way through the house, searching for Nick and following the faint sound of metal clinking to the kitchen. Everywhere he looked, the curtains had been closed and lights turned off, and he smiled.

Leaning against the kitchen doorway, he stared at Nick's jean-clad ass, his gaze glancing at the bandage on his arm. Guilt swept through him. Nick had been injured because of him, because he hadn't even tried to get in contact with him, because he hadn't told anybody what was going on. Compounding his guilt was the knowledge that Nick had torn the stitches again taking care of him.

Inhaling deeply, he finally understood what Nick had known all along. Tristan wasn't the right man for him. Nick deserved someone else—someone better—someone who would

make him happy. Someone who wouldn't get him killed. Tristan's smile faded. He'd relish the remaining time he'd have with the only man he'd ever love then push him hard back to Chicago where he belonged.

"Goodbye, Nick. I'll always love you," he whispered, his voice no more than a sigh.

Silently, he turned and crept back up to his room, savouring the image of a shirtless Nick completely comfortable in his home.

Chapter Seven

Nick waited in his truck, outside the dojo. Tristan had insisted on working, teaching, reminding, and preparing students for next week's tournament. Nick had insisted on driving, still feeling slightly more protective than Tristan was comfortable with. The deep-seated need to protect Tristan scared Nick. So, he'd run a few errands, checked with Craig for possible developments, and returned to the dojo, watching from the truck everyone who came and went. His mind wandered back to the last couple of nights.

Saturday night had been better than he could have imagined or remembered it. He hadn't been sure if Tristan could handle the ties, but he had, and he'd given Nick the most precious gift in the world, his complete trust. He'd had several moments of panic, testing, warring with himself for control, a release from the pending fear. Nick had been proud, his heart swelling when Tristan had allowed him to take control. Nick had tried to be as gentle as possible, combining pleasure and pain in a spectacular conclusion that drew them both in.

Mine. The word shimmered in the air, ripped from the depths of his soul. He'd seen in Tristan, more than he had before, he'd seen love, and knew it was a reflection of what he'd fought in his heart. *Take a chance, a risk.* How many times, had he heard that? First, from Crysta then Todd and, finally, from Tony, his sergeant, who'd pulled him into his office more than once after it had been found out Nick was gay. There was an initial fear of hatred or kicking him out of the department, but neither had happened, and Nick had made sure he went through doors first, moves that had saved more than one friend. Nick had argued with Tony saying there wasn't any one guy he was hung up on. Tony had called him a lying fool, saying his brother-in-law had the same attitude and hang-dog look on his face over a chick he'd broken up with and wouldn't get over his own stubborn pride to go and win back.

Nick swallowed the lump that formed in his throat. Could he do it? Could he live with Tristan and everything he carried, knowing he'd never be whole again. Could Nick do it? But could he live without Tristan? Did he want to? He inhaled sharply then let the breath out again.

He didn't think he could live a lifetime of walking on eggshells, not even a few years. The couple of weeks he had was almost more than he could bear. In the end, his father hadn't been able to either. He'd walked out on them, leaving his sister, younger brother, and him to deal with their mother, unable to comprehend the wild accusations, fists, assorted items thrown at them followed by long periods of deep despair that had only intensified after he'd left. She'd died from a lethal combination of prescription medications three weeks after his brother graduated from high school.

Nick shook the memory from his head. Tristan wasn't his mother. He didn't run from things. Nick needed to know why Tristan had left and why he hadn't said anything to anyone. Was there more that he wasn't telling them? Did he remember more from that time than he'd told them? Did he know who'd kidnapped him?

There wasn't a beating, at least not that he'd mentioned, and he had no bruises outside of those on his arms and legs where it looked like he'd been carried unconscious and where the cuffs had been locked on a little too tight. They had kept him in the hospital for several days, at first on Nick's insistence, for safety he'd told them and for his own peace of mind. In the end, it had been a moot point because the constant stimulation to Tristan's overly sensitised body had kept him unconscious for more days than anyone was comfortable with. A rape kit had been taken, while he'd been under, the results of which had been negative.

Nick smiled grimly. Tristan was strong, could take just about anything anyone gave him, good or bad, but the highly sensitive body had given him a vulnerable spot that could be taken advantage of. That, Nick told himself, was the real reason for his over-protectiveness of Tristan. It had nothing to do with the reason behind the fear that had sent speeding from Chicago, with a quick call to his sergeant, apologising about missing a mandatory meeting.

He redirected his thoughts to Sunday and the change in Tristan. The blizzard hadn't hit, and the snow that had fallen was barely over six inches yet Tristan had remained quiet all day. He'd slept, meditated, worked out, and pulled away from Nick every time he touched or hugged him, stating that Nick had been right and his body was over sensitised, in pain, and just generally needed to rest. Nick was certain it was only part of the truth.

Sitting in his truck, he watched the students leave the dojo one by one. He waited until the last one left before jumping out of his truck. Movement out of the corner of his eye had

him quickening his pace. He turned, stopped, and stared. A group of men rounding the building's corner made their way towards the parking lot. But it was a tall man with short blond hair in the middle who made Nick freeze. Nick racked his brain, looking for an answer to the man's familiar features. He'd seen him somewhere, he was certain. Not a date, but somewhere. Shaking his head, he continued on his course.

"You son-of-a-bitch!" an angry, male voice yelled seconds before a large, bare fist barrelled into his jaw.

Seeing stars, Nick stumbled back, slid on the snow and fell to the slush-covered ground. Quickly, he regained his feet, staring from one angry face to another. He thought about reaching for his gun but decided against it, knowing it could make the situation worse.

"Mike, what is going on?" he asked, spotting one of Tristan's brothers and backing up. "What are you doing here?"

"You—"

One man tried to tackle him, Nick sidestepped, causing the man to skid across the ground. From the other side, another man tackled him, forcing him to the ground with a thud. A vicious kick landed on his injured leg. Something crunched. Pain cascaded through his body. Blood poured out of the wound, seeping through the denim. Through the hazy hail of fists, he saw a bare foot punch through the air, scattering his attackers. He warred between cradling his leg and his ribs. His breath caught in his throat as he struggled to sit up. Backing himself up several inches, leaving a bloody trail. Knowing he was losing too much, he removed his scarf and tied it tightly around his leg. Keeping his eye on the whirling dervish of black in front of him, Nick heard the distant wail of sirens and tried not to feel helpless.

A jump front snap kick aimed to the chest took out one man. As Tristan landed, he leaned forward, kicking his leg out to the back and side, and caught another man in his knee. Tristan shifted weight and position. Stepping in, he punched yet another man in the stomach then used the man's other arm to flip him over his back. A well-placed knee to the groin had the next man tumbling to the ground while Tristan spun around and faced the last man. The man punched. Tristan blocked, landed a punch to the gut and swept his leg, catching the man's leg, causing him to fall.

Police cars came to screeching halt. Martial arts students formed a circle around them. Tristan knelt down beside Nick, placing a hand on his cheek.

Nick stared at Tristan. "How bad?" He'd seen the pool of blood leading away from him. "What happened?" Tristan asked.

Craig pushed through the crowd.

"Somebody tell me what the hell is going on," he yelled. He pointed at Nick. "You first."

Nick reported the events coldly, still perplexed by the sudden attack. The group stayed silent until Craig turned to Mike who started yelling, the onslaught of words aimed directly at Nick, holding him responsible for Tristan's kidnapping.

"You didn't draw?" Craig asked, turning back to him. "Did you identify yourself as a police officer?"

"No. Was just going inside to get Tris." Nick shook his head, regretting the action immediately. "Lost blood though."

"Ambulance is on its way," Tristan said softly. "And you're going."

Nick stared at Tristan, fought his rising anger and nodded. A young boy came up, calling 'Sensei'. Tristan stood and turned. The boy handed him a pair of shoes, bowed then left. One by one, Tristan's students departed as the police cuffed each of the men. Sorrow dug deep into Tristan's eyes, and Nick ached to take it away. He blew out a breath. He needed to ask a favour first. Keeping Tristan safe was the most important thing right now.

"Craig!" Nick called out as the ambulance pulled into the parking lot.

"What?"

"Check on the blond."

Craig nodded.

"Are you charging them?" Tristan asked, joining them. "Mike knows Nick is a cop and that he's with Chicago PD."

"Maybe. We'll keep you informed," Craig replied noncommittally.

* * * *

Tristan followed the ambulance to the hospital and alternated between standing, sitting, and moving in the waiting room. Amberlee had called and offered to come up, but he'd said to go to the police station and see what was going on with Mike. Nick's sister and brother-in-

law were on their way, and their older brother would fly in some time in the next couple of days. Nobody looked at Tristan as he continued to pace the floor.

“Tristan!”

He turned as Sue burst through the doors, crossed to him and pulled him into a hug.

“I just heard. How is he? Will he be all right?” she asked, running a hand through his hair.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine, the doctors are working on him now. There was so much blood. How can I let him go again? I still love him,” Tristan replied, pulling himself from her.

He needed space not contact. He wanted to be alone. Nick would have to return to Chicago now, and even if he didn’t, his sister would probably insist on him staying with her, especially since Tristan couldn’t have him living with him. The temptation would be too much, the pain of having him that close and completely unattainable would be his undoing.

A bit later, the door opened, revealing a tall man in blue-green scrubs. The monotonous chatter Tristan had managed to block out silenced. He pushed his way forward. Crysta and Todd joined him.

“He’ll be fine, and I expect him to make a full and complete recovery with time.”

“How bad was it?” Tristan asked, needing to know Nick would truly be okay. He waited patiently, listening to the surgeon’s explanations and asking a few questions, his heart demanding to see Nick now, to hold him, to know the truth of the words, to know if Nick cared for him at all.

“Where is home?”

Tears filled his eyes. “Chicago. He’s with Chicago Police Department,” Tristan replied. “How long will he be here?”

“Does he have a place in town to stay at?”

Tristan nodded. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Sue leave as Craig walked in.

“Then maybe tomorrow.”

Tristan nodded again. “Can I see him?”

“A couple of hours.” The surgeon nodded, turned and left.

“Well?” Craig asked.

"He'll be fine. They just needed to repair the damage done, which was surprisingly minor considering the amount of blood he lost. And he broke two ribs, and he'll have a black eye for a week or so," Tristan replied flatly.

"I'm going to make a few inquiries here then get back to the station and do what I can from there."

Tristan nodded. "Crysta, can Nick stay with you until he returns to Chicago?"

"Of course, but why can't he stay with you? I know you care about him," Crysta replied, cocking her head to one side.

"Because I'm not what he wants or what he needs."

"He can stay, if he agrees, but you have to tell him. I won't do that to him," she said. "Go down to the cafeteria and get a drink or something. We'll stay here."

Tristan nodded and made his way downstairs. He grabbed a bottle of Coke and a muffin and sat down. He couldn't believe he'd told Sue he still loved Nick or that he didn't want him to go. She'd listened the first time, had encouraged him to press Nick about his feelings then had been patient with him when he needed a shoulder to cry on. It wasn't a lie. It certainly wasn't a secret. He loved Nick, had loved him for years. Blowing out a breath, he threw the barely eaten muffin in the trash, took the bottle and went back to the waiting room. He resumed alternately standing, sitting and pacing while studiously avoiding people.

"Mr. McTavish?"

Tristan stopped mid-stride and turned to face the speaker. "Yes."

"He's asking for you. We've already moved him to his own room."

* * * *

Tristan pushed open the door to Nick's dim room. The light over the bed was lit, illuminating Nick as he slept. Tristan swallowed hard. One part of the sheet was pulled back, and there was a large bandage on Nick's leg where the doctors had repaired the damage. For a brief moment, he allowed himself to wonder what it would have been like to walk into Nick's hospital room after he'd been shot.

"Hey there, pet," Nick rasped, barely opening his eyes. "You're here."

Tristan's heart melted. "Where else would I be?" he asked, moving to side of the bed and grabbing Nick's hand. It had been ages since he'd been called pet. He missed it. Missed the sense of belonging he'd had. He steeled himself and took a deep breath. "Crysta and I think it best if you go to her place. There are no stairs, and she'll be able to look after you better."

"No, I'm not going to Crysta's. I'm going to our house and our bed."

"Nick, I don't think —"

"No thinking, pet." Nick released Tristan's hand and reached up his arm. "Here, come here."

Tristan obeyed and leaned forward. Nick grabbed his shirt and pulled him close. Nick kissed him, his tongue thrusting and intermingling with Tristan's. Taking. Demanding.

"I think. You obey. You've been pushy and mouthy," Nick said, releasing him.

"Nick —" Tristan protested.

"Tristan, love, I hate explaining myself. Crysta is a wonderful person, but she's not the one I want looking after me."

"Nick —"

"I can't grope and ogle her or trick her into getting me a snack before bed and meals. She's a mom, but I would rather be with you. Only you," Nick said, the last words came out as a cross between begging and needing.

"Nick —"

"Only you, love."

Tristan stared at Nick, captivated by the look in his eyes, and nodded, praying he hadn't made the biggest mistake of his life. It was a look he'd seen before and knew he could never deny.

* * * *

Nick tossed and turned in the bed, trying to get comfortable. Pain flared up from his leg. Swearing, he opened his eyes, and stared at the ceiling. Grabbing his crutches, he pulled himself up. He'd been out of the hospital only a couple of days and had spent nearly the entire time in his bed, away from Tristan. He'd taken the pills the doctor ordered, using the

pain pills sparingly. He needed to be working again. To move again. The recovery period was worse than the injury itself. Slowly, he made his way to Tristan's room.

From the doorway, he saw the bed hadn't been slept in. The clock on the nightstand read two-twenty in the morning. Turning, he made his way down the hall to the stairs. He saw light shining from the living room but heard nothing. Putting both crutches in one hand, he braced himself against the wall and hopped down the stairs as quietly as he could. Righting himself, he crossed to the living room, stopping in the doorway. Tristan sat, head in hands, facing a small brown package on the coffee table. Nick's blood ran cold.

"Tris! Tristan!" he called out, walking as fast as his crutches allowed.

"Nick?" Tristan's head snapped up. "What are you doing out of bed?"

Nick sank down onto the couch next to him.

"I should ask you the same thing. When and where did this come from?"

"Sue came by. She said it was sitting on the porch. I had her put it down there. Haven't touched it."

Nick's mind raced. He'd heard Tristan taking a shower just before eleven, and Crysta and Todd had left at ten-thirty. If it had been there then, he would have heard about it.

"When was Sue here?"

"Eleven-thirty, eleven-forty-five maybe. I'd just gotten out of the shower."

"I hope you were wearing more than a towel." Nick grinned, his cock hardening at the thought.

"Barbarian. No, I was in this," Tristan replied, gesturing to his clothes.

"What do you want to do?" Nick asked, quietly.

"Huh?"

"Do you want to call Craig now? Wait until morning? Do you want to open the bloody thing?"

"Oh, just wait until morning," Tristan replied, distracted. "Let's go upstairs."

"I don't know if I can. I'll stay down here," Nick offered. He didn't want to leave Tristan alone, but he didn't want to try and navigate the stairs just then.

"The couch isn't as comfortable as it used to be. I'll help you. Come on."

Nick nodded, and he allowed Tristan to help him up the stairs. He could have made the ascent alone, but he loved the way Tristan protectively held him. He shook his head when Tristan started him towards his room.

“With you.”

“Nick, if I kick you –”

“Please, let me. I want to know you’re safe.”

Nodding, Tristan relented. Nick got into bed and patted the spot beside him. He needed Tristan beside him, to be in him, to know he was okay. Tristan excused himself to make sure doors were locked and lights were off. Afterward, he crawled into bed from the other side. Nick pulled Tristan to him, his cock hardening.

“Tell me it was a lucky shot,” Tristan said, snuggling closer.

“I’d be lying,” Nick replied kissing the back of Tristan’s neck.

Beside him, Tristan stiffened. “I was afraid of that. I didn’t see it happen, just the damage. Do you know who did it?”

“I have an idea.” Nick let his hands wander up and down the hard plane of Tristan’s chest before slipping them into Tristan’s pants and reaching for his cock.

“Who?” Tristan asked in disbelief. “Now? You want to do it now?”

“Yes.” Nick flicked his tongue across Tristan’s ear. “Need to know you’re okay.”

“Yeah, I’m not the one who went through surgery a couple days ago.”

“Strip for me,” Nick ordered between laving kisses to Tristan’s neck and shoulders.

Tristan rolled over, and Nick pulled him onto him, kissing him, his tongue darting back and forth. Tristan pulled back, stared at him for a long moment and got to his knees. Nick reached over and turned on the bedside lamp, anxious to see Tristan’s glorious body. He pulled himself into a sitting position and carefully removed his shorts. Tristan knelt beside him and pulled his shirt over his head, hesitating for a moment before pulling it off and tossing it to the floor. Nick moaned, reached for him and missed. Laughter and lust danced in Tristan’s jade eyes. He stood and slowly removed his pants.

“Come here!” Nick ordered. Desire and need ran rampant through him.

Obedying, Tristan turned around. Grabbing his legs, Nick pulled him closer until the tip of his cock was inches from his face. Inhaling deep, Nick leaned forward and licked the soft, velvety tip, eliciting a deep-throated moan from Tristan. Smiling, Nick took the man’s cock

into his mouth and laved it. Blindly, he reached for the lube, his attention never leaving Tristan's cock. Applying some to his fingers, he pushed one finger up Tristan's hole and slowly fucked him with it, before adding a second and third. The addition of a fourth finger brought Tristan to orgasm.

"Ride me," Nick said, after licking him clean.

He tugged on Tristan's wrist then trapped the man's mouth with his when Tristan lowered himself over Nick's rigid penis. Releasing him, Nick thrust his hips up as Tristan sank lower into him. Nick let Tristan set the rhythm, thrusting as he came down, driving his cock deep into his lover's ass. Tristan moaned and held onto Nick's shoulders, his ass clenching and releasing, his cock once again hard and needing.

"Faster," Nick urged.

"Harder," came Tristan's breathless reply.

Both men obliged. Nick manipulated Tristan's balls and stroked his cock, matching the rhythm Tristan had established. A cry wrenched from Tristan.

"Coming!" Nick shouted, stiffening and depositing his seed into Tristan's ass.

"Nick!" Tristan shouted, his cock erupting all over Nick's chest and abdomen.

Nick pulled Tristan into his embrace, ran a hand through the man's mane of black hair and kissed him deep.

"Mmm," Tristan purred. "I like this."

Nick ran a hand over Tristan's back. "So do I, love, so do I."

Chapter Eight

"Mike and his friends are going to be charged with assault and battery," Craig said, looking from Tristan to Nick

Tristan shifted in the cushioned chair in the Craig's office. They had called the Sheriff first thing in the morning and told him about the newest package. Craig, the rookie, and the lab tech had come over, dusted it for prints, checked the porch where Sue had claimed to have found it and took the whole thing back to the station with them. He knew Craig had probably pushed it ahead of other things that needed to be done, and he was grateful.

Nick nodded. "I don't think they have anything to do with the person or persons who are trying to terrorise Tristan. Mike is Tristan's brother. He may disapprove of him, but I can't see him involved with the stalking."

"Possibly. Nothing is being ruled out," Craig replied.

"Do you know anything more about the packages, and who sent them?" Tristan asked, not looking at Nick. Part of him wanted the answer to be no so that Nick would stay in Harbour Springs with him, and part of him wanted it to be yes so that the nightmare would end.

"Pam, the lab tech, is working on the box now. As soon as I know something, I'll let you know. The best thing for you two to do is to go home," Craig replied.

Tristan jumped to his feet. "I'm tired of sitting home. First him, now you... I have a business to run. My students have a tournament coming up, and they have a right to feel safe at my dojo. I want this bastard caught!" Tristan slammed his fist down on the desk. "I want answers!"

"Tristan, I understand. I do," Craig said, holding up his hands.

"Love, sit down," Nick said, getting to his feet.

Tristan turned to face him. "Are you going to tell me it was a coincidence that Mike and his friends happened to be there when you were? As much as I don't want to believe it, I wouldn't put it past any of my brothers, although a fight is more their style. You're a cop. Tell me what you think."

Nick shook his head and pulled him closer. Tristan stiffened.

"I don't believe in coincidences" Nick said. "I'm sure someone told them, but I don't know who. I didn't realise Mike would know where your dojo is."

"He didn't know that I have a dojo," Tristan replied. "Not until now. At least, I don't think he did. I don't make a point of sharing my life with my family."

"Did you question the instructors or the receptionist?" Nick asked, straightening.

"About what?"

"Any calls they might have received."

"Nick, there is no receptionist. Carol left for school, and I never got around to replacing her," Tristan replied. "You think someone called the dojo to see if you or I were there?"

Nick shrugged. "It's a possibility."

"Jenkins and Detective Martinez are already out talking to people and have been. Again, as soon as I know something, I'll let you know."

"We've heard that line before. We're your friends, and you're not telling us anything. *And* you know something," Nick stated, guiding Tristan back to his seat.

"No, I'm not telling you everything. I can't."

"Why not?" Tristan asked, hanging onto Nick's hand. "What do you know?"

"Enough to know that what I say could cause the two of you more problems, and neither one of you need that right now. Tristan, take care of your students, and Nick, rest your leg. We're working on it."

"So you have a lead?"

Craig inclined his head slightly. "We are looking into it, yadda yadda yadda."

"Nice," Nick said, shaking his head. "Come on, love. Let's go back to the dojo. Your students should be arriving in a half hour."

Tristan nodded, aware his anger had ebbed and was replaced by suspicion. "Go on ahead. I'll catch up with you."

"Well, that's a bit obvious isn't it?"

"Nick, I need to speak to Craig alone."

"Why? Do you think I had something to do with it? Is that what you want to ask him?"

"Of course not."

"Then what is it? What are you hiding?"

"Nick, let me do this, I will explain later."

"Explain now."

"Have it your way." Tristan pulled an envelope from his back pocket. He hadn't wanted Nick to see the photograph, hadn't wanted to tell Craig about it, and he'd thought long and hard about it before deciding to turn it over. Not that there was anything they could get from it, he'd run his fingers over the whole image, countless times since it had arrived. "You may want gloves Craig, but I don't know that'll do you any good for this one."

"When did that arrive?" Nick demanded.

"Several weeks ago. Couple days after you were shot."

Craig nodded, donning a pair of protective gloves he'd retrieved from the shelf behind his desk.

"Where in the hell did you get this?" he asked, removing the note and photograph.

"Mailbox. In that envelope."

"Nick, go have Jenkins get Pam up here. You can see it then," Craig said.

"Is this what you didn't want him to see?" Craig continued after Nick left.

"Yes. And I want to know what you aren't saying?"

"A lot, as you already know. And he's going to want to see this."

"I know. Are you looking at Nick for this?"

"What do you think?"

Tristan paused, looked out at the love of his life and shook his head. "I think you had to, but I don't think it's him. In my gut, I don't believe it's him."

"Then listen to your gut. We aren't looking at him."

"Done," Nick said, walking back into the office. "Now, let me see it."

Tristan nodded and held his breath.

"Gloves. We'll preserve what we can."

Nick retrieved gloves, and Craig passed him the note and photo. Nick blanched before the feeling was quickly replaced by anger. He returned the items to Craig and clenched his fist.

"How in the hell was this taken? Who took it? And how in the hell did Tristan get it?" Nick ground out, his voice menacingly low.. "Why didn't you want me to see that? What were you afraid of? What else haven't you told us?"

“Very little. I have no other answers for you,” Tristan replied. “I’ve told you all that I know.”

“Are you sure?”

“Fuck you, Nick.” Tristan turned and left the office. He wandered around the parking lot and neighbouring field before returning to Nick’s truck. He waited while Nick climbed up into the passenger side before sliding behind the wheel. They drove to the dojo after Nick insisted he didn’t want to go home and assured him he wouldn’t be bored.

“Tristan, I’m sorry. That was uncalled for. I wasn’t prepared for that. I almost looked dead.”

“That’s why I didn’t want you to see it,” Tristan replied, looking over at Nick. “What do you think that was all about?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say Craig has a good idea of who’s behind everything or part of it. And if he tells us, and we mention it to the person by mistake, he could lose them.”

“Why would we tell the person involved if Craig told us?” Tristan asked, raising an eyebrow.

“We wouldn’t if he named suspects, but if he says we have a person or persons of interest, and we’re talking to friends and they find out, they could rabbit,” Nick explained.

Tristan nodded. “So who was the blond you mentioned to Craig?”

“I didn’t realise you heard me.”

“Craig talked to Jenkins. I heard that.”

“Ah. The blond is someone I remember from Chicago. Came by to borrow the phone once, said his hadn’t been turned on yet and he needed to call his boss. New neighbour. I didn’t think anything about it until I saw him again.”

“Could he have taken your shirt? I mean, you didn’t wear it to work, did you?”

“I suppose it’s possible. No. I had on my uniform. I never wear good clothes to work. Too easy to ruin them.”

“Who do you think is behind it?” Tristan asked, parking across from the dojo.

“Since they were brought up, aside from Mike, your brothers Paul and Bobby are possibilities, since they hate you just because you’re gay. But the last note implies revenge. A jealous lover, maybe?”

Tristan laughed. “Nope, don’t think so on that one.”

"Maybe you dismissed him, and he's angry and wants you for himself?"

"By what, dragging you back into my life. We've been apart for almost a year."

"Maybe you were supposed to turn to him for support, and you didn't." Nick shrugged. "That might fit with a theory of revenge."

"Maybe."

"There's another possibility."

"Which is what?" Tristan asked, turning off the engine and removing the key.

"One of the girls. Sue and Amberlee come to mind."

"No way. According to Craig, Amberlee's called him everyday, four times a day before you three found me in that cabin, and Sue's been a friend of ours for years. She introduced us, if you don't remember."

"Trust me, I remember. You looked sexy as hell in those painted-on jeans and snug as hell T-shirt, but that doesn't mean either one of them couldn't have done it."

"Nick, really. Amberlee is practically the only member of my family I'm still speaking to, and Sue is our friend."

"I know. I didn't say I liked it. I just said it was a possibility."

"Well, come up with other possibilities because I can't see either Sue or Amberlee involved in it. Besides, I weigh more than either one of them would be able carry, especially as dead weight, even with a partner."

"You might not have been knocked out."

Tristan shook his head and opened the door to the truck. "Let's go."

* * * *

Nick sat in a chair in Tristan's office, watching his lover put the kids through their paces, noting a few who showed real potential. Stretching out his leg and propping it up on a nearby chair, Nick wondered how often had he'd sat in his tiny apartment in Chicago and wondered how Tristan and his dojo were doing, recalling the times he'd sat and watched Tristan work out or teach a class.

Was that what love was? When you didn't want to live without someone? When you compared everyone else to that person? When you chose to stay home and drink yourself

into oblivion to chase away the memories? When you stayed so in touch with those memories that dating anyone else was a moot point?

He'd been relieved to see Tristan when he'd woken up in the hospital. Had Tristan felt that way? Did he love Tristan? Did Tristan love him? Could it work? Could he get past what his parents hadn't been able to?

Nick's gaze wandered around the room to the furniture, battered and scarred, perfectly suited to Tristan and his office. As was Tristan's home. The house wasn't new or perfect but came with generations of predecessors who all had left their marks on it. Maybe the problem was and always had been unreasonable expectations. *Expect the best, and you get the best.* Isn't that what his father had told him repeatedly. His father had emphasised it more after he'd gotten remarried to a blonde bombshell. The woman, he admitted, was pretty. At least until she opened her mouth. The woman didn't have brains or common sense. To his father, the best had been physically perfect. Tristan wasn't perfect, had never been, but he'd always been perfect for Nick.

Nick swore. Tristan had always been there, had never nagged, or complained. But Nick had pushed him away, never acknowledging or admitting his own emotions and his own ideal of perfect and best. He swore again. He had done the same thing his father had done. He'd looked at Tristan with unreasonable expectations. Nick's heart swelled. He did love Tristan. He always had. He always would. Not in the short-term, Hollywood version of love, but in the until-the-end-of-eternity-I'll-die-for-you sense. Now, if only Tristan could forgive him for being stupid and slow.

The shrill sound of Nick's cell phone pulled him from his reverie.

"Nick," he said, answering the phone after glancing at the display. "What's up, Craig?"

"Where are you two?"

"Tristan's dojo. He's working with his students. Whatever tournament they're going to next weekend is huge, so they're putting in extra time," Nick replied, wishing he'd paid closer attention to the tournament schedule.

"Get to my office as soon as you can," Craig ground out.

"What is it? Is something wrong?" Nick asked, sitting straight up. "Is Tristan in danger?"

Images of a lifeless Tristan threatened to overwhelm him.

"As soon as you can, Nick."

Nick flipped shut the phone and hooked it on his belt. He looked up at the clock and blew out a breath. There was still an hour left of practise. He passed the time alternating between basking in the new revelation of his love for Tristan and anxiously worrying about Craig's cryptic message. Combined with Craig's attitude earlier, it didn't bode well. The sheriff knew something, but he wasn't sharing, and whatever he and Tristan had talked about, neither one of them had cared to fill Nick in. Maybe they thought he'd done it and had arranged the attack himself. Nick shook his head. Tristan wouldn't have let him in the house, let alone made love with him, if he had suspected him.

"Craig called," Nick said when Tristan came into the office after the last students and instructors had left and the doors were locked.

"When? What does he want?"

"About an hour and a half ago. He wants us in his office."

"And you didn't tell me. Why?"

"Because I know you wouldn't have left your students. There are a finite number of days left before this competition of yours, and you want them to get in all of the practise time they can."

"Yes, but you should have told me. Let me make the decision. Don't make it for me."

Nick nodded. "I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd mind."

"That's the problem, Nick. You never stop to think. Analyse, yes. And I'm sure you're great in a fight and on the job, but on a personal level, you stink," Tristan said tersely. Grabbing his clothes, he left the office and headed for the bathroom.

"Well, fuck." Nick pulled himself to his feet and shrugged into his coat. Nothing was said until after the building had been locked up and they were in Nick's truck.

"Tristan—"

"Leave it alone," Tristan bit out.

Nick stared at Tristan. His jade green eyes stormed, and angry tension rolled off him. Inhaling deeply, Nick forced his gaze back to the road and let Tristan drive them to the sheriff's station while silence built between them.

The parking lot was empty when they pulled in five minutes after six. Nick led the way into the building, acutely aware of the distance Tristan kept. A cheerful woman escorted

them to Craig's office, telling them to have a seat and Craig would be with them shortly. Tristan nodded and Nick sat down in the nearest chair, leaning his crutches against the wall.

"Nick. Tristan. Thank you for coming in," Craig said, walking through the door. Officer Jenkins behind him.

"What is going on?" Nick asked, longing to reach out to Tristan.

"The attack on you and the packages being left for Tristan are related," Craig said, sitting down on the edge of his desk.

"They are?" Nick and Tristan asked simultaneously.

Craig nodded. "We caught a break with that last package."

Nick raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Tristan, who came to see you after the fight, while Nick was in surgery?"

"Crysta and Todd. Amberlee. Sue. Tony, Helen, and a handful of others later on. Why?"

"Who did you call?"

"EMS, you, Crysta and Amberlee."

"What's so important about that?" Nick asked, running a hand through his hair. He wasn't sure he liked where this was going. "Hasn't he been over this already?"

"Not these questions," Craig replied. "We brought in Sue Montgomery and Paul McTavish, along with Dave Singleton."

"Who's Dave Singleton?" Tristan asked, shaking his head. "Wait. Is it the blond Nick recalled?"

"Yes," Craig replied. "Seems that Sue wanted you for herself, and since seducing you straight out hadn't worked, she hatched this scheme with Paul, whose intolerance of homosexuals is nothing new. Singleton is a friend of Mike and Paul's. The fight between Mike, his friends and Nick was planned. Mike blamed Nick for everything--from your kidnapping to your being gay--and wanted to get even, so to speak, with Singleton pushing him toward the fight. When Nick didn't die, again, and you still didn't turn to Sue for comfort, it pissed her off royally. In her anger, she wasn't as careful as before, and that tripped her up."

"How?"

Nick watched the display of emotions wash over Tristan's face as he digested the information that his best friend and two of his brothers had set him up.

"We expected to find Sue's prints on the outside of the box, because she brought it into the house, we didn't expect to find them on the inside, which we did. We found one of Paul's prints on the inside of the lid."

"I see. And you got them to confess?" Tristan asked, hesitantly.

Craig nodded.

"So, the whole thing came about because Sue wanted Tristan, and Paul basically wanted to terrorise his brother into becoming straight?" Nick raised an eyebrow.

"Pretty much."

"And Singleton?"

"Singleton is a goon for hire with the hots for Sue."

"Well, that's dumb," Tristan snorted.

"No, Sue claims to be in love with you."

"Hmph."

"Go home now. It's been a long couple of weeks," Craig stated, standing up. "I don't have to tell you two not to tell anyone anything."

"Of course not."

"Good. Go home and relax. They aren't going anywhere for a while."

Nick nodded and pulled himself up. Tristan followed. Silently, they left the office and walked back to the truck.

"I can't believe Sue and Paul were behind the whole thing. I trusted Sue. *We* trusted her," Nick said, running a hand over Tristan's back. "She introduced us in the first place."

Tristan remained silent, distancing himself from Nick. On the short drive back to Tristan's, Nick tried continuously to draw him out, receiving stony silence interspersed by occasional, one-word answers.

"Tristan, love, what's wrong?" Nick asked as they parked in front of the house. "Talk to me. Please."

"Go home, Nick. You don't belong here," Tristan replied, getting out of the truck, the door slamming behind him.

"Wait! Tristan!" Nick called after him, moving as fast as he dared over the snow and ice. "Damn it! Wait up! I can't move as fast you can!"

Tristan ignored him and continued into the house. Nick found him, several minutes later in the kitchen, brewing a fresh pot of coffee.

“Love—”

“Save it. I’m not perfect Nick. I’m not going to be. I’ll carry this with me for the rest of my life, and we both know it’s not something you can deal with. Go home. Go back to Chicago, where you can find what you want.”

“I want you, Tristan. You have to know that.”

“Too little, too late. Wanting isn’t enough. Desire won’t get you or us through the coming months.”

Nick started to speak, ready to confess his feelings, when his cell phone beeped. He glanced at the display, hoping to ignore it, and swore.

“Jackson here.”

His sergeant’s voice erupted through the spotty lines, demanding he be at the station first thing in the morning.

“Tomorrow? Shit. Yeah, I’ll be there.”

“How convenient for you. Sounds like Chicago is calling. They have excellent timing. Go home. I want you out of my house by time I get back. And this time, leave the key.” Tristan turned on his heel and left the kitchen. The front door slammed behind him.

“Bloody hell.” The engine of the Mitsubishi Eclipse roared to life, and Nick knew Tristan was gone. Nick’s heart shattered.

Chapter Nine

Tristan stared at the lone bronze-coloured key that had lain on the kitchen counter since Nick had placed it there three days ago. When he'd left. Again. Only this time, Tristan hadn't given Nick a chance to argue or make excuses. He didn't want to hear the words that would let Nick further into his heart only to break again. He could accept never being whole again—he had no choice—but Nick couldn't. Wouldn't. And the rejection that would come would be harder to bear than the pain of letting Nick go.

"Happy freakin' Valentine's Day," Tristan said, staring out the window at the rare late afternoon sun.

Heaving a sigh, he drained the contents of his coffee mug, set it in the sink and headed upstairs. Last night's storm had dropped a foot and a half of new snow in a handful of hours, and he wanted to get a jump on clearing the snow before the next band came through. He cast a glance at the closed door to the room Nick had used. It had been shut when he'd returned home, and there was no sign of Nick. Unwilling to face the emptiness of the bedroom, Tristan had left the door closed since Nick had shut it.

A wry smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as rapid-fire images of their time together assaulted him. Memories tumbled forward, pummelling and taunting him—the night he'd gone in to talk to Nick after his shower, Nick making love to Tristan until he'd gasped and moaned and every sane thought had been driven from his head, Nick surprising him in the shower, Tristan's back against the wall and his legs wrapped around Nick's waist. He'd screamed then.

Tristan blew out a breath and jammed a hand through his hair. Turning, he padded barefooted into his room, his erection noticeable through his sweat pants. He contemplated a cold shower but decided against it since the snow still needed to be cleared. Stripping, he methodically went through every kata, block, punch, and kick he knew, forcing his mind from his memories and Nick. Quickly, he stuffed himself into his jeans. Tugging on a sweatshirt, he headed downstairs.

Shadows passed across the bay window, catching his eye as descended the stairs. Silently, he moved to the windows and peered through the curtains. Any tracks there might have been had disappeared into the glistening wet pavement. Tearing through the house, he yanked open the front door and stared, open-mouthed. His driveway, sidewalk, walkway, and front porch had been shovelled and a salt-sand mixture poured on them. He looked up and down the street for a sign of who was responsible, finding nothing, he scratched his head and went back inside.

He was pouring himself a fresh cup of coffee in his favourite mug when he was interrupted by a persistent pounding on the door. He set the mug down and went to answer it. Looking out of the side window, he was greeted with two-dozen red roses and a pair of legs.

"Um, can I help you?" Tristan asked, pulling open the door.

"Delivery for Tristan McTavish," came the reply with a thick, southern accented voice, the words sounding like they should be heavily peppered with sickly sweet terms of endearments.

"There must be a mistake," Tristan said, raising an eyebrow. Flowers? Who would send him flowers? Even for Valentine's Day. He shook his head.

"No. No, there is no mistake. You are Tristan McTavish, aren't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then these are yours." The flowers were thrust into his hands.

"I don't like cut flowers," Tristan said by way of a protest.

"Yes, but the guys at work swore this was the quickest way to forgiveness," Nick's deep voice said as the flowers lowered. "I thought about something practical but was assured that was the way to disaster."

Tristan let go, and the vase shattered on the concrete porch. "What are you doing here? Why aren't you in Chicago?" he asked, his cock hardening instantly.

"Would you believe me if I said I was in the neighbourhood?" Nick quirked an eyebrow and offered a half smile.

"No." Tristan braced himself for the wave of emotions threatening to rocket through him.

"Would you believe me if I said I couldn't live without you? That the past few days have been the worst?"

"Nick, I—"

"Just listen, please?"

"You drove three hours out of your way to talk? You know my phone number. You could have called, you know?"

Nick shook his head. "Not this time, love. I've never lied to you. Never. Not even to spare your feelings."

"I'm aware of that fact," Tristan bit out.

"I can't live without you. I don't want to. Chicago wasn't what I thought it would be. Every man I dated, I compared to you. I want you."

Tristan's heart beat faster at Nick's words. He took a deep breath. Was it because he wanted it to be true? Because no matter what he'd said, he had never stopped loving Nick? He ran a hand through his hair and shook his head. He wanted—needed—to believe Nick, but he didn't want his heart broken, yet again. "Nick—"

"Tristan, I don't just want you. I need you. Forever," Nick said, grabbed his crutches from beside the door then stepped in, taking Tristan's hands. "I love you."

"Nick, I'm not what you want," Tristan retorted, not wanting to believe the words.

"I've never lied to you. I love you. I want a chance to prove it."

"When did this realisation occur? When last night's toy said no?" Tristan snapped. He shook his head again. "I'm sorry. That was uncalled for."

"You have a right to be mad at me. But...there hasn't been anyone else for me since we split."

"No one?"

"No. After sharing my bed with you, everyone else was a horrid imitation. You are the only one I want. I love you," Nick said, embracing him.

Tristan paused, stiffened then relaxed into Nick's arms. Nick lowered his head, slanted his mouth over Tristan's, his tongue pushing into Tristan's mouth, searching, exploring, tasting, needing and demanding. Tristan was lost. His heart and body ceded to Nick.

"I need you. Now. Forever," Nick demanded, releasing him. "Love me. Give me a chance."

"Nick, I've never stopped loving you."

"Then why did you send me away?" Nick asked, peppering his neck and face with kisses.

"Because your rejection would have killed me."

Nick stopped and looked into Tristan's eyes. Nick's brown eyes swirled with untold emotion. "I never meant to reject you. I just didn't realise how unrealistic my expectations were. We aren't my parents. I was too scared to try. Forgive me? Please. Let me love you. Let me take care of you. Be mine," Nick pleaded.

Tristan nodded. "I do forgive you. I love you. I've always been yours."

Nick pushed Tristan further into the house and pushed the door shut behind them with one of the crutches. Tristan unzipped Nick's leather coat and let it fall to the floor. Nick grabbed Tristan's sweatshirt and yanked it over his head. Nick gently bit his ear, traced the outline of his jaw and nipped playfully at the corner of his mouth. Tristan moaned, his cock pressing against the confining denim of his jeans. Nick made quick work of his own shirt, backing Tristan up as he continued his onslaught until Tristan's legs hit the dining room table.

"Trapped," Nick said, kissing him. He released the button on his jeans then slid them down. Tristan moaned, his cock springing free. Nick grabbed him and pressed him close. "Take them off and get on the table, love."

Tristan removed his jeans then undid Nick's before sliding them down to his thighs. He ran his hands over Nick's body and cupped his cock and balls, sucking on the head of his cock before getting onto the table. Lying on his back, he propped himself up on his elbows and watched Nick move around the room, limping heavily. Tristan smiled, replacing his rising anger at the reason for the injury with images of Nick possessing him. A lubed finger pressed at the entrance to his hole and plunged in. Nick massaged Tristan's balls, pulled on his nipples, and kissed the inside of his thigh, his finger spreading him. Slowly, he added a second then a third and finally a fourth. Tristan met Nick's thrusts, until Nick stopped and pulled out.

"Please. Nick, please. Fill me," Tristan begged.

"Hands behind your head," Nick ordered.

The head of Nick's cock teased Tristan. Nick pulled his legs onto his shoulders and surged forward. Tristan bucked his hips and groaned. Nick established a hard and fast rhythm, giving them both what they needed. He grabbed Tristan's cock and pumped it. With two hard thrusts, Nick's seed filled Tristan's ass. Tristan groaned, his body clenched and he shot his own cum spraying both of them and the table. Nick released his legs, pulled out, and braced himself on the table, overlooking him.

"I love you, Tristan."

"I love you, too."

"We need to get cleaned up."

Tristan smiled and led the way up to the shower.

* * * *

"Come with me," Nick prompted, running a hand through Tristan's sleep tousled hair.

The sun had begun to set. The remains of the ruined flowers had been cleaned up and discarded. The shower had finally come to an end with the last of the hot water and the onslaught of the cold. Nick smiled at the memory of pummelling Tristan's ass and body. He loved Tristan and the way he felt in his arms. He was in love with Tristan and would never get tired of making love to him.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see." Nick kissed him. "Follow me."

"Let me get dressed."

Scooping up a pair of jeans from the floor where they'd landed, he handed them to Tristan. Turning, he searched the closet, found a shirt and handed that to him as well. Bracing himself on his crutches, he led the way down the stairs and waited.

"What's going on?" Tristan asked.

"Close your eyes."

Tristan obeyed. Nick tugged his hand once before dropping it to grab the crutch and led him into the dining room. He'd used the time Tristan had been asleep to transform the dining room into a makeshift Taj Mahal. Brightly coloured rugs and pillows with assorted

beads and trims filled the space. His sister had readily supplied the décor once he'd come clean.

"Open."

Tristan gasped. "You did this while I was asleep?"

Nick nodded. "I know how much you want to go to India, and since I can't take you there, I brought it here."

"Nick, it's wonderful!" Tristan smiled and hugged him. "You cooked, too!"

Nick nodded.

"Sit down, and I'll get the plates," Tristan said, bounding into the kitchen and returning with two loaded plates of food. He set them down before sitting on the pile of pillows. Nick hobbled over and joined him.

"Stay with me," Nick asked, his voice soft. He hoped the fear and anticipation enveloping him didn't show.

"I don't want to move to Chicago. My students and my dojo are here."

Nick nodded. He had known this would be Tristan's answer. "Then let me stay with you. I've talked to Craig, and after I've received the all clear from the doctors, I'm going to take a job with the Sheriff's department. When I returned to Chicago, I gave notice. I'll have to go back for a couple of weeks after the all clear, but then I'll be back. I've given my landlord notice."

"You're leaving Chicago?"

"Yes. I love you. I want you always in my life. I don't care where we are."

Tristan leaned over, wrapped his arms around him and kissed him.

"Be mine, love. Forever," Nick pleaded.

Tristan's heart soared. Nick loved him, knew it and accepted it. They had found love. It would stay with them until the end of time and help get them through rough months ahead.

"Always, Master. I love you, too."

About the Author

Simone lives in West Michigan with her family. She has been writing all of her life, seriously in the past few years, when her writing took on a dark and delicious twist. A college student, she offsets the tedium of lectures by thinking up new and interesting ways to torture her characters, occasionally shrieking in the middle of class "I got it!" to the puzzlement of those around her.

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