

# Beautiful Viking

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For Ronnie

## Chapter 1

### The Dance

RUSHING wind and the roar of his Harley filled Eric's ears. The open freedom of the four-lane suburban drive and the brilliant power between his sturdy thighs filled his heart.

He looked into his mirror and moved from the left lane to the right. Eric smiled when the car behind him fell back respectfully. The power of his bike and his broad, leather-clad shoulders called for respect.

Eric slowed and turned into a parking lot. He pulled into an empty space between two parked cars. When he turned off his Harley, the sudden quiet struck with the power of a loud shout.

He stepped from his bike and removed his helmet. Twenty yards away stood the single story brown brick building that was the West Michigan Community House. He slowly walked to the building and stopped.

It was a Sunday afternoon, and instead of being out on the open road with his bike, Eric stood looking at the double doors of the Community House. Inside, he knew there was a gathering of men. Young men. Young, *gay* men. The flier in his pocket said the afternoon dance was being held to raise money for the West Michigan Gay Alliance. The flier also said the dance was a chance to meet new people and form new friendships.

He was nervous and unsure, but he knew he had to take this step.

He knew he had to discover the truth. Eric walked to the doors, opened one, and stepped into a large crowded hall bright with sunlight streaming in through the oversized floor-to-ceiling windows that lined opposite walls. Music and voices filled the room and his ears. He looked around at the crowd.

Neatly dressed young men were standing in groups, talking, smiling, and looking happy. In a large open area in the middle of the hall, men were dancing with each other.

Eric felt completely out of place. Crowds always made him uncomfortable. A crowd of young gay men was a new experience. Slowly making his way through the packed room toward the coat check, he was intensely aware of the eyes that discovered and explored him.

Eric stood tall, with red hair and bright green eyes. He wore his hair in a buzz cut. On his chin he had a small, handsome, red goatee. There was no mustache above his moist crimson lips. Below the outside corner of his left eye, an inch and a half long vertical scar marked his cheek. He wore a sleeveless black T-shirt that showed off his muscular arms and creamy milk-white skin dusted with golden-red hairs. In his left hand he carried a black leather jacket. Black jeans and biker boots completed his virile appearance.

After leaving the leather jacket at the coat check, Eric found a line at the bar. Patiently but nervously waiting his turn, he looked around the room. That was when he saw him. Standing in the crowd was a face he recognized—a tall, dark young man casually watching the people on the dance floor.

A week earlier, with his girlfriend tagging along, Eric had gone to a local nursery looking for two crabapple trees. The tall dark man Eric was watching worked in that nursery. He had helped Eric choose two healthy young trees.

Eric was nervous. He felt lost and out of place. Voices and bodies and faces crowded around the bar. He was shy and wanted to leave, but he knew he had to stay. The face near the dance floor was the only

person he even vaguely knew.

The man was also stunningly beautiful—the beauty of a smooth-skinned young man of Mediterranean descent. His eyes were soft, brown, and lively. His hair was short and black. His lips were proud and wet and flushed with rosy-youth. He was wearing a dark green T-shirt and carpenter jeans that showed off his magnificent round butt.

Eric stepped out of the line at the bar. He looked at the brown-eyed beauty. He remembered the voice, the eyes, and the smile. The memory gave him the boldness to approach and to speak.

“Let’s find out if I belong here,” he said to himself. He took a deep breath and walked to the young man. With a voice touched with nervousness he said, “Hi.”

The young man turned. “Hey,” he said with a warm smile. “How are you?”

Eric answered with his own smile. “I’m good, man.”

He had forgotten about the man’s eyelashes. They were long and soft, and Eric quickly felt them tug at his lonely heart.

“I’m Eric,” he said as he extended his hand.

“Nick,” the young, brown-eyed man answered. He took Eric’s hand and shook it with warm friendliness.

“I haven’t killed the trees yet,” Eric said.

“Don’t worry, crabapples are hardy. They can put up with a lot.”

“I’m glad,” Eric answered. “I don’t have much of a green thumb.”

Nick smiled. “You’ll do all right.”

Eric looked around the room. “How’s the dance?”

“I don’t know,” Nick answered. “I came here because my friend Tony told me she thought I might meet someone new, but it’s just the same old bar crowd; only here, they’re out in the daylight.”

“I’m new,” Eric pointed out.

“Yeah, you are. I’ve never seen you at the bars before.”

“I’ve never gone,” Eric admitted.

A slow, romantic song began to play. With the reawakened courage that he had only reclaimed yesterday, Eric knew it was time he stepped in to see if this was indeed his truth. He felt shy, but he knew what he had to do.

“Hey man,” he asked nervously, “you want to... uh... you want to dance?”

“Sure,” Nick answered.

Eric hesitated.

Nick smiled. “Come on, man,” he said gently. He took Eric’s hand and led the way onto the crowded dance floor. He turned to face Eric. There was another momentary hesitation. Eric was not quite sure what to do. Nick smiled again and stepped closer. Eric cautiously put his right arm around Nick’s waist. Nick took hold of Eric’s left hand.

They stood almost the same height. Eric, at six feet, three inches, was just an inch taller than Nick.

Slowly, they began to move with the music.

“You’re a good dancer,” Nick said after a few moments. “A real good dancer.”

“I use to play football in high school and college,” Eric said. “Maybe weaving my way down the field taught me something I could use here.”

“Maybe,” Nick answered. “Whatever it is, you move great.”

Eric smiled and felt himself blush. “To tell the truth, I’ve never danced with a man before.”

“No!” Nick answered with mock surprise.

They shared their first laugh. The laughter helped Eric relax. He felt Nick’s strong body pressing against his own, comfortably and effortlessly following his lead.

Nick slowly moved his left hand from Eric’s shoulder to the back of his solid neck. The warm, strong hand on Eric’s skin was unexpected and pleasing. He quietly admitted to himself that he liked the hand on his neck. His mind became filled with the hand’s warmth.



He was nervous and mystified, but he wanted the hand to remain on his skin.

“I’ve never seen such bright green eyes before,” Nick said. “Do all redheads have beautiful eyes like yours?”

Eric was taken by surprise. He was unaccustomed to compliments about his appearance and did not know how to respond. He looked past Nick’s face to the anonymous crowd around them.

“Well?” Nick asked.

“I don’t know,” Eric answered without looking at Nick.

Although still nervous, Eric felt safe and comfortable with Nick on that crowded dance floor. He could feel Nick’s strong back under his hand. He experienced a new and unanticipated satisfaction at the way Nick followed his every move. The hand on his neck continued sending waves of unfamiliar pleasure down his back. Together, he and Nick moved with a smooth, fluid grace.

He slowly returned his gaze to Nick’s face and looked into his warm brown eyes. They were beautiful eyes. Eric felt those brown eyes search deep into his own. They smiled at each other. Eric knew he was taking the first steps in the ancient art of discovery. He knew he was being quietly attracted to Nick and wondered what Nick was feeling and thinking.

Although Eric found an unexpected pleasure dancing with Nick, he was still uncomfortable in the crowded room. He wanted to get away. He wanted to get out into the open, into the fresh air. He also wanted to get to know Nick better. Maybe it was Nick’s smile, maybe it was his warm brown eyes—Eric was not sure, but whatever the reason, he felt relaxed with Nick. With Nick, he was comfortable. With Nick, he felt at ease. With Nick, he felt clean.

The music stopped and their dance ended. They returned to the spot where they had met.

“That was fun,” Nick said. “Thanks.”

Eric smiled. “You want a drink?” he asked.

“Yeah man, an ice-cold beer would be awesome,” Nick answered.

“Wait here,” Eric said. “I’ll be right back.”

He returned to the bar as another dance started. He came back to Nick as that dance was ending and a new one was beginning. “Here you go,” he said as he handed Nick a cold bottle of beer.

“Thanks,” Nick said. He took a long drink. “Ah, I needed this. It’s getting warm in here with all these bodies.” They had to speak loudly because of the music.

“Have you been to these daytime dances before?” Eric asked.

“No,” Nick answered. “Have you?”

Eric shook his head no. The music stopped and another slow romantic dance began playing. “You want to go again?” He pointed to the dance floor.

In answer, Nick smiled, put his bottle on a nearby table, and took Eric’s hand. Again, he led the tall redhead into the crowd of dancers.

After their second dance had finished, Eric hesitantly asked Nick, “Hey man, do you want to go for a walk or something? You know, to get some cool, fresh air?”

Nick looked at Eric for a moment before smiling and answering, “Sure. Where?”

“How about Riverside Park? It’s just down the road.”

“Let’s go,” Nick said.

Nick was happy and light-hearted. Eric enjoyed his smile, his freshness, and his openness. On their way out, Eric stopped at the coatroom and retrieved his leather jacket.

THE two men walked together into the parking lot. Eric led Nick to his Harley.

“Whoa! A biker!” Nick exclaimed.

“I’m not in a club or anything like that, but I like to ride. I’ve got

an extra helmet here. You want to ride on my bike with me to the park?”

“Shit, yeah!”

Eric unlocked his helmets, handing the spare to Nick. Nick put it on and fumbled with the straps as he tried to tighten them.

Eric smiled, reached over, and helped him. “Here,” he said. “Like this.” As he tightened the straps, the back of his fingers brushed against the warm, soft skin of Nick’s jaw.

“Thanks,” Nick said when Eric finished.

Eric put on his own helmet and mounted his bike. “Get on,” he told his new friend.

Nick climbed onto the bike. “Man, I love that smell.”

“What smell?”

“Your leather jacket.”

Eric didn’t know what to say to that, so he just said, “Hang on.”

The bike exploded to life with that unmistakable Harley roar. Nick’s hands quickly grabbed Eric’s waist and held firm.

Eric did not tell Nick most men did not hold the waist of another man when two of them were riding on the same bike. He allowed Nick to hold him. He liked Nick’s hands on him. He wanted Nick’s hands on him. There was almost a pride in him, a pride that this beautiful, dark man with strong hands was holding him.

Eric pulled out of the parking lot onto the four-lane avenue. In a surge of power, they merged into the traffic and sped down the road. The fresh wind swept past them in a riot of sound.

Riding down the road toward the park, Eric was intimately aware of the hands on his waist. He did not care about the looks from the cars they passed; he wanted Nick’s hands to stay on him.

Eric felt Nick’s helmet gently touch his back between his strong, broad shoulders. The touch lasted no more than a few seconds, and then it was gone. He felt the hand on his left side move slowly forward under his leather jacket to his T-shirt-covered stomach. For the shortest

of moments, the hand rested there, and the fingers lightly caressed his belly. Then the hand returned to his waist.

In his mind, Eric imagined Nick lifting his leather jacket and black T-shirt. He imagined Nick leaning on his back, resting his face there, breathing in the aroma of Eric's skin, and kissing his back.

Eric's daydreaming stopped when they neared the park. They rode through the north gate. Eric pulled up under some old cottonwood trees, turned off the bike, and looked back toward Nick.

"You first," he said.

Nick dismounted the bike. Eric followed.

"How was the ride?" Eric asked.

"Man, that was sweet as hell," Nick answered with boyish excitement. "I love the speed, the wind, and the openness. All the free space around me. And the power. Man, all that power between my legs. That's fucking awesome."

Eric removed his helmet and laughed at Nick's excitement. "I'm glad you liked it. Do you ever ride?"

"No, man," Nick answered. "I've never, ever been on a motorcycle before."

With Eric's help, Nick took off his helmet. Eric locked both helmets onto the bike. After making sure everything was secure, the two men walked down near the river.

For a few minutes, they watched a flock of ducks sunning themselves on the grass. When the ducks took notice and started looking for a handout, the young men walked away under the ancient cottonwoods along the river's edge.

The riverbank was grassy and shaded by the old trees. Stones had been placed along the bank to help stop erosion. The air was warm, filled with the sounds of birds chirping and children playing on nearby swings. The aromas of water, wild mint, and charcoal were in the air.

"You know, Nick," Eric said, "I've never been to a gay dance before. I've never been around so many gay men before." He looked at

the river as he walked and spoke.

“Yeah, I kind of got that feeling,” Nick answered.

“I have a girlfriend,” Eric confessed quietly.

“Was she the one with you when you bought the trees?”

“Yeah, but I think I’ve kind of been using her.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, as a cover.”

“A cover?” Nick asked.

“Yeah. You know, I mean... I think I’ve been hiding behind her. Using her to prove to everyone, including me, that I’m not....” He paused.

Nick waited.

Finally, Eric said in a low voice, “You know, not gay.”

Nick walked quietly beside Eric.

“Wow,” Eric said. “That’s the first time I’ve said that out loud to anyone.”

Nick stopped and looked at Eric. “Are you gay?” he asked.

Eric stopped walking. He looked across the river to the trees on the opposite bank. A great blue heron was fishing in the shade of the tall old trees. Watching the large bird, he answered in a quiet voice. “Yeah.” Slowly, he turned and looked at Nick. “Yes. I think so.”

Nick smiled. “You think so. What do you mean, you think so?”

Eric looked into Nick’s dark, warm eyes. Those beautiful eyes looking back into his own both calmed and stirred him. Those eyes quietly called to him and warmed him.

“Yesterday,” Eric answered, “I finally started being honest with myself. After twenty-four years I finally started being honest with me. Yes. Yes, Nick, I’m gay.”

Eric saw Nick smiling curiously at him.

“What?”

“Am I the first person you’ve shared this with?”

“Yeah, I only admitted it to myself yesterday.”

“Then I’m honored. Thank you.”

“I remember how helpful you were when I bought those trees. I also remember how your face stayed with me for the next couple of days. I, uh...” Eric stopped speaking.

“You what?” Nick asked.

“I remembered your face,” Eric answered self-consciously. “And then when I saw you at the dance....” He paused for a few seconds. “Well, I don’t know. I felt a little more comfortable, a little more at ease, ’cause there was someone there I kinda knew.”

“I’m glad you saw me, and I’m glad you came and talked to me,” Nick answered. Nick’s friendly openness was very attractive to Eric.

“You know, man,” Eric said, “you’re really easy to talk to. I’ve never felt this comfortable with another person before.”

“Thank you.”

They started walking again.

“You know, Eric, it’s not any of my business, but it’s not really a good thing what you’re doing. You know, using your girlfriend like that.”

“I know,” Eric answered. “I know it has to end. I’m going to end it. I want to end it. I just have to find the right time and the right words.”

“The right time?” Nick asked.

“Well, maybe the guts,” Eric admitted.

The two young men laughed in the cool shade. They strolled silently under the tall trees along the riverbank. After several minutes of walking quietly together, Nick started talking about the giant old cottonwoods.

“Cottonwoods become huge trees,” he said. “They can get a hundred feet tall.”

“Why do they call them cottonwoods?”

“Because of the seeds,” Nick answered. “When the trees release their seeds, it’s like a snowstorm of white cottony fluff. Around here it usually happens in June.”

“These trees make that stuff?” Eric asked.

“Yup,” Nick answered. “When I was a kid, we called it summer snow.”

“I always wondered,” Eric said. “You sure know a lot about trees.”

“I like trees and I work with them all day,” Nick answered. Suddenly, he stopped walking. “Hey, man, are you hungry?”

“Yeah, I could eat,” Eric answered.

“Let’s go get something. I’m a vegetarian, but the restaurant I usually go to is great. Are you ready for an adventure?”

“I think I’m kind of in an adventure right now,” Eric answered with a smile.

“Yeah, I suppose you are,” Nick agreed.

THE two new friends returned to Eric’s Harley, where Nick gave him the directions to the restaurant. They mounted the bike and headed across town.

Because Nick had said he liked the power he felt during their ride to the park, Eric decided to take the highway. Entering the on-ramp, he opened the throttle and roared into the flow of traffic.

He hoped Nick was still enjoying the wind and the power. He felt the hands around his waist tighten. He took great pleasure in those strong hands holding him. After riding on the highway for a few minutes, he felt Nick’s left hand again move forward onto his hard, flat stomach. Eric wondered if the hand on his stomach was there to give Nick added support or if it was there for another reason.

The trip was short. Eric entered the off-ramp and took it as fast as he dared. The bike leaned around the turns in the ramp, and the hand on

his stomach gripped tighter, as did the hand on his waist.

Eric was intensely aware of both hands.

When he stopped at the red light at the end of the ramp, the hand on his stomach returned to his waist. Eric smiled to himself and thought he had made the right decision in coming to the dance.

But he also felt a thread of uncertainty. What now? What would he do with a handsome man who thrilled him with the simple touch of his hands? What would he do? What could he say? He knew there was a great discovery waiting for him.



## Chapter 2

### Dating a Man

ERIC parked his bike in front of Mother Earth's Kitchen. The building was an old red sandstone store converted to a restaurant. They walked in, and Eric was greeted with a host of aromas from the kitchen. The floor was hardwood, and the ceiling was old-fashioned ornate tin painted white. The tables and chairs, although they were all made of wood, were a mixture of styles and ages. Nick led them to a table by the large front window. Potted Schefflera guarded either side of the window.

After the waiter had brought their menus, Eric scanned the offerings.

"You've never been to a vegetarian restaurant before, have you?" Nick asked.

"No. Why?"

"The look on your face," Nick said. "I guess today is your day for new experiences."

"I guess so," Eric answered. "Do you recommend anything?"

Nick asked Eric about his favorite foods, pointing out a few similar things on the menu. Eric decided on a grilled tempeh burger, homemade potato chips, and iced oolong tea. The waiter returned and took their order.

"So, Nick how old are you?" Eric asked while they waited for their food.

“I’m twenty-three. Earlier, didn’t you say you were twenty-four?”

“Yeah, my birthday was in June.”

“Really?” Nick asked. “What day in June?”

“The thirteenth.”

“No way!” Nick almost shouted. “My birthday is the thirteenth of June.”

“What?” Eric asked.

“Here,” Nick said as he pulled out his driver’s license.

Eric took out his license and traded with Nick. They found they were indeed born the same day, Eric a year earlier than Nick.

“You think this means anything?” Nick asked.

“I don’t know, man,” Eric said. “So many things have happened the last two days, I’m not even going to try to figure this one out.”

“If you come up with anything, let me know,” Nick said.

“Okay,” Eric agreed. He looked back at the license. “It says here your name is Nikos, not Nick.”

“Yeah, I was named after my mom’s dad. He died before I was born.”

“You go by Nick?” Eric asked.

“My friends call me Nick. My family all call me Nikos.”

“Your last name’s Bertolli,” Eric said as he returned the license. “Are you Italian?”

“Half Italian,” Nick answered. “My dad’s Italian and my mom’s Greek.”

“Is that why you have such nice-looking skin?” Eric asked.

“I guess,” Nick answered. “But what about you? You look like a big Viking.”

“Because of my red hair?”

“Yeah,” Nick answered. “That and your size.”

“I could be a tall Scotsman,” Eric said.

“Are you?”

“No. I’m Danish.”

“I knew it! A Viking!” Nick said with a confident smile.

“Well, maybe a few dozen generations back,” Eric laughed.

After they had been served their food, Nick asked, “How did you know about the dance?”

“I found a flier somewhere,” Eric answered.

“Why did you come?”

“I’m not sure if I can really explain it,” Eric answered. “Yesterday morning I woke up with another one of my fucking hangovers.” He stopped and studied Nick’s face. He saw no judgment in the soft brown eyes watching him. “I never used to be a drinker,” Eric continued. “But something’s happened over that last few years.”

“What?” Nick asked.

“I’m not really sure,” Eric answered. “But yesterday morning I realized I’ve been hiding.”

“Hiding?”

“Yeah,” Eric answered. “I’ve been hiding and denying and lying to myself and everyone else.”

“About what?” Nick asked.

“Me,” Eric answered.

“What do you mean?” Nick asked.

“Man, Nick, I’m not happy,” Eric answered. “I don’t remember the last time I was happy. I don’t remember the last time I looked forward to getting out of bed in the morning. I know I’ve hurt my family and my friends with my drinking and the fucking anger that seems to come from nowhere.”

“Anger always comes from somewhere,” Nick said.

“Yeah, it does,” Eric answered. “I think some of it comes from my girlfriend. I’m not happy with her.” He took a slow drink from his iced tea. “I don’t think I’ve ever been happy with a woman,” he said as

he put his glass back on the table. “I’ve never really enjoyed dating. It’s always been a bitch—a real bitch. But it was something I knew I had to do.” He paused for a moment, then continued slowly, “No, not *had* to do—something I was *expected* to do.”

He took a long, slow, deep breath. “Fuck, I know it’s not all her. After work I get drunk and go out and meet men. Then the next day I get mad so I don’t have to think about what happened the night before. Then the next day I do it again. It’s just a bullshit cycle.”

“You’re not drunk now,” Nick said.

“No, I’m not.”

Nick’s beautiful mouth and eyes smiled at Eric.

“Whoa,” Eric said. “I’ve never talked with anybody about any of this stuff.” He looked hard at Nick for a moment. “What is it about you that makes me feel so relaxed and willing to talk?”

“I don’t know,” Nick answered. “Maybe you just feel safe with a tree-hugger.”

Eric smiled and watched Nick’s face for a moment. His smile relaxed and he leaned into the table towards Nick. “I’m going to tell you something I’ve never told anyone else,” Eric said in a low voice. “I’m kind of shy. I was a real shy teenager. But I was also the best football player in the history of my high school.” He leaned back and continued to speak in a low voice. “And my coach told me I was one of the best baseball players he’d ever seen. I was a hero in school. I made my parents proud. When I was playing sports, I wasn’t shy. I fit into that world. It was a man’s world. A macho world. A world of locker rooms filled with the smell of strong young men. And....” He stopped talking.

“And what?” Nick asked.

Eric leaned over the table again and whispered, “And it was a world where jokes about queers and faggots were told all the time.” He sat straight in his chair and looked out the window. “I remember the awesome smell of fresh sweat in the locker room,” he said in a quiet voice. “I remember the wet bodies in the shower. I felt good and alive

when I walked in the locker room and smelled that smell. I felt powerful and strong when I was in the shower with all those wet bodies.” He turned back to the table and took a bite from his tempeh burger. He took a moment to chew and swallow before looking back at Nick. In a slow, hesitant whisper, he continued. “And I remember those fucking jokes. Those goddamn faggot jokes.”

He watched Nick’s hand slid across the table towards his hand. It stopped short before it touched him. He looked back at Nick’s face. “I knew it was the aroma in the locker room that excited me,” he whispered. “I knew I looked forward to the showers with my teammates so I could watch them soap up their strong, sweet bodies. I knew all that, and I knew what I was, but I couldn’t deal with it. I could never say anything to anyone.”

He looked at his plate. “Nick, I didn’t want to be like the people in those fucking jokes about sissy faggots. I started to hate myself because of those jokes. I crushed my feelings and ignored my needs.”

“You found out you couldn’t ignore them, didn’t you?” Nick asked.

“Yeah, I did,” Eric answered. “But those fucking constant jokes made me hide and deny what I was, what I wanted, and what I needed. Part of me ached to see the beauty of my buddies’ strong wet bodies, and the other part cringed because of the ugliness of those jokes. I ended up hiding and lying.”

“Dude, you’re being too hard on yourself,” Nick said.

“Hard?” Eric repeated. “No, I’m just a coward. A coward and a very confused man. I’m so fucking confused. And I’m tired, Nick. So tired. So fucking tired of hiding, of lying, of being unhappy. I’m so tired of being unhappy.”

The first finger of Nick’s hand carefully, hesitantly touched the back of Eric’s hand. There it rested, as light as a breath.

“But what about you, Nick? You’re gay, right?” Eric asked.

Nick pulled his hand away. “Yes sir,” he answered. “One hundred percent, through and through.”

“When did you realize it or admit it or whatever?”

“I don’t know,” Nick answered. “As far back as my memory goes, I knew I was different from other guys. I didn’t know why, but I knew I was different. I think I was eleven or twelve when I discovered what ‘gay’ was. I realized that was me. I came out to my family when I was fifteen.”

“I envy you your courage and your honesty,” Eric said.

“I’m just me,” Nick said.

“Who are you?” Eric asked quietly.

“I’m a gay Buddhist living in Christian Reformed West Michigan who has just made a new friend.”

“Yeah?”

Nick slowly nodded his head as his eyes searched Eric’s face. Eric felt those gentle brown eyes probing into his soul. Finally Nick said, “Besides being unhappy, you’re carrying a lot of loneliness, aren’t you?”

In the spring, ice slides off roofs, crocuses push their way up to the sun, and birds begin returning from the south. With that one question from Nick, Eric felt spring return to his heart. “Man,” Eric said, “I am lonely. God, I’m lonely.” He felt his lips tighten and an anxious warmth spread over his face. He wondered if Nick saw on his face what he was feeling in his heart. “I am lonely,” Eric said. “I’m incredibly lonely. It’s like a dry, choking dust. It’s suffocating and demanding. The women I date don’t help. I think my loneliness is beyond the ability of any woman to heal.”

“Hey, man, I’m lonely too,” Nick said.

“Someone as good-looking as you?”

“Yeah. That’s all most people see,” Nick answered.

“What?”

“They don’t see me,” Nick said. “Not the real me. They don’t care who I am or what I think. They see my face or my ass or whatever, and they make me into their fantasy. I don’t exist as a real person. I

could be a drooling idiot—they don't care. I can be talking with somebody about the most intelligent thing, science or history or physics, and when I stop, they say, 'God, you're beautiful'. They haven't heard me. I become their fantasy. I'm not a real individual. I'm not a person. I'm a thing."

"I see you," Eric said.

"Yeah? What do you see?" Nick asked.

"A new friend."

The waiter brought the check at the end of their dinner. Each man paid for his own meal.

As they stood beside the Harley putting on their helmets, Eric asked, "Hey Nick, would you like to do something with me tomorrow night?"

"Yeah," Nick answered. "What do you have in mind?"

"I was thinking maybe a movie and dinner."

"Sweet, I'd like that."

"Yeah?" Eric asked with what he knew was probably an excited, boyish smile.

"Yeah."

"Good. Give me your address, and I'll pick you up around seven-thirty. Okay?"

"I'll do better than that," Nick said. "We can go by my apartment before you take me back to my car. It's not far from here. I'll show you."

"Hey, wait a minute, man," Eric said. "I never answered your question."

"What question?"

"Why I came to the dance."

"Oh, yeah," Nick said. "So why did you come?"

"To find out if I'm really gay," Eric answered.

Nick smiled a wide smile. "And?" he asked.

“And I really am,” Eric answered with his own smile.

Before they returned to the Community House, Nick directed Eric to his apartment. He pointed out his door on the first floor of a beautiful century-old Victorian mansion that had been divided up into apartments.

When they returned to the Community House parking lot, Eric stopped at the back of Nick’s car. Nick dismounted the Harley, returned the helmet, and shook Eric’s hand.

“See you tomorrow,” Eric yelled above the beautiful noise of his motorcycle. He waved, and with a roar from his bike, he shot out of the parking lot back onto the street. With graceful ease, he slipped into the traffic and sped down the road. As he rode towards home, he felt a warm excitement. He knew he had found more at the dance than he had ever expected.

THE next day at work, Eric sat at his desk working on a proposal for a new client. Suddenly, he stopped. His fingers stood still on the keys of his laptop. He looked at his motionless fingers and realized he was happy—truly happy. He could almost taste the new, clean happiness.

He wondered whether he felt that way because he had faced his secret or because of the man he had met yesterday. He felt his chest rise and fall with each breath. He heard his heart pump blood through his strong young body. In the stillness of his newfound freedom, he searched for the source of his new happiness.

“Nick,” he whispered.

NERVOUS anticipation filled Eric as he drove his Lexus to Nick’s apartment. It was a warm, calm Monday evening and he had a date. A date with a man. He had a date with a man. As many times as he said the words to himself, he still could not believe them. Saturday morning,



he had come to the decision to look into his hidden truth. Now, two days later, he was about to pick up a man and go out on a date.

He pulled up along the curb in front of Nick's apartment and sat quietly for a moment. He looked at the old, well-kept Victorian house. Nick's apartment was on the first floor. In that house, behind that door, waited a different kind of friendship. Eric wiped the nervous moisture from his palms onto his pant legs. He was taking a step he had never imagined he would take.

He looked back at yesterday and his meeting with Nick. He remembered the dance and the walk in the park. He remembered the words he and Nick had shared. He remembered Nick's smile and eyes. He remembered Nick's warm, beautiful mouth.

*Do I want to do this?* With the same courage that had led him to the Community House yesterday, he found his answer. *I need to do this.*

He took a deep breath, opened his car door, and stepped into a new world. With a heart lighter than it had been in years, he followed the well-worn redbrick walk to the mansion's porch. He took the steps up onto the porch and walked to Nick's door, hesitating only a moment before knocking. The door opened, and his heart jumped with a fearful thrill.

"Hi," Nick greeted him with a warm welcoming smile. "You're a punctual man—it's exactly seven-thirty."

"One of my foibles," Eric admitted. "I hate to be late anywhere."

"I'm the same way," Nick answered as he stepped onto the porch.

With his hands in his pockets, Eric walked beside Nick to the car. "Today was really a great day for me," Eric said during the drive to the theater. "I got more done than I usually do. Everything just seemed to go right."

"I had a good day too," Nick said. "I kept thinking about yesterday. I really liked our walk in the park and our dinner together."

"Me too," Eric confessed. "I was happy at work today. I'd never gone to work happy before. I'm good at my job, real good, but I've

never been happy there.”

“What do you do?” Nick asked.

“I’m a management consultant,” Eric answered. “I’m not a friendly person in the office. It’s all business. No one kids with me. I know nobody in the office feels relaxed enough to joke with me like most people do at work.”

“Why do you think that is?” Nick asked.

“I guess it’s the wall I’ve built around myself.”

“Wall?”

“Yeah,” Eric answered. “It started in junior high school, and it’s gotten real thick and strong over the years.” He drove silently for a moment. “But something happened yesterday,” he said quietly.

“What?” Nick asked.

“Somebody put a crack in my wall,” Eric answered. He quickly looked at Nick, then, just as quickly, returned his eyes to the road. “This morning I saw the surprised looks on the faces of the people I work with when I said ‘good morning’ and smiled at them.”

“Good,” Nick said.

“Yeah it is,” Eric said without taking his eyes off the road. “And that crack in my wall is getting bigger.”

AFTER the movie, Eric took Nick to a small inn several miles north of the city. While they were eating, Eric asked, “What do your parents do?”

“My pop’s a lawyer, and my mom teaches at St. Sebastian’s College.”

“No kidding?” Eric said. “My mom teaches at St. Sebastian’s too.”

“Yeah? What does she teach?” Nick asked.

“Physics. What about your mom?”

“She teaches cello and violin,” Nick answered. “I wonder if they know each other?”

“I don’t know,” Eric answered.

“Shit, another coincidence,” Nick said.

Eric simply shrugged his shoulders. “You play an instrument?”

“The guitar,” Nick answered.

“You’ll have to play for me some time.”

“I’d like to do that,” Nick said. “I always take my guitar when I go camping. I like to sing around the fire at night.”

“You camp a lot?” Eric asked.

“Whenever I can. What about you?”

“I’ve only gone camping twice,” Eric answered.

“Maybe we can go together sometime,” Nick suggested with a smile.

“I don’t have anything to camp with.”

“That’s not a problem,” Nick said. “I have a brand new tent and a couple of sleeping bags.”

Eric took a drink of his stout. He peered over the edge of his pint at the beautiful man across the table from him. Nick was talking about camping and hiking, but Eric, although he heard the words, let his eyes wander over Nick’s face. He became lost in the delicious curve of Nick’s mouth, the smooth satin skin on his cheeks, and those long, soft lashes that never ceased to amaze and captivate him.

Eric suddenly realized Nick was asking him a question.

“You never told me about your father. What does he do?”

“He’s a dentist,” Eric answered.

“That’s why you have such a beautiful smile,” Nick said.

Eric grinned and felt himself blush.

During the meal of their first date, they learned many things about each other. Eric learned, to his surprise, that Nick had never played pool.

“If you want, I’ll teach you. It’s a lot of fun. I’d like to show you.”

“Great. When?”

“How about tomorrow night?” Eric suggested.

“Really?”

“Really.”

“You’re on,” Nick answered.

He took a drink of his stout and looked at Eric’s face. “How did you get that scar on your cheek? Or is that something you don’t want to talk about?”

“No,” Eric answered. “It’s cool. When I was thirteen a friend and I collided on our bikes. I fell over and the pedal of my friend’s bike cut me.”

“Wow,” Nick said. “You’re lucky it didn’t get your eye.”

“I know.”

“What’s that sound in your voice all about?” Nick asked. “Something wrong?”

“I’ve always been a little self-conscious of the scar,” Eric answered. “I know I’m not that good-looking. The scar doesn’t help.”

“What are you talking about?” Nick asked. “Are you fishing for compliments or what?”

“No. What do you mean?”

“Eric, I think you’re a very handsome man. You’re not pretty, not at all. You’re a man. A big, handsome man. And that scar sets the whole package off. I like it. It’s manly and strong, like you. It’s like a Viking’s badge of courage.”

Eric felt his face warm again.

“You’re not blushing?” Nick asked.

“I don’t get many complements about my looks.”

“That’s too bad,” Nick said in a low, almost sexy voice. “There’s a lot of compliments I could give you.”

Eric smiled. He knew he was still blushing.

“You said you live in the Easttown neighborhood?” Nick asked.

“That was a quick change of subject,” Eric said.

Nick grinned.

“You’re a good guy,” Eric said.

“Why do you say that?” Nick asked.

“You saw I was kind of embarrassed, and you changed the subject.”

Nick’s grin widened.

“You’re a good guy, Nick,” Eric repeated. “Thank you.”

“So, where do you live?” Nick asked.

Eric chuckled. “Yeah, I live in Easttown,” he answered. “I own a house there.”

“Does your girlfriend live with you?”

“No, I live alone.”

“Why?”

“I’m not an easy person to live with.”

After their dinner, Eric returned Nick to his apartment. In the front seat, they shook hands and said goodnight.

“I’ll see you tomorrow night for your pool lessons,” Eric said.

“I’m looking forward to it,” Nick answered. “Goodnight.”

He stepped out of the car and walked towards his door. Eric watched him walk away. He smiled and traced a finger on the scar on his face. That little line was something he had always hated. That little line had turned off several women. That little line was something Nick had said he liked.

Nick turned and waved before going inside. After the door had closed, Eric drove home. He thought of Nick’s voice and smile as he drove. He thought about Nick’s warm aroma. He thought about Nick’s mouth—that beautiful mouth.

TUESDAY was another warm, calm evening, and again Eric had a date with a man. He and Nick went to the bowling alley next door to the Community House where they had met. Here, he taught Nick how to shoot pool. He explained all the different shots. When he took his own shots, he explained what he was doing and why. He was a very patient teacher.

During their game, Eric found it difficult to keep his eyes on the table. His vision seemed to be drawn to Nick's back and butt and especially that wondrous mouth.

During their second game, Eric asked, "You like working in the nursery?"

"Oh, hell yeah," Nick answered. "I like trees and plants, anything growing."

"You want to make trees your career?" Eric asked.

"No," Nick answered. "I'm only working there until I get enough money saved up to open a photography studio."

"You're a photographer?"

"Yeah, I studied photography in college," Nick answered. "I like to create photos of intimate closeness. You know, close-ups of insects, mosses, and germinating plants. I also like to capture people being tender with those they love. You know, lovers, spouses, father and son, friends, even man and dog. That kind of thing. I want to capture the hidden, the personal."

Eric looked into Nick's eyes. They were shining as he spoke and described the vision of his art. Eric had never shared with anyone the kinds of emotions Nick was describing. He longed to know them. He longed to share them. Nick's face was so beautiful.

Nick aimed at a pocket and missed.

While Eric was lining up his shot, Nick asked, "You like your job? You like being a management consultant?"

After sinking his ball, Eric stood tall and answered, "Yeah, I do. I

enjoy improving things. Making things work better.”

“I’ll bet you’re good at it,” Nick said.

Eric smiled broadly. “I don’t like to brag, but I am.”

Nick laughed and punched Eric lightly in the chest.

Eric had never felt so happy. He liked Nick’s smile. He liked Nick touching him.

Nick won the third game. After he put the eight ball to bed, he stood and stared at Eric.

“What?” Eric asked. He tried to hide the guilty sound in his voice.

“You let me win,” Nick said with certainty.

“What are you talking about?”

“Don’t stand there smiling like a little boy. You threw that game,” Nick said.

Eric took Nick’s cue and hung it back on the rack along with his own. “I wanted to build up your confidence,” he said when he turned back to Nick.

“Asshole!” Nick answered. Again, he punched Eric in the chest. Eric laughed and pushed against Nick’s chest with his forearm.

“Let’s go get something to eat,” Eric suggested.

The young men walked to the little restaurant in the bowling alley. When the waitress placed their checks on the table at the end of their meal, Nick picked them up. Eric reached for Nick’s hand to take his check, but Nick pulled his hand and the checks away.

“Hey, man,” Eric protested, “this is my treat.”

“You paid last night,” Nick said.

“So?”

“So,” Nick repeated, “fair is fair.”

Eric shook his head and smiled. He immediately saw he was not going to win the debate.

They walked out of the bowling ally into the still night air. The pavement of the parking lot was releasing the solar heat it had collected

during the long day.

“Hey,” Nick said. “You want to take a walk in the woods?” He pointed his thumb to the trees behind the bowling alley.

Eric did not want to take Nick home and end their night together. “Sure,” he agreed. “It’s probably a lot cooler in there than it is out here.”

They walked out of the parking lot into the trees. Immediately, the air felt fresher and cooler. The aroma of sleeping trees and old humus replaced the petroleum odor of the hot pavement.

The two men walked side by side along an old path under the trees. They did not speak but shared one another’s quiet company. After a few minutes, Nick began bumping shoulders with Eric. This quickly turned into a playful pushing and shoving. Eric felt a frisky, boyish freedom. After his years of lonely unhappiness, he found a great pleasure in Nick’s playful teasing. The clouds and anger that had filled his life were vanishing rapidly.

Suddenly, Nick tripped Eric and started to run.

“Fucker!” Eric yelled as he caught himself and ran after his new friend.

He grabbed Nick around the waist and threw him to the ground with a mighty swing. Nick landed on his back with a thud among the leaf litter of the forest floor. Eric jumped onto his attacker and sat straddling his stomach. He held Nick’s wrists tight to the earth beside his head and looked down at his captive. Through a broad smile, he said, “You’re a smartass, aren’t you?”

Nick smiled in return. “Just wanted to see how tough you are,” he answered.

Eric looked at Nick’s beautiful face. “You’re a punk,” he said softly.

“Yes sir,” Nick answered quietly, “I am.”

There was silence for a moment. Eric looked deep into Nick’s eyes. Then he slowly allowed himself to lean closer to Nick. As he got



nearer, he could feel Nick's warm breath on his mouth and his cheeks.

A pause, a stillness—and then suddenly Eric sprang to his feet and pulled Nick up by the wrists with him. They laughed while Nick brushed last year's fallen leaves from his clothes. Eric wanted to help brush off the leaves, but he nervously held himself back.

"Nick, are you bored with me yet? Or tired of me? Can I ask you out again for tomorrow night?"

Nick looked at Eric and took a step closer. "You big, beautiful, golden Viking," he answered, "I'd love to go out with you tomorrow night."

Eric stared at Nick.

"I'm sorry, Eric, did I say something wrong?"

"No. I've just never been called beautiful before."

"Someone's been failing somewhere," Nick said.

Although he was embarrassed, Eric liked it when Nick called him beautiful. He liked the way Nick looked at him. He liked being with Nick. He liked *Nick*.

After Eric dropped Nick off at his apartment, he drove himself home, again thinking of the sound of Nick's voice, the warm aroma of his skin, his long eyelashes, and his puppy-like playfulness. He thought of the woman he now called his girlfriend. Compared to Nick, she was cold, dull, and uninspiring.

## Chapter 3

# Everything Changed

WEDNESDAY night, Eric took Nick to see a documentary about the Christian right's assault on science. After the film, they walked down the block to a Thai restaurant that was one of Eric's favorites.

"I've had a lot of fun with you these last three days," Eric said as they ate. "Like I told you the other day, I've never really enjoyed dating before."

"Are we dating?" Nick asked.

Eric was taken aback. He sat at the table silent for a moment and looked at Nick. He saw a smile and a pair of mischievous eyes across from him. Suddenly, he laughed. "You asshole! You know fucking well we're dating."

The two young men laughed together, but after a moment, Eric fell silent and looked at his plate. "Wow!" he said, looking back into Nick's eyes. "I'm dating a man. I'm dating a man, and I'm happy about it."

"Isn't dating supposed to be happy?"

"Yes, my friend, it is," Eric answered, "but it hasn't been that way for me. You're more intelligent, more fun, and more interesting than any woman I've ever gone out with."

"Yeah?" Nick asked.

“Yeah,” Eric answered. “I realize now I only dated women so I could hide.”

“You’re not hiding anymore?” Nick asked.

“No,” Eric answered flatly. “I might not understand everything yet, but I know I’ll never lie to myself or about myself again.”

“That’s a big step, Eric.”

“I’m know, but I think I’m ready.”

They were silent for a moment. Finally, Eric said, “You know, I hate to admit it, but the only way I was able to deal with the whole fucking mess was by drinking a lot of gin.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, man,” Nick said.

Eric saw the gentle kindness in Nick’s eyes. “Okay, I’ll try,” he said. “But what about you? Have you ever dated a woman?”

“God, no!” Nick answered with a laugh. “I’m proud to say I’m a heterosexual virgin.”

The admission of virginity made Eric laugh. It also made him happy. He did not know why, but he was glad, extremely glad, that Nick had never been with a woman.

AT THE end of the evening, Eric drove Nick to his apartment. For a few moments, they sat together in the car and talked. Silence slowly came over them. It was time to say goodnight, and Eric did not want to say the words and end their time together. He hoped Nick felt the same way.

There was an aching shyness in Eric as they sat in the car. He looked at Nick and saw Nick watching him with those beautiful, warm brown eyes. Hesitantly, Eric raised his right hand and carefully placed it on the back of Nick’s neck. For a moment, his fingers gently caressed Nick’s warm, satin skin. Then, with gentle but persistent strength, he pulled Nick toward his face. There was a slight pause when their lips were only inches apart. Eric could feel the warmth radiating from Nick’s face onto his own, the gentle touch of Nick’s warm breath on

his lips as they paused and breathed with only inches between them.

Nick had closed his eyes. His long, soft lashes rested against his warm skin. Eric looked at those lashes with wonder. Then he looked at Nick's mouth, that mouth with those rich, welcoming lips that were now so near to his own.

Almost shyly, Eric touched his mouth to Nick's mouth. There came a sweet swirling to Eric's world. For a moment, he lost awareness of everything except the warm, soft, tender lips that were touching his own. He lightly squeezed Nick's lower lip with his own.

Eric became lost in the silky lushness of Nick's mouth. Never before had he kissed another man. Never before had he held a man. Many times, in the anonymous dark of hidden places, he had allowed men to service him. In those dark, secret places, he had searched unsuccessfully for fulfillment. But never had he imagined the joy, the pleasure, the almost overpowering magic of caressing another man's lips with his own.

After a few heartbeats, Eric slowly backed away. There was a small sound as the moisture between their mouths broke. He looked at Nick's eyes. They were still closed. With this one kiss, Eric realized everything had just changed.

They sat still and silent, their faces inches apart. Their breathing was a little heavier than usual. Nick was the first to break the stillness.

"I guess I should say goodnight," he breathed softly onto Eric's mouth.

"Night," was the only thing that came from Eric.

Nick slowly opened the car door.

"Can I see you tomorrow?" Eric asked.

"Yes. Please," Nick answered softly.

He stepped out of the door, turned, leaned down, and looked in at Eric.

"If you're not getting tired of me," he said.

"I don't think that'll happen," Eric answered.

"See you tomorrow," Nick said.

NICK did not go into his apartment after Eric drove away. Even though it was late night and he had to get up early in the morning for work, he was far too excited to sleep. He sat in a chair on the large porch and tried to relax in the cool darkness. He found relaxing difficult. The sound of Eric's rich voice, his clear green eyes, and his beautiful, melancholy smile filled Nick's thoughts.

Nick wanted to talk with someone about Eric; maybe by talking, he could better understand his feelings. He took his cell phone from his pocket and called Tony. She was a lesbian and a few years older than he was. They had met the first night he'd entered a gay bar. He often turned to her for advice.

"Hey, Sweetie. Are you still awake?" he asked when Tony answered.

"Yeah, Baby Boy, we're still up. What's going on?"

"Honey, I've met someone," Nick said.

"Did you call to brag or what?"

Nick could hear Tony's smile. "I don't know."

"Go ahead. Tell me about him."

"Man, Tony. He's so fine. So fucking fine."

"When did you meet him?"

"Sunday at that dance you told me to check out."

"See, I knew it'd be good for you to go," Tony said.

"Yeah, yeah, you told me."

"Okay, Baby Boy. Tell me all about him."

"His name is Eric, Eric Folke. He's got red hair and a red goatee. He has beautiful crystal green eyes. His skin, oh my God, Tony, his skin is milk-white and silky smooth. He's strong and shy. He's big and gold. And Tony, he's *it*. He's the one. I know he's the one."

"You've just met, Baby; don't jump too fast," Tony cautioned.

"I know, but I'm so comfortable with him. The last three days

I've been singing to myself at work. I've never been so fucking happy."

"Nick, you know it takes more than just being happy to make a good relationship."

"I know that," Nick answered. "But he's touched my heart like nothing I've ever known. There's a richness in his heart waiting and wanting to be tapped. And I want to be the one to tap it, to discover it. To have it."

"Nick, in sex, you 'have'; in love, you 'share'."

"What?"

"I don't know if you're talking about sex or love," Tony answered.

Nick was silent.

"Are you horny for him or in love with him?" Tony asked.

"I don't know," Nick answered. "Both, maybe? Yes, both. Monday, on our first date, I wanted to hold his strong, manly face in my hands and kiss each eye. But I want him to be more than a one night stand, more than a fuck-buddy."

"You sound like you're not real sure," Tony said.

"I'm sure," Nick answered. "Pretty sure. I'm sure he needs me."

"What do you mean, he needs you?" Tony asked.

"He's sad, Tony. He's sad and lonely."

"He told you that?"

"I see loneliness and insecurity in him. There's a sadness deep in his beautiful green eyes. I don't think he's ever been loved."

"Nick, you've tried to heal people before, and it's only left you a crying mess. Remember?"

"I know," Nick said. "You don't have to remind me."

"Be careful, Baby," Tony said.

"I will," Nick said. "But past the loneliness in his beautiful green eyes, I see a heart filled with truth, dignity, and strength that I don't think anyone else has ever seen. I want to discover and know that heart. No one else has been there. I want to go there."

“Baby, don’t set yourself up for a lot of pain.”

“I don’t want to get hurt, Tony, but I want that tall redhead. And I want him to want me. I’m going to let our friendship grow before I do or say anything. I don’t want to push him too hard. He doesn’t have a whole lot of experience. I don’t think he knows how to start a relationship with a man. I have to be real careful. I don’t want to scare him off.”

“Sounds like you’ve thought a lot about this,” Tony said.

“I have, Tony,” Nick answered. “You know sex is easy to find. It’s the easiest thing in the world to find. But love, that’s different. That’s hard to find.”

“You sound like you love him already,” Tony said.

“I don’t know.”

“But you do know you want to have sex with him?” Tony asked.

“Hell, yes!” Nick answered. “He’s a big red fox. Tuesday after work, he took me to the Westside Bowling Alley and taught me how to play pool. Every time he leaned over the table to take a shot, I just stared at his awesome, masculine butt and thick thighs.”

THURSDAY night and it was time for their fourth date in as many days. Eric drove to Nick’s apartment. When he got out of his car, he saw Nick standing on the porch locking his door. Nick turned from the door and looked at Eric. When Eric saw Nick smile at him, he felt a childlike excitement, the kind of excitement he used to have on Christmas morning.

“Hey,” Eric said as he stepped onto the porch.

“Hi.”

“Open your door for a minute,” Eric said.

“Why?”

“Something I have to do.”

Nick turned, unlocked the door, and opened it. Eric gently pushed

him into the dim apartment. Once inside, he closed the door, drew Nick close, and held him while his mouth eagerly claimed Nick's, kissing him with a quiet, urgent passion.

They kissed deep and long and held each other tightly. Eric's hands explored Nick's back, stopping at the waist; he wanted to go further, but he stopped. Nick's hands found their places on the side of Eric's face and the back of his strong neck. When Eric finally released that warm, sweet mouth, his strong lips moved and caressed Nick's dark eyebrows. Then, softly, he brushed Nick's long beautiful lashes with his lower lip.

"Thank you," Eric said as he reluctantly ended the exploration of Nick's eyes.

"Thank you," Nick answered with a wide smile.

The two young men stood holding each other with their foreheads leaning together. Slowly, they released one another and walked back out onto the porch. Nick relocked his door and walked to the car by Eric's side.

ERIC took Nick to a comedy put on by a local theater group. The boyish excitement and laughter from Nick was a sweet narcotic to Eric. After the show, they walked along the sidewalk in the warm evening air.

"Thank you, Eric. That was one of the funniest damn things I ever saw," Nick said as they walked passed lighted store windows.

"I'm glad you liked it," a very happy Eric answered. "A couple of times you laughed so hard I thought you might piss your pants."

"I almost did. That fat woman trying to seduce the old rich nearsighted man behind everybody's back was too fucking much."

They walked with their shoulders only inches apart. Eric felt happier than he ever remembered feeling. After several blocks, they arrived at a small Chinese restaurant, and a short, cheerful man greeted them when they entered the door. He led them to a table along the front



window where they could watch the world as they ate. Eric hardly noticed the world walking past them.

During their meal, he asked, “When you go camping, do you hike or just stay at the campsite?”

“I hike, or sometimes, when I camp by a river or lake, I bring my canoe and go exploring on the water,” Nick answered.

“You’ve got a canoe?”

“Yeah, it’s a seventeen footer. It’ll hold two adults and all the supplies you need.”

“Who do you canoe with?” Eric asked.

“My friends Tommy or Tony, or sometimes my brother.”

“I’ve never gone canoeing,” Eric said.

“Really?” Nick asked. “This is Michigan. I thought everyone canoed.”

“Not me,” Eric answered. “I don’t even water-ski.”

“Do you swim?”

“Yeah, I love to swim.”

“Let’s go canoeing Saturday,” Nick said excitedly. “We can explore and swim and take some pictures.”

In the very short time they had known each other, Eric had learned Nick often became excited about the simplest of things. This excitement in Nick was something he enjoyed and needed. “You serious?” Eric asked.

“Hell, yeah. Are you free this weekend?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Then let’s do it.”

Eric looked at the beautiful smiling face across the table from him. So much had happened so fast. He was nervous and unsure, but he could not deny how drawn he was to Nick.

“Okay, let’s do it,” he agreed, “but like I said, I’ve never canoed before. You’ll have to teach me.”

“I’ll teach you everything you need to know,” Nick said in a low

voice. There was a playful smile on his face and a sparkle in his eyes. Eric felt himself blush as he returned the smile.

Looking into Nick's eyes, Eric felt his loneliness melting. He stopped caring about his nervousness and bashfulness. His only concern was the beautiful smiling face on the other side of the table.

Nick looked down at his plate as he used his chopsticks to pick up some noodles. Without looking up, he said, "It'd probably be easiest if you stayed at my apartment Friday night. That way, we can get an early start Saturday morning."

Eric was silent for a moment. "How early should we leave?" he finally asked.

"Seven or eight," Nick answered. "No later. It's a half hour drive to the place I was thinking of."

"Okay," Eric answered quietly.

Nick looked at him and smiled. "Hey man," he said, "you can sleep on the couch. I promise I won't molest you."

Eric relieved his sudden renewed anxiety with a laugh. "In that case, I might not want to stay."

"Fuck you," Nick said with a grin.

After dinner, they leisurely strolled back to Eric's car. He was in no hurry to arrive anywhere. Being with Nick, talking, laughing, and looking at him was all he wanted.

"Before you ask me, I want to ask you out for tomorrow night," Nick said when they finally reached the car.

"Where do you want to take me?" Eric asked with the broad smile he had inherited from his father.

"Mr. Blackport," Nick answered. "It's a great jazz club."

"I know Blackport," Eric said. "I've been there a few times."

"Wow," Nick answered. "I wonder if we've ever been there at the same time?"

"Maybe. Coincidence seems to follow us."

"I know," Nick said softly. "You think it means anything?"

Eric smiled in answer.

“What does that smile mean?” Nick asked. The streetlights sparkled in his warm brown eyes.

“It means I don’t know about the coincidence, but I’ll go wherever you want to take me.”

When they arrived at Nick’s apartment, Eric pulled up to the curb and turned off his car. In the front seat of his Lexus, he leaned over to Nick and kissed him goodnight. This kiss was longer and deeper than the one the night before, full of hunger and need. When he slowly backed away, Nick pulled him close for another. Eric parted his crimson lips when he felt Nick’s tongue gently asking permission to enter.

Eric held Nick tight in his arms as his tongue entered, explored, and discovered the sweet secrets of Nick’s mouth. He felt Nick’s hands exploring his back. Eric’s breath came quicker and louder; his heart beat stronger. His trousers became more crowded.

Eric was discovering his truth, but he was also discovering an unknown beauty. He was healing an indescribable wound, filling a cold, empty place inside of him. He did not want Nick to leave his car; he wanted his new friend to stay longer. He wanted to kiss him and hold him, wanted to explore Nick’s body with his hands and his mouth. He was surprised by his desire, but he knew the desire was there; he knew it was strong and growing stronger. He also knew he was afraid. He was not sure if Nick would allow him to explore his body. He was not even sure *how* to explore a man’s body.

“You want to come in for awhile?” Nick whispered against his lips when their kiss ended.

“Yeah,” Eric answered softly.

They got out of the car and Nick led the way up the walk to his door, unlocking it and leading Eric into the dark apartment. When Eric closed the door, Nick stopped and turned around. Eric took Nick’s upper arms in his hands and pulled him close. He leaned forward and kissed the warm, strong softness of Nick’s mouth. He felt the tip of

Nick's tongue run along his lips, meeting it with the tip of his own.

Slowly, the two young men backed away from their kiss, standing with their arms around each other and their foreheads leaning together. After a silent moment, Nick backed away, took Eric's hand, and guided him through the dark to the sofa. "Sit down," he said.

While Eric made himself comfortable on the sofa, Nick took a candle from a bookshelf, lit it, and sat it on the coffee table.

"Want to listen to some jazz?" he asked.

"Yeah," Eric answered. "Something mellow."

Nick chose a CD and put it in the player. "How about a glass of wine?"

"No, thanks," Eric answered. He closed his eyes and relaxed to the rich, soft music. He felt Nick settle onto the couch next to him.

"Hey, man," Nick whispered.

Eric opened his eyes and looked at Nick's beautiful smiling face. "What's up?"

"I want to make out."

"You do?" Eric asked softly.

Nick nodded his head.

Slowly, Eric sat up, took Nick in his arms, and reclaimed possession of that beautiful mouth. Nick's arms encircled him. He felt Nick's hands reached under his shirt and caress his strong back. Nick lay back onto the sofa and pulled Eric on top of him.

"Nicky," Eric breathed.

"Eric," Nick whispered in return. "I need you. God, I need you."

"I'm here, Baby," Eric answered. "You've got me." His mouth kissed and nibbled at Nick's jaw. His left hand moved to Nick's face, and his fingertips gently explored his lips. A moan from deep in Nick's throat came to Eric's ears, delighting and thrilling Eric. His lips walked to the warm satin skin of Nick's neck and offered more kisses and tender bites.

Nick pulled Eric tighter and kissed the scar on his face. Eric

moved so he and Nick were lying side by side. His right hand slid down Nick's back and stopped at the waist. Then, slowly, he went further. His hand moved down and filled itself with the round mound of the hard butt he had so longed to touch, to know. He pulled Nick's hips tight against his own, feeling Nick's hard desire press against his own.

"Eric," Nick whispered, "will you follow me?"

"Where?" Eric asked as his mouth caressed Nick's warm wet lips.

"To my bed."

A pause. A breath. A heartbeat. Eric raised his head and looked into Nick's eyes. Those beautiful brown eyes were wet and shining in the happy light from the candle.

"Yeah. I'll follow you. I'll follow wherever you lead."

Nick gently pushed Eric away from him, and they stood. Nick took Eric's hand and led him down the hall to his bedroom. The room was dark; the only light came from the street lamps. It filtered through the leaves of the tall oaks outside the windows.

Nick stopped at his bedside and turned down the covers. He turned around. Slowly, he pulled Eric's shirt over his head and tossed it onto the chair in the corner. Eric, always a fast learner, pulled Nick's shirt off and threw it towards the chair.

Eric closed his eyes when he felt Nick's fingers slowly glide through the soft red hairs on his powerful chest. His body jerked with sudden pleasure when Nick discovered a nipple. Nick squeezed the long, fat, erect nipple. Eric's mouth released a small sound of surprised, happy pain.

Nick moved his hands to the button of Eric's jeans. The button opened, and the zipper parted at Nick's urging. Eric opened his eyes and found Nick watching his face.

"Baby, you have such beautiful green eyes," Nick said.

Then, slowly, he knelt, pushing the jeans and underwear down to Eric's ankles. Eric stepped out of his clothes. Nick stood, undid his own jeans, and pushed them to the floor along with his underwear. Stepping out of his clothes, Nick took Eric's upper arms in his hands.

He lay back onto the bed, pulling Eric on top of him.

In a blinding flash, a moment Eric would remember always, his body discovered the joy and the pleasure of warm male skin upon warm male skin. No woman's body had ever felt so perfect to him.

He ran his fingertips gently along Nick's side down to his satin-smooth thigh. Nick arched his back and pulled Eric tighter to him. From deep in Nick's throat came the sound of a happy gasp. Eric again thrilled to Nick's response.

"Nicky, your skin's like satin—warm, silky satin," he whispered into the ear his mouth was caressing.

Eric returned to Nick's mouth and kissed him with all the lonely need he had carried throughout his young life. His tongue again explored all the sweet, wet, secret places deep inside that beautiful mouth.

The pure, wondrous magic of his body pressed on top of Nick's quenched all the fears, doubts, and uncertainties in his heart. The opium-like high he felt when his tongue delved deep into Nick's mouth was a pleasure he had never dreamed could exist.

As he kissed Nick, Eric realized half the moans he heard came from his own throat. Why had he denied himself this joy, this pleasure, this heavenly healing taste, warmth, and closeness?

"Baby, Baby, oh, my beautiful baby," Eric whispered into Nick's mouth. He moved to Nick's neck and again kissed the silky smooth skin. "I need you, Nicky. I've needed you my whole life."

His hands traveled and searched the satin warmth of Nick's body. He found and touched places he had never touched on another man before.

Nick's strong thighs and legs wrapped themselves around Eric. Eric's mouth found Nick's smooth hairless chest. His lips kissed. His tongue licked and tasted. His teeth bit and teased the silky chest and impatient nipples as Nick's hands held strong to the back of his head and neck.

"It's yours, Daddy. It's all yours," Nick breathed.

Nick arched his back and moaned at the pleasure of Eric's mouth. Eric grew bolder at Nick's response. He rubbed a nipple with his tongue. Nick moaned deeper. Eric took the fat nipple in his mouth and sucked it. He nibbled it and pulled at it.

Nick's moans became gasps.

"Eric! Eric!" he breathed.

Eric returned to Nick's mouth. His hunger drove his passion. His hands went searching down Nick's sides. He found Nick's waist, freed himself from Nick's legs, and rolled him onto his stomach. Then he sat back on his heels and filled his eyes with the glory of Nick's round, silky, bronze butt. Carefully, he caressed the satin globes of that beautiful butt. His passionate hunger grew when his hands touched the flawless, silky skin covering the hard, solid muscle.

Nick raised his hips. Eric leaned forward and carefully kissed each butt cheek. The taste, the smoothness, and the warm, heady aroma filled his brain. He stretched his body on top of Nick's. He kissed the back of Nick's neck. Nick answered the kiss by rubbing his raised butt against the hot, hard evidence of Eric's passion.

"Nicky," Eric breathed into his lover's ear. "Beautiful, beautiful Nicky."

Nick rolled his body so he was again on his back facing Eric. Their strong chests and flat stomachs were tight against each other.

Nick swallowed Eric's tongue once more as his legs again wrapped themselves around Eric's strong, white hips.

Eric's mind was reeling from the pleasure of his body rubbing against Nick's, the taste of Nick's mouth, the thrill of Nick's hands exploring him. Every gasp, every moan, every satisfied cry from Nick brought delight and pride and a hungry urgency to Eric.

He wanted to please Nick. He wanted to bring Nick pleasure. In his want, he discovered the more pleasure he gave to Nick, the more pleasure he received.

"Eric, my big redheaded baby," Nick breathed into his ear, "there's condoms and lube in the drawer of my nightstand."

Eric backed his head away from Nick. He looked down into the half closed brown eyes below him. "Yeah?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah, Daddy," Nick answered. "Oh, yeah."

Eric sat up and reached for the drawer, taking out a condom and the lubricant. Hurriedly, he tore open the package, pulled the rubber over his impatient hardness, and smeared it with the slippery clear gel. He again looked into Nick's warm, hungry eyes.

"I don't want to hurt you, Baby," he said.

"Fuck me, or I'm going to hurt you," Nick answered with a wicked smile.

Eric smiled in return. He put more of the lubrication on two of his fingers, reached between Nick's thighs, and gently smeared the clear lubricant.

Nick moaned deep when Eric's fingers touched him.

"Nicky," Eric breathed as his fingers performed their happy duty.

"I need you, Eric," Nick said.

"Baby, I need you too," Eric answered as he guided himself to the prize.

Gently, carefully he pushed. Slowly, resistance gave way to surrender, and Eric was admitted into paradise.

Nick gasped as Eric entered his body.

Eric was suddenly engulfed by hot, wet, silky pressure. Deeper he pushed. Deeper Nick swallowed him into his body.

Eric became lost in Nick. His hands and mouth returned to Nick's face, where they explored, discovered, and delighted. His sweat mingled with Nick's. The only sounds he heard in the dark bedroom were the chorus of their gasping and growling, their breathing, and the sound of sweating skin slapping against sweating skin.

Several hours later, they rested side-by-side, naked and moist, warm and smiling, with their faces close. Their legs were entangled, and their arms were wrapped around one another.

"Wow," Eric exhaled. "I need to catch my breath."



“Me too, and thank you for that,” Nick said.

They laughed lightly and kissed softly. Their breathing began to slow and return to its normal pace. In the dim light, Eric could see a smile on Nick’s face. He smiled in return. Again they laughed.

“I’ve never felt so good in my whole fucking life,” Eric said as he rubbed his face against Nick’s.

“Yeah?” Nick quietly asked.

“Yeah,” Eric answered, “and I’ve never ever laughed after sex.”

“I hope that’s good,” Nick said. “I mean, I hope I didn’t do anything you thought was funny.”

“No, Baby, no!” Eric said. He squeezed Nick tighter and snuggled into him. “Nothing like that. I just feel so goddamn good.”

“I hoped that’s what you meant,” Nick said.

“You little fuck. You know that’s what I meant.”

Again they laughed together in the warmth of Nick’s bed, in the warmth of one another’s arms.

“You know,” Eric said after a few minutes of quiet snuggling, “I wasn’t quite sure what to do. I’ve never been in bed with a man before.”

“You did very good,” Nick assured him. “Very fucking good. You were awesome.”

“I just followed my instincts,” Eric said.

“You have good instincts,” Nick answered. “Now, let’s go shower.”

“In a minute,” Eric told his lover. “I don’t want to let go of you just yet.”

Softly, they laughed, and gently, they kissed.

With his mouth next to Nick’s ear, in the softest of whispers, Eric said, “I like you, Nick. I like you a lot.”

“I like you too, Eric.”

There followed a stillness disturbed only by the sound of their gentle breathing.

Quietly, Eric again whispered into Nick's ear, "You have an awesome ass."

"You know how to use it," Nick chuckled.

"I try my best," Eric answered.

"Wait a minute," Nick suddenly said. "You told me you use to get drunk and go out to meet men for sex."

"Yeah, so?"

"So you just said you've never been in bed with a man before."

"I never was," Eric answered.

"I don't understand."

"Any sex I ever had with a man was always in peepshows, bathroom stalls, or in a park somewhere. It was always standing up. It was always cold and empty. Not like this. Nicky, this is heaven. This is right. This is clean."

"Baby," Nick breathed as his strong, soft lips again claimed Eric's mouth.

Eric held Nick tight as he returned the kiss. This kiss was rich and nourishing. This kiss held dreams and promises. He took Nick's face in his hands. He backed away and looked into Nick's rich brown eyes. There were words he wanted to say. There were feelings he wanted to share.

He did not know how long he looked into those warm eyes. Tenderly, he kissed Nick's forehead. Then he lowered his face and buried it in Nick's satin neck.

As Nick tightened his arms around him, Eric felt himself being engulfed. A man of lesser strength would have been crushed by those arms. Eric was not a man of lesser strength. He drew needed healing from Nick's arms. He was happy in the warm prison of those powerful arms.

"You know, Nicky, I've been wanting to invite you to my house, but I've been too nervous," Eric said.

"Yeah?" Nick asked.

“Yeah,” Eric answered. “I’ve been afraid to spend an evening sitting alone with you in private. I didn’t know what to do. That’s why I’ve been trying to keep us busy doing things.”

“I know,” Nick answered.

“What do you mean, you know?” Eric asked.

“I’m not blind,” Nick answered. “I could see you were unsure.”

“You could have fucking invited me into your apartment,” Eric said.

“Yeah, but I didn’t want to scare you off,” Nick said.

“Scare me off?”

“You know, by molesting you,” Nick chuckled.

“You mean like you just did?”

“Yeah,” Nick answered as his lips gently caressed Eric’s.

“Nicky,” Eric whispered into the warm mouth kissing him.

“Hm,” Nick answered.

“I want you, but I’m afraid of that want.”

“Me too,” Nick whispered.

Again, Eric settled on Nick’s body, in the comfort of Nick’s arms.

“Okay, Baby,” he finally whispered. “Lead me to your shower.”

Nick slowly extracted himself from Eric’s arms and legs and hopped to the floor. “Come on, you big, golden Viking,” he said.

Eric jumped off the bed and hurried after the two beautiful orbs of Nick’s royal ass. In the bathroom, Nick pulled the shower curtain around the large old claw-foot bathtub and turned on the water. Eric grabbed Nick and wrapped his arms around him. He pulled Nick against his body so he could again enjoy the pleasure of that delicious, warm, dark skin. He pressed his powerful chest against Nick’s strong back.

“Do you think we can both fit in there?” Eric asked.

“Sure,” Nick answered, “we just have to stand real close.”

“I’d stand close to you if we were in a big YMCA shower,” Eric stated proudly.

“How do you like your water?” Nick asked as he turned in Eric’s arms and faced him.

“Wet,” Eric answered.

He let his hands slide down Nick’s back and lay claim once more to the smooth bronze globes of his hard, round butt cheeks.

“Smartass,” Nick laughed.

“I like it hot—very hot,” Eric said.

“Good; me too.”

He gave Eric a fast kiss. The two stepped into the tub, pulled the curtain closed, and began to soap each other. Nick turned and rubbed his back against Eric’s chest.

“I love that golden forest on your chest,” he said.

Eric passed his hands over Nick’s smooth chest. “I love the warm satin of your smooth chest and stomach. And I really like this little line of hair that starts at your bellybutton and goes down to here.” As he spoke, Eric’s hands showed Nick what he meant.

Nick again turned in Eric’s arms. “The hot water’s turning your skin bright pink,” Nick said.

“Is that good?” Eric asked.

“Daddy, everything about you is good.” He pressed his wet body tight to Eric’s. “You’re my tall, golden lover,” he whispered into Eric’s ear. Then, slowly, he knelt in front of Eric. He kissed the hard, flat stomach and carefully nibbled the edge of the deep navel hidden in the red forest. His tongue entered the navel, searched it, and played in it. Then he knelt lower and rested his butt on his heels.

Eric looked down at Nick’s beautiful face smiling up at him. That face was only inches from the red forest between his white thighs. Water from the shower ran off his body and poured onto Nick’s smooth chest.

Eric smiled down at the beautiful face watching him.

Later the moon, peeking in at the bedroom window, saw the two young men asleep in the still quiet. They were wrapped in each other’s arms. The only sound was their gentle breathing.

## Chapter 4

### Little Punk

THEIR sleep was rudely broken by the attack of Nick's alarm clock. Quickly, he silenced the harsh sound. Eric's arms were around him. He turned to face the man who had held him through their short night.

"Wake up, Eric," he said. "Wake up."

Eric lay still, his eyes closed, his breathing soft and gentle. Nick kissed his red eyebrows.

"Morning," Eric said with his eyes still closed.

"Morning. Are you awake?" Nick asked.

Eric opened his eyes. "I never slept so good in my whole fucking life," he answered. He kissed Nick's mouth, eyes, and eyebrows. "Damn, I feel good, Nicky. So goddamn good."

Nick tenderly captured Eric's lower lip with his teeth and gently tugged. He let go of the lip and kissed the golden-red goatee. "Goddamn, I love all this hair," he said as he passed his fingers through the silken forest on Eric's chest where he had played the night before. He moved his hand and felt a fat, erect nipple. Then his hand traveled south. It stopped and a finger investigated the deep navel his tongue had explored only a few hours earlier.

Eric's mouth took possession of Nick's.

Nick's hand descended further south on Eric's hard belly. It found the southern forest. It found something more.

Two hours later, Nick glanced at the clock.

“Damn! We’re both late for work,” he shouted as he jumped off the bed.

“It’s your fault,” Eric said as he hurriedly stood up.

“Why my fault?” Nick asked.

“Because we’d be on time if you hadn’t molested me when we woke up.”

“I didn’t hear any complaints,” Nick said.

Eric circled the bed, grabbed Nick’s face, and kissed him. “No, you didn’t,” he said. “And you never will.”

“Promise?” Nick asked.

“Promise,” Eric answered.

He loudly slapped Nick’s smooth, bronze butt. They hurried into the bathroom and danced around each other as they washed and shaved.

“I don’t have time to go home,” Eric said. “Can I borrow a suit and tie?”

“Yeah, help yourself,” Nick answered.

Quickly, the men dressed and then thundered into the kitchen where they wolfed down some yogurt. At the door, before they stepped out into the world, the two kissed one another goodbye.

“I’ll pick you up tonight about eight-thirty,” Nick said as they rushed to their cars.

THE giant old trees in Eric’s neighborhood were quickly filling with their nightly resident birds. The sounds of children playing in the park across the street joined with the chattering of the birds. He sat on his enclosed porch, listening through the screens to the sounds as he waited for Nick. The sounds were not new, but he had never truly listened to them. They were good sounds, homey sounds. They reminded him of the sounds in Riverside Park the day he’d met Nick.

Eric sat, anxious, impatient, and excited. It was almost time. Any minute, Nick would pull up in his old car. Any minute, he would walk to the house with that beautiful smile. That smile. That mouth.

“Why did I wait so long?” Eric said to himself.

He stretched the fingers of his right hand. He remembered those fingers gliding over the satin smoothness of Nick’s back, legs, chest, and butt.

“Oh, my God, that butt,” he said aloud.

He stopped and smiled. His hands had cupped the cheeks of that butt so perfectly. Holding onto that butt, he had pulled Nick closer to his body. He wanted Nick close. Waiting on his porch that warm August evening, he knew he needed to smell Nick’s skin, taste his skin, rub his face on his skin again.

His heart jumped, as he knew it would, when Nick’s old Ford pulled up to the curb. Nick stepped out, looked at Eric’s house, and smiled. Eric knew Nick saw him sitting behind the screens.

He stood and watched Nick walk towards the house. There was that smile he wanted to see. There was that mouth.

“Hey,” Eric said as he opened the screen door.

A smiling, happy Nick walked onto the porch. “Hi,” he answered.

His body almost touched Eric’s body. Eric looked out the screened windows. “Come on,” he said. “I don’t want my neighbors to see this.”

“See what?” Nick asked.

“Come on,” Eric repeated.

He led Nick into his living room. There was a fireplace with a raised hearth against the far wall. Bookcases, more than half empty, stood on either side of the fireplace. There were no plants. No life. Everything was clean, neat, and tidy, but it was cold and did not have the feeling of a home.

When Eric had walked only a few feet into the room, he stopped and turned. Suddenly, he and Nick were holding each other, their

mouths joined in a moist, hungry kiss. Eric was amazed. Nick was in his arms, their mouths were touching, and these were the most natural of things. The most beautiful of things. The most needed of things.

When their lips finally parted, Nick's breath warmed Eric's face.

"I could become very used to kissing you," Eric whispered.

"Then why the hell did it take you so long?" Nick asked.

Eric backed his head away. "What?" he asked.

"Why did it take you so long to come find me?" Nick asked. Both his mouth and eyes were smiling. Eric understood and returned the smile.

"I don't know," he answered. "I kick myself in the ass every time I think about it."

Again, their mouths sought each other. Their arms held, their hands caressed, their lungs searched for air. When the kiss ended, they continued to hold each other.

"Oh, Baby," Eric said into Nick's ear.

"Mm," was Nick's only answer.

Slowly, they parted. "Man," Eric said, "I was so damn tired today."

"Fuck, I was too," Nick said.

"I had a boring meeting this morning with a dull-ass client," Eric said. "I thought I was going to die. It was a bitch trying to stay awake. My boss kept kicking me under the table."

"That's because you kept us up all night," Nick said.

"Yeah, that was all my fault, wasn't it?" Eric asked.

"It was somebody's," Nick answered.

Eric stared at Nick for a moment. "You're so fucking beautiful," he said abruptly.

"So are you," Nick answered.

Eric took Nick's hands. "Hey, man," he said, "instead of going out for dinner, why don't we take a quick nap here on the sofa? On our



way to Mr. Blackport we can stop somewhere and grab something to eat.”

“I’m half Greek and half Italian,” Nick protested. “We don’t grab anything to eat. We relax when we eat.”

Eric smiled at his new lover. “Between here and Mr. Blackport, we can find a place to stop and dine,” he said with his great, wide smile.

THE two took off their shoes, socks, jackets, and ties and stretched on the sofa for their nap. Their bodies, their faces, their warmth, and their hearts were close. So close. They moved together. They breathed together. Their nap was postponed for more important things, necessary things.

When they finally rose off the sofa, they were not more rested, but they were far happier. Before leaving for the club, they packed the things Eric was taking on their canoe trip into the trunk of Nick’s old Ford. On their way to the club, they stopped at a Greek restaurant and ate a leisurely supper.

It was almost midnight when they arrived at the club. After they had been served their drinks, Nick asked Eric to dance.

“This isn’t a gay club,” Eric said.

“No it’s not,” Nick said. “Mr. Blackport is a nightclub for people who love jazz. Everyone is welcome here.”

“I don’t know, man,” Eric said.

Nick stood and offered his hand. Slowly, Eric took the hand, stood up, and allowed Nick to lead him to the dance floor. He glanced around the club. No one was paying any attention.

“Eric,” Nick said, “no one here cares. That’s what’s so cool about this place—it’s all about jazz.”

Hesitantly, Eric took Nick in his arms. They began to dance to the warm music. Soon, Eric forgot there was anyone else in the club. He

forgot the world and lived in Nick's arms and eyes.

LATE that night, after closing the club, the two returned to Nick's apartment and bed. In that bed, by the light of a single candle, their sweat and breaths mingled again. They gave and they took. They explored and they discovered. They nourished one another. Together, the two young men created new pleasure and satisfaction.

After blowing out the candle and before he fell asleep, Eric whispered into Nick's ear, "Nicky, this morning was the first time in my life I ever felt complete. Thank you, Baby; thank you."

Nick always had answers and opinions to share. Now, because of Eric's breath caressing his face, his neck, and his shoulders, because of the tenderness of the strong arms holding him, because of the magic in the still darkness, Nick was lost and unable to find an answer. He snuggled deeper into Eric's powerful arms, kissed his goatee, and drifted into sleep.

EARLY Saturday morning, Nick opened his eyes. Eric's head rested on the pillow only inches away. He was watching Nick.

"How long have you been awake?" Nick softly asked.

"I don't know. A few minutes."

Gently, Nick touched Eric's face with his fingertips.

"I like you. goddamn, I like you," Eric whispered.

"Tell me again."

"I like you," Eric repeated.

"I like you too, Eric. I like you very, very much."

Their mouths touched. Their hands found each other's chests.

"Mm," Eric sounded deep in his throat.

Nick backed his mouth away from Eric. "I hate to say this, but if

we're going canoeing, we have to get out of bed."

"One last kiss," Eric said.

"I might not let go of you," Nick teased.

"That wouldn't be so bad," Eric whispered.

"We don't have much time," Nick answered. "Unless you're in the mood for a quickie."

"I never want a quickie with you," Eric said. He suddenly threw off the covers and jumped out of the bed.

"Damn!" Nick said. He looked at Eric with disappointed surprise.

"Nicky, with you it's always going to be all or nothing."

A smile replaced the unhappiness on Nick's face. "I'm going to hold you to that," he said as he climbed out of the bed.

They dressed in cutoff jeans, old T-shirts, and sandals.

AFTER another non-leisurely breakfast, they strapped Nick's canoe to the top of his old Ford and drove to the Indian River, twenty miles northeast of the city. Here, they changed their sandals for the water shoes Nick had brought along.

On the riverbank, Nick showed Eric how to load their supply of stout and food into the canoe evenly. He showed him how to get in and push off. Because Eric was new to canoeing, Nick sat in the back to control their course.

Canoeing down the river under the overhanging trees, they watched kingfishers dive after fish. Ducks leapt from the water's surface in front of them and flew down the green tunnel the river made through the forest. Occasionally, a mink would peek from the undergrowth along the riverbank. Turtles sunning themselves on old sun-bleached fallen trees slipped into the water as the canoe neared them. The beauty of the green trees and the peaceful silence, broken only by bird and insect voices, was all new to Eric.

“Nick, this is just too fucking cool,” he said as they drifted along.

“I know,” Nick agreed. “This is one of my most favorite things in the whole world.”

“It’s so beautiful here with all the trees and the birds,” Eric said.

“In the early morning, if you’re real quiet, you can see deer come down to the river for a drink,” Nick said.

Eric quickly learned how to control the canoe with his paddle. The two men investigated fallen trees at the river’s edge. They peered into dark holes along high banks. They darted through the occasional rapids and drank a lot of stout.

That stout demanded they occasionally stop.

“Oh, man,” Eric exhaled with relief at one of their stops. “A few more minutes and I would have pissed my pants.”

“I told you to hang it over the side of the canoe,” Nick said.

“Fuck, no, I don’t want to feed a turtle,” Eric answered.

Nick laughed while they stood several feet apart and emptied their bladders.

Nick finished first. Eric heard him walk back towards the canoe. When he finished, Eric shook the piss off and tucked himself back into his cutoffs. He turned and walked towards the canoe, where Nick squatted, looking out over the small forest river.

When Eric was only a few feet from the canoe, Nick suddenly sprang to his feet, spun around, and jumped on him. The tall redhead was taken by surprise and knocked off his feet. His ass and back landed with a thud among the leaves and forest flowers.

“Motherfuck!” Eric cursed as he pushed back against his attacker.

His strong arms went around Nick. His powerful legs pushed and tried to flip his body on top of his attacker. Nick fought against Eric’s pushing. They were both young, healthy, and very strong. They pushed and rolled in the leaves. They laughed as the one tried to get the better of the other. Finally, with one last push from his mighty legs, Eric flipped Nick onto his back. Nick went limp in sudden surrender and

allowed Eric to lay triumphantly on his body.

They lay together and worked to fill their lungs with needed oxygen. Eric raised his head and looked down at Nick's face. Sunlight sparkling through the leaves from the overhead trees danced on that beautiful face.

Eric smiled down at his captured prisoner. Nick's head rested in the leaves with small bits of old dried vegetation scattered on his moist face and rich black hair. His eyes and mouth were smiling at Eric.

"You're a fucking little punk," Eric said.

"Come here," Nick whispered.

"What?" Eric asked.

"I said, come here," Nick softly repeated.

Eric leaned close to Nick's face. He was not sure what Nick would do, but the smile and the deep soft voice drew him. Nick put his mouth next to Eric's right ear. Warm breath caressed Eric's ear and neck and awoke a thousand goose bumps along his arms and shoulders.

Softly, quietly, in the gentlest of whispers, Nick said, "I'm your fucking little punk."

That was the moment when the last remaining pieces of the wall Eric had erected fell. That was the moment when Eric knew. He knew, and the knowledge frightened him. He knew he was not prepared to face it. That knowledge required too much from him. That knowledge held the possibility of rejection and pain. Eric pushed that knowledge deep into his heart.

He kissed Nick's neck. Then his mouth found Nick's mouth. Their hands, their hunger, and their passion came together. On the forest floor, under the silent trees, he shared with Nick a tender power and a commanding thirst new to his young life. The affection, the need, and the desire he felt for Nick were growing, strengthening, and they were true.

The sun had started its slide from the sky when the two young men again entered the canoe and resumed their exploration of the river.

The day was old when they reached their stopping point.

Nick's friend Tony and her lover Carol met the two men at the end of their canoe run. The women gave them a ride back to Nick's old car.

LATE Sunday morning, Eric woke in Nick's bed. He opened his eyes and found them filled with the beauty of the sleeping Nick. Softly, he blew on Nick's eyes. The eyes fluttered and opened. The warm brown eyes filled Eric's heart with a tenderness new to his life.

The knowledge he had discovered yesterday under the trees on the riverbank was reawakened in him. He was not ready to describe or name that knowledge, but its presence in his heart was demanding his attention. Again, he tried to ignore it.

Nick wrapped his arms and legs around Eric. The two young men spent their morning in happy lovemaking and adventurous love-play.

Sometime around noon, they lay naked in each other's arms on the floor at the foot of Nick's bed. Eric passed his fingers through the silky softness of Nick's rich black hair. Gently, he kissed Nick's mouth.

"You know, you're the only man I've ever kissed," Eric confessed.

"What?" Nick asked.

"You're the only man I've ever kissed," Eric repeated.

"You never kissed any of the guys you had sex with?" Nick asked.

Eric could hear the sound of surprise in Nick's voice. He rolled onto his back and looked at the ceiling. "No, I wasn't there to kiss anyone. I was there to pop a nut and then leave," he answered.

"Do you like kissing me?" Nick asked.

Eric turned back to face him. "Fuck, yes," he answered.

Nick wrapped his arms around Eric's strong body. "Kiss me," he whispered. "Please, kiss me."

Eric eagerly granted Nick's request.

AFTER granting Nick's request, the two men showered together. Nick then went into the kitchen to make their lunch. Eric stretched on his stomach on the living room floor in a pair of Nick's white briefs and looked through the CD collection.

He suddenly felt a sharp sting on his right thigh. He swung his head around and looked; no one was there. A piece of fusilli lay next to his leg on the floor. He looked at the kitchen door. No one was there. He smiled knowingly to himself and turned back to the CDs. A few seconds later, there was another sharp sting on his thigh. He quickly turned his head and again looked around. No one, just the empty doorway.

Eric got up onto his knees and quietly moved to the doorway.

After a few moments, he saw Nick begin to creep around the edge of the door. He was holding another piece of hard, uncooked pasta in his hand. In a flash, Eric grabbed Nick's wrist and pulled him to the floor.

"Not so smart, are you, you little punk?" Eric laughed as his face came close to Nick's.

In answer, Nick took control of Eric's mouth with his own.

MONDAY evening was wet. It had been raining on and off all day. Nick had had a very slow, very boring day at the nursery. Now he was home, sitting on his sofa trying to find something on television that would catch his interest. Nothing did. He turned off the television and thought about putting on some music. He knew that would not work. Reading was out of the question. Everything seemed pointless. He

knew why he was unable to concentrate on any one thing. This was the first night since he'd met Eric that they were not together.

He thought about yesterday and how he had teased Eric with the uncooked pasta. He remembered peeking around the door at Eric lying on the living room floor. He smiled to himself as he recalled Eric stretched on the floor wearing only the white cotton briefs. He remembered the beauty of Eric's extraordinary thighs, the rise of his full masculine butt, his strong back, and broad shoulders.

"Damn!" he said to himself.

He decided to telephone Tony.

"Is Eric busy tonight?" she asked.

"No, he's with his girlfriend."

"What girlfriend?"

"The woman he's been dating for the past year and a half."

"I didn't know he had a girlfriend," Tony said.

"She's more of a cover."

"Does she know that?"

"I doubt it."

"Oh, Nick. A guy with a girlfriend. That's not good. And I thought you were better than to date a man already in a relationship."

"Things aren't always what they seem," Nick answered. "Eric's just accepted being gay. Now he has to readjust his life."

"Readjust," she repeated.

"Tony, I'm not happy about any of this, but I know if I want to be with Eric, I have to let him move at his own speed."

"Do you want a relationship with him?" Tony asked.

"Girl, I've already got one," he answered.

"You're in love with him, aren't you?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do." A pause. "Nick?"



“Probably,” he answered.

“Probably. What kind of a word is ‘probably’?”

“It’s just a word,” he answered.

“Nick.”

“Okay, Tony, I’m in love with him, cool.”

“Why are you being so bitchy?” she asked.

“I just don’t like him being over there. I don’t like the idea of someone else touching him.”

“Tell him.”

“I don’t want to put any pressure on him,” Nick said. “He’s just come out. Besides, I don’t have any right telling him what to do. I don’t have any claim on him.”

“The impression I got from Eric when I met him at the river was he’s an honest man who wouldn’t do something behind anyone’s back,” Tony said.

“Yeah, that’s Eric,” Nick answered. “I’m sure he’s trying to figure out the best way to tell his girlfriend. You know, without hurting her.”

“If he breaks up with her, it’s going to hurt,” Tony said.

“Yeah, I know.”

“What’s he going to tell her?” Tony asked.

“I don’t know; that’s up to him.”

“Well, keep the faith, Honey,” Tony encouraged.

“I will, Baby.”

After his talk with Tony, Nick took a shower and crawled into bed. By a young man’s account, it was still early, only ten-thirty. He did not want to have to think about Eric and that woman anymore. He grabbed a book of lesbian poetry Tony had given him.

“This ought to put me to sleep,” he said to himself.

It did.

Nick was awakened by a knock at his door. He looked at the

clock on his night table. The softly glowing green numbers told him it was 12:24. Wearing only his white briefs, he stumbled in the dark to the door. He paused; his heart was filled with excited hope. He opened the door. The sky had cleared, and the fresh, clean air caressed his skin. Eric was standing on the porch, smiling. Nick smiled, reached out, pulled Eric in, and led him to his bed.

Later, the two men lay holding one another. Their bodies were still moist from their lovemaking. Eric caressed Nick's face and whispered into his ear. "Nicky, I didn't have sex with her."

"You don't have to explain anything to me."

"No, Nicky, I don't, but I want to."

"Hold me, Eric."

Eric pulled Nick tighter into his furry chest. After a few minutes of silently holding one another, Eric kissed Nick's temple and whispered once more into his ear. "Nicky," he said, "I very seldom spend all night at her house."

"Why?"

"I'm just not comfortable."

"Doesn't she wonder why?" Nick asked.

"I always make some excuse, usually about work," Eric answered. "Anyway, I think she's happier without me there. I'm just a trophy for her. I make good money, I have a nice car, some people think I have a good body, and I was a star football player in college. That's the sort of crap she and her crowd like."

"How did you ever end up with a person like that?" Nick asked.

"I don't know," Eric answered. "The only thing I do know is I don't want to sleep with her again. And I don't want to sleep alone anymore. Nicky, I want to sleep with you every night. Does that sound like I'm being pushy?"

"Yeah, it does," Nick answered, "and I'm glad you said it, so I don't have to be the one who says it and sounds pushy."

"What?" Eric asked.

“I want to sleep with you every night too. I know we only just met, but there’s something between you and me. Something...”

“What?” Eric asked.

“I’m not sure,” Nick answered. “Let’s just wait and see. Okay?”

“Okay,” Eric agreed.

Then in the softest of whispers, Eric repeated, “I don’t want to sleep alone anymore.”

“I’ll do my best so you’ll never have to,” Nick promised.

Eric kissed Nick’s temple again.

“Let’s take a shower and get some sleep before my alarm goes off,” Nick said.

Eric looked at the clock on Nick’s nightstand.

“Damn, it’s almost four o’clock,” he said.

Together, they jumped off the bed and hurried to the bathroom. Later, with only a few hours before Nick’s alarm was set to sound, the two young men were asleep in each other’s arms.

## Chapter 5

### The Seeds of Rage

THE rains of Monday did not return. Tuesday and Wednesday were hot and sunny. Thursday, a welcomed breeze from Lake Michigan cooled the city. After work, Eric and Nick enjoyed the change in the weather and walked the few blocks from Eric's house to a small, family-run Mexican restaurant.

"Eric," Nick asked while they ate, "have you ever been to a gay bar?"

"No."

"I think it's time you met the rest of the tribe," Nick said with a smile.

"The rest of the tribe?"

"You know, your gay brothers and sisters. Let's go to the Hairy Lady when were done here."

Eric sat silently and looked at the Aztec murals on the restaurant walls.

"Eric," Nick said.

Eric looked at Nick's smiling face. There was a tender mischievousness in those beautiful brown eyes. He could not stop himself from smiling broadly in return. "Okay," he carefully agreed.

Nick made a call on his cell phone.

"Tommy and Allan are going to meet us at the bar," Nick said after he finished the call.

“Tommy’s your best friend, right?” Eric asked.

“Yeah,” Nick answered. “We met at a gay teen party at the West Michigan Gay Alliance when we were both seventeen.”

Eric turned away and looked out the window.

“Hey, man. You don’t have to be jealous or anything like that,” Nick said. “Tommy and I are like brothers. We love each other, but we’ve never had sex or anything. You know, no matter what some bigots might say or think, gay men can be friends without having sex.”

Eric looked back at Nick and smiled.

“Tommy’s a lot like you,” Nick said.

“How?” Eric asked.

“He’s honest, to the point, and he’s a redhead with beautiful milk-white silky skin. Only he doesn’t have any chest hair.”

“How do you know what his skin feels like?” Eric asked.

“Because he’s my friend. I’ve touched him a few times in the last seven years. Eric, I love Tommy. I’m not in love with him.”

“Am I acting jealous?” Eric asked.

“A little bit.”

“I’ve never been jealous before,” Eric said. “Sometimes I think I’m just a kid when it comes to relationships.”

They finished their dinner and walked back to Eric’s house to get his car. Because the night was early, when the two young men arrived at the Hairy Lady, a parking spot was easy to find.

They stepped out of the Lexus into the warm evening air. Standing tall, Eric looked at the two-story mustard-colored brick building. On the wall, large, black letters proudly proclaimed “The Hairy Lady.”

“Don’t worry, Eric,” Nick said. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Thanks,” Eric answered.

Nick took Eric’s hand and led him to the door. For the first time, Eric walked into a gay bar. Holding Nick’s hand, he felt both nervous

and happy. He was happier now than he had been in a very long time. He was also aware of the many eyes following them. He smiled with pride when he saw the yearning faces of the middle-aged men and the hungry faces the young men as they stared at Nick.

“There they are on the dance floor,” Nick said.

He waved. Eric saw two men leave the dance floor and walk towards them. Both men were several inches shorter than the six-foot-two-inch Nick.

“Eric,” Nick said, “this is Tommy and Allan. Guys, this is Eric.”

Tommy wore his red hair in a jungle of very short spikes. Allan’s dark brown hair was cut similar to Nick’s casual style.

“Holy God!” Tommy exclaimed as he took Eric’s hand. “You are a big, beautiful hunk of man.”

Eric’s face suddenly felt warm. He knew he was blushing.

“I’ve heard a lot about you,” Tommy said.

“I’ve heard a lot about you too,” Eric answered.

Eric and Nick joined Tommy and Allan at their table. Within minutes, a drink arrived for Nick.

“Send it back,” Eric told the waiter, “and if anyone else wants to buy a drink for Nick, please tell them he’s with me.”

“Laying your claim?” Allan asked.

“Damn right,” Eric answered. “The fantasies of whoever bought this drink are going to stay empty.”

Eric looked at the smiling Nick.

“Cool?” Eric asked.

“Cool,” Nick answered.

Later, Eric and Tommy were left alone shooting a game of pool while Nick and Allan were dancing.

“Nick means a lot to me,” Tommy said.

“I know he feels the same about you,” Eric answered.

“You make him happy,” Tommy said. “He’s been too lonely for too long.”

“He makes me happy too.”

“Eric, I love Nick. I’m from Alabama. When I was seventeen, I told my parents I was gay. They kicked me out of the house.”

Eric saw a shadow of sadness and pain quickly cross Tommy’s face.

“After about six nasty weeks on the road, I ended up here in Michigan. I met Nick at a party. I was skinnier than I am now. I was wearing crappy clothes and hustling so I could eat. I think Nick saw me as a kind of lost puppy. He took me home, not for sex, but to help me. His parents accepted me and gave me a place to live. They helped me finish high school. His parents and his brother and sister made me part of their family. They’re good people. I love them, and I love Nick. I love Nick a lot. He’s my brother. I don’t want him hurt.”

“I promise you, I don’t want to hurt him either,” Eric answered.

“I hope so,” Tommy said. “He’s been hurt too much already. The other two guys he’s gone out with were....” He stopped in mid-sentence.

“They were what?” Eric asked.

“I never liked either one.”

“That’s not what you were going to say,” Eric said.

“No, it’s not. I was going to say they were both dicks. Each a different kind of dick, but still dicks.”

“Why were they dicks?” Eric asked.

“The first guy he hooked up with was Chad,” Tommy answered. “He met Chad when he was eighteen. They stayed together for almost two years.”

“What was wrong with Chad?” Eric asked.

“He only wanted to be with Nick because Nick is so good-looking. Chad’s one of those guys who likes to have the best of everything so he can show it off to people. That’s all Nick was, just another pretty toy Chad could show off. Chad’s real slick and a fast talker. Nick’s problem is he has a big heart. He swallowed Chad’s whole line of crap.”

“I didn’t think having a big heart was a problem,” Eric said.

“It’s a problem when people use it,” Tommy answered.

“What happened with Chad?”

“Nick finally figured him out and left. A couple of weeks later, he met Dennis.”

“What was Dennis’s problem?” Eric asked.

“You and Nick never talked about this stuff?” Tommy asked.

“No, not really. He just told me he’d dated two different guys and neither one of them worked out.”

Tommy shook his head. “Nick might get mad at me,” he said, “but that fucking creep Dennis was an asshole. A real fucking asshole.”

“What do you mean?” Eric asked.

“Nick really never told you?”

“No.”

“Dennis was possessive and jealous,” Tommy answered. “He’s a real control freak. I hardly ever saw Nick because of that fool. He was jealous of everyone and everything. Nick couldn’t be with anyone or go anywhere unless Dennis approved it, and he seldom approved anything.”

“That doesn’t sound like the Nick I know,” Eric said.

“He’s grown up since then, but he used to be real naive,” Tommy answered. “On the streets, I learned real fast how bad some people can be. Nick grew up in a good, loving family. It was easy to take advantage of him. It took him a little longer to learn about some of the shit out there.”

He gave Eric a concerned look. Eric understood the look.

“Don’t worry, Tommy,” Eric said. “I’m not using Nick. I like him. I don’t want to control him or hurt him. I really like him.”

“I hope you do,” Tommy said.

“So what happened with Dennis?” Eric asked.

“After about six months, Nick got tired of Dennis running his life. They had a nasty breakup and he hasn’t really dated anyone since.”



“What does ‘nasty breakup’ mean?” Eric asked.

“It wasn’t nice. But I’d better let Nick tell you about that.”

“Cool,” Eric agreed. “But you say he hasn’t dated anybody since Dennis?”

“He’s had a couple of dates, but nothing serious,” Tommy said.

“Dennis was really bad?” Eric asked thoughtfully.

“Nobody liked that fucker,” Tommy answered. “I hated him. But like I said, he did help Nick grow up. Dennis showed Nick you can’t always trust everyone.”

“Too bad he had to learn it like that,” Eric said.

“Nick wants to be loved,” Tommy said. “But he got caught up with the wrong guys. His friends, his parents, and the rest of his family didn’t like them. I remember his mom once asked me to do something to get rid of Dennis. I told Nick what everybody thought, but he had to find out for himself.”

“How did Nick feel about Chad and Dennis?” Eric asked.

“He never loved either one of them, if that’s what you mean,” Tommy answered.

“Why’d he stay with them?” Eric asked.

“I think he was hoping.”

Eric leaned onto the pool table and sank a ball. “I didn’t know any this,” he said as he stood.

“Nick’s been looking for love for a long time,” Tommy said. “He likes you, Eric. The last two weeks, every time he calls me all he does is talk about you. He really likes you.”

“I like him too,” Eric admitted with a smile.

“Good,” Tommy said. He leaned closer and said in a low voice, “Don’t hurt him, Eric. I love Nick, and I don’t care how big you are; if you hurt him, I’ll kill you.”

Eric smiled and put his hand on Tommy’s shoulder. “Thank you, Tommy,” he said. “I promise I’ll do my best not to hurt him.”

Eric saw Nick and Allan leave the dance floor. They were hot and

moist with sweat from their dancing. Nick wrapped his arms around Eric and gave him a quick kiss on the mouth.

“There, Baby,” Nick said, “our first public kiss.”

“And our second,” Eric answered. He quickly kissed Nick.

“Oh, God!” Tommy groaned as he rolled his eyes.

“Fuck you,” Nick said.

“Can you drag yourself away from Eric long enough to help me get some more drinks?” Tommy asked.

When Nick and Tommy went to get the drinks, Allan walked to the restroom. Eric was left alone. He returned his cue to the wall rack and stood for few moments watching Nick and Tommy at the bar. He thought about everything Tommy had told him.

He knew his emptiness and loneliness had been healed by Nick. He knew his anger had all but disappeared. His drinking had become a pleasure and not an attempt to hide from reality. He recognized all these good changes in him were because of Nick.

Nick and Tommy were laughing with several other men at the bar.

“Do I love that man?” Eric slowly asked himself.

The question frightened him. Nick might not share his feelings. His fear stopped his mind from facing and accepting what his heart already knew.

TWENTY-FOUR hours later, Eric stepped out of his car and looked at the apartment building where his girlfriend lived. The night was hot and heavy and did nothing to ease the knot in his stomach. It was not fear that tightened his gut; it was simply the prospect of performing an irritating yet necessary task.

He walked to the building, entered the door, and took the steps to the second floor. For a few minutes, he stood looking at the floor in front of her door. He thought about the sound of Nick’s breathing as he

slept. He remembered the warm, rich, manly aroma of Nick's skin. A smile replaced the tightness of his lips. He raised his head.

"Quick and clean," he said to himself. He knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" a woman's voice shouted from the other side.

Eric took a deep breath. That was classic Shannon; too lazy to get off her ass and answer the door. She shouted like a street bimbo because she lacked all grace. Nick was far from lazy. Nick would have opened the door and warmly welcomed his guest.

"Eric," he answered loudly.

"It's open; come on in."

Eric opened the door but did not step into the apartment. Shannon looked at him from where she was sitting on the sofa.

"It's about time you showed up," she said. "Come in and sit down."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Shannon, I'm going to come right to the point."

"What's the point?"

"I don't want to date you or see you anymore."

Shannon jumped up from the sofa. "What the hell does that mean?" she shouted.

"It means exactly what it sounds like," Eric answered.

"You're dumping me?" she shouted again.

"Yeah."

"Why? What the fuck did I do?"

"You didn't do anything. I'm just not happy being with you. And I don't think you really like me. You care more for my money than for anything else. You think I'm something you can brag about to your family and friends."

"You arrogant son of a bitch!" Shannon snapped.

"Let's face it," Eric said, "I don't love you and you don't love me. We go days without seeing each other. When we are together, we argue

most of the time. I don't want to argue anymore, and I'm not going to argue now. It's over. Goodbye, Shannon."

Eric turned and walked away.

"Don't you fucking walk out on me!" she shouted.

He kept walking and did not look back. He expected to hear her come after him. Happily, he did not. When he left the building and walked to his car, he heard Shannon shouting from her balcony.

"Eric! Eric, you bastard! Get your ass back here! Walk out on me, motherfucker, and you'll regret it!"

He ignored her shouts, got into his car, and drove away. As he drove, he turned off his cell phone. Tomorrow, he would have his number changed. When he arrived at Nick's apartment, he was filled with tension.

He walked the red bricks to Nick's door and knocked. The door opened and Nick smiled. Eric's stress evaporated. His heart was warmed, thrilled, and cleansed by Nick's smiling face. He stepped in and Nick closed the door.

"It's over, Nicky. I broke up with her. It's over."

"Are you sure that's what you want?"

In answer, Eric took Nick in his arms and kissed him. He felt the hunger in Nick as he returned the kiss.

"Yeah, Baby," Eric answered when their kiss ended. "It's exactly what I want."

Later that night, in bed, in the warm dark, in each other's arms, as their breaths mingled, Eric told him, "Nicky, you've awakened something in me I didn't know was there."

Eric was slowly accepting the love he felt for Nick, but he still could not say the words. He had never been in love. There was a cold, bare fear in his heart: the fear of being rejected.

TWO weeks after Eric broke up with his girlfriend, he sat at the table in

Nick's apartment. He was watching Nick set the table with simple stoneware dishes and two candles in holders made from oak branches with the bark still on them. Soft jazz was playing quietly. Nick lit the candles and turned off the lights.

In the warm candlelight, Eric and Nick shared their supper. Halfway through the meal, Eric placed a small black jeweler's box on the table and quietly pushed it towards Nick.

"What's this?" Nick asked.

"A present," Eric answered.

Nick picked up the box and looked at Eric. "Why?" he asked.

"You don't ask why when someone gives you a gift," Eric answered. "Just open it."

Nick opened the box and drew out a braided copper bracelet. "Eric, this is beautiful."

"I've never given jewelry to anyone before," Eric said.

"Not to any of your girlfriends?"

"No."

"You're not serious?" Nick asked.

"I'm very serious. To me, jewelry means something important."

"What does this mean?" Nick asked.

"It means you're special to me," Eric answered.

Nick smiled. "Does it mean I'm your boyfriend?" he asked.

"Of course it does, you fucking little punk," Eric answered.

"WHAT the hell is he doing?" Eric asked.

"He's trying to bang his secretary," Nick answered.

The two were watching an old movie in Nick's apartment. Nick was sitting in the corner of the sofa with his feet on the coffee table. Eric was stretched on the sofa with his head on Nick's lap.

"He's trying too hard," Eric said.

Nick did not answer. Instead, he took Eric's left hand and put a braided copper bracelet around the wrist. The bracelet was exactly like the one Nick was wearing, the one Eric had given him two days earlier.

"Now," Nick said, "this means you're my boyfriend."

"You like me calling you my boyfriend, don't you?" Eric asked.

"You know I do," Nick answered.

He leaned forward and their mouths met. As Eric caressed Nick's strong mouth, he felt a hand slide under his shirt and play in his soft red chest hair. He gently cupped the back of Nick's head with his strong hands. They kissed passionately and noisily. Nick moaned deep in his throat.

"My beautiful baby," Eric whispered into Nick's mouth.

He felt the hand travel to his strong, flat stomach. It lingered there for a few moments before it continued its southern journey. The hand found the button of his jeans. Expertly, the hand opened the pants and went searching for its prize.

A long, slow "Oh" came from Eric's mouth when the hand went under his briefs and captured him.

He rubbed the back of his head against the hardness he felt growing between Nick's thighs. His fingers became lost in Nick's silky hair. With his two strong hands, he held Nick's head close to his face. His lips and tongue wanted to taste and feel all of Nick's warm, wet mouth.

While their mouths and tongues played together, Nick's strong hand freed Eric. With that strong, gentle hand, Nick began a slow, teasing, erotic massage.

Eric gasped for air but he would not release the strong, wet lips that were kissing him. He did not want to lose the long, delicious tongue that was exploring his mouth.

Nick hungrily licked Eric's mouth, tongue and lips. Deep, satisfied growls came from Eric's throat. He became lost in Nick's greedy, passionate exploration.

Nick moved his mouth and kissed Eric's nose, red eyebrows, and

silky eyelids.

“Baby, oh my fuckin’ beautiful baby,” Eric moaned.

Nick returned his wet mouth to Eric’s lips. Eric’s hands again held Nick’s head as he fed on that beautiful mouth. His hands caressed the silky skin on the back of Nick’s strong neck.

The pleasure of his hands, his mouth, his entire body all worked to bring him close to the glorious edge. He felt the explosion coming. Closer and closer he came to that edge. Suddenly, his body shuddered and bucked.

He gasped and groaned and growled, but Nick’s hand would not stop. Every nerve in his body was in ecstatic, violent revolt. Still Nick would not stop. Eric thrashed and jerked, but Nick refused to release him.

The giant redheaded Dane could take no more of the extreme pleasure. He rolled off the sofa onto the floor and rested on his hands and knees. Eagerly, he gulped air deep into his hungry lungs. His brain was reeling and his eyes were momentarily blinded.

“Motherfucker!” he finally blurted out.

Nick pushed Eric’s head back so he was looking up at him. “Yeah, Baby?” Nick asked with a wicked smile.

“Motherfucker, that was awesome,” Eric answered.

The dark-eyed Nick leaned forward and tenderly kissed Eric’s warm, wet forehead.

When they had rested, Nick left Eric on the sofa and went into the kitchen. After several calm moments, Eric got up and followed him. He stood in the doorway and watched Nick working at the counter.

A small smile appeared on Eric’s mouth. His eyes flowed over Nick’s strong back, round butt, and long thighs. He must have made a sound as he stood watching, because Nick suddenly turned around.

Eric walked into the kitchen and backed Nick into a corner against the counter. With an arm on either side, he leaned onto the cabinets and trapped his boyfriend. Nick tried to move towards the sink. Eric blocked his passage and would not let him out of his little

prison. Nick tried to step the other way, but Eric stopped him.

With half-opened eyes, Nick tilted his head to the side as if to kiss Eric. Eric leaned close to meet the kiss. Nick backed away. Again, Nick tilted his head. Once more, as Eric tried to kiss him, Nick backed away.

“Punk!” Eric said.

He grabbed Nick’s upper arms and again tried to kiss him. Nick ducked his head, wrapped his arms around Eric’s waist, and lifted his feet off the floor. He took a few steps forward and sat Eric’s butt on the table.

“I’m hungry,” Nick said. “If you don’t let me make something to eat, I’m going to eat you.”

Eric smiled and leaned back on his elbows on the table. Nick lowered his beautiful face between Eric’s thighs. Eric watched Nick slowly, carefully begin to chew and gnaw at the great Danish snake hidden in his trousers.

Almost instantly, the sleeping dragon woke. It knew from happy experience that it was about to embark on a great adventure. It knew it was about to be swallowed by a mouth that was wet, hot, and well-versed in the art of giving pleasure. That excited, anxious snake knew there was a tongue in that mouth that would caress it, play with it, and bathe it with delicious, silky saliva.

The pants were opened, and Eric felt them being pushed down passed his ankles. He heard them fall onto the floor. He smiled with pleasure when Nick’s long, soft eyelashes danced on the hot skin of his strong, thick thighs. Nick pushed those great thighs apart and knelt onto the floor. Eric happily, proudly watched Nick’s bronze forehead between his hairy white thighs.

His lungs took a sudden gulp of air when he felt Nick’s tongue touch his skin.

“Baby,” Eric said, “I love your face between my legs.”

“My face belongs between your legs,” Nick answered without looking away from his happy work.

Eric’s body jolted when he felt the tip of Nick’s tongue slide to a



place no one had ever visited—a place no one had ever dared to visit.

“Baby, what are you doing?” Eric asked as he realized what was about to happen.

“Shh,” came Nick’s muffled answer.

He felt Nick push his thighs further apart. Then came hot breath against his white skin. The breath brushed his anxious body. The breath was followed by the same tongue, which, over the past few days, had been on every inch of his strong magnificent body.

That tongue now shoved, pushed, and bullied its way into his body. His left hand went to Nick’s head and held it a willing prisoner between his powerful white thighs. With his right hand, he began to masturbate himself. Soon, he heard the sound of Nick unzipping his own pants.

Eric was lost in paradise on that strong kitchen table as his body was assaulted by Nick’s tongue. Then, it happened—the sounds of Nick’s muffled groans and growls came to his ears. He felt Nick’s face tremble and push hard against his body.

Eric quickly answered Nick’s cries of pleasure with his own. He growled in primitive pleasure as his body convulsed and burst into flame.

“Yeah!” Eric yelled.

Nick backed away and looked Eric.

“Hell fuckin’ yeah!” he shouted in answer.

Eric sat up on the table and reached for Nick’s shoulders. He pulled Nick up and kissed him. He could taste the wild, heady flavor of his own body on his boyfriend’s beautiful lips and long, wet tongue.

Eric backed away from Nick’s face. “Baby, my fucking beautiful baby,” Eric said.

Nick smiled and laughed. Eric laughed in answer.

“Nick, you’ve shown me a happy playfulness I didn’t know could be part of sex. I have more fun with you, both in bed and out, than I’ve ever had with anybody else.”

## Chapter 6

### The Push

FRIDAY night, Eric and Nick returned to The Hairy Lady to dance and shoot pool.

During their second game, Nick said, “Eric, there’s a middle-aged guy leaning on the wall over there by the cue rack.”

Eric looked. He quickly turned back to the table and chalked his stick. “Yeah, so?” he said.

“What do you think he’s doing?”

Eric leaned onto the table and aimed at the cue ball.

“Probably watching the games,” he said.

“You don’t think he’s watching us?”

“There’s three tables here. Maybe he’s watching all of ’em.”

While they played, Nick kept glancing at the man. He soon realized the man was not watching the games. He was watching Eric. Nick noticed something else. Eric was doing his best not to look in the man’s direction. Eric became quiet. He seemed tense.

Nick looked hard at the man against the wall. He was doing more than watching Eric. He was staring at Eric with a sloppy gutter leer.

Eric made a shot. The ball went in. He stood and started to walk to the other side of the table for his next shot. The man left the wall, stepped towards Eric, and blocked his path.

“Hey dude,” he said in a low voice, “you want to come out to my

car and party with me? I remember your long, fat, juicy horse dick.”

Eric ignored the man and stepped around him. The man followed and repeated his suggestion. Eric turned suddenly and faced him.

“Fuck off!” he said in quiet, suppressed anger.

Eric’s face was red, almost scarlet. He took a deep breath, turned, and walked away again. The man began to follow him.

Nick’s breath had become hollow and short. He suddenly stepped in front of the man and stopped him. He looked the man straight in the eyes. His voice was controlled and low when he spoke. “Walk away or I’m going to put my fist in your fucking face,” he said.

“Hey!” the man said. “Who the—”

Nick cut him off. “Leave right now or I’m going to crack open your goddamn skull.”

“What?” the man asked.

Nick was several inches taller than the man. He stepped closer. His face was only inches from the man’s face. “I said fucking leave.”

Nick saw a sudden fear in the man’s eyes. “Sorry, dude,” the man said in a small voice. “I just wanted—”

Again, Nick cut off his sentence. “Say one more fucking word!”

The man hesitated, looked at the floor, turned, and slithered away without looking back. Nick looked at Eric. His green eyes were lost and lonely.

“I got to take a piss,” Eric said in a dry monotone.

“What’s wrong, man?” Nick asked.

“I said I got to take a piss,” Eric snapped.

This was not Eric, not the Eric Nick had come to know. Something about that man. What the man had said implied a history between him and Eric.

Nick looked towards the restroom.

He thought, *Even though Eric’s only been to a gay bar twice now, he’s a grown man. He’s strong and intelligent. He can handle a*

*middle-aged guy coming on to him.*

Ten minutes passed, and Eric still had not returned. Nick went to the john. Eric was not there. Nick left the restroom and looked around the bar. He did not see Eric anywhere. Worry began its slow growth in Nick's heart. He walked out of the bar into the parking lot. Eric's car was gone. Nick took his cell phone from his pocket and called Eric's cell phone. There was no answer, just the voice mail. He did not leave a message.

"Son of a bitch!" Nick said to himself. "What the fuck's going on?"

Nick was not sure if he was worried or angry. He called a taxi. When the cab arrived, he jumped in and gave the driver Eric's address.

During the ride, Nick called Eric again. There was still no answer. The cab pulled up to the curb in front of Eric's house. Lights were shining in several of the windows. His car was in the driveway.

Nick paid the driver, stepped out of the cab, and walked to the front door. It was locked. With the key Eric had given him, he opened the door and walked into the house. Eric was not in the living room. Nick started to walk toward the kitchen when he heard a sound from the upstairs. Carefully, he went up the stairs. More sounds came from Eric's bedroom. Nick walked down the hall to the door and looked into the room. Eric was packing a small travel bag.

"Eric, what the fuck are you doing?" Nick demanded as he stepped into the room. "What the hell's going on? Why did you leave me at the bar without saying anything? Why the fuck didn't you answer your phone?"

"I'm packing the things you've left here," Eric answered coldly and flatly.

Nick was not expecting that answer. His anger was momentarily replaced by puzzlement. "What?" he asked. "Why?"

Eric looked at Nick. His eyes were lonely and sad.

"Nick, we have to stop this," he answered. "We have to stop before things go any farther." His voice was hollow and empty of its

usual richness.

“Why the fuck?” Nick snapped.

“Because, Nick. Because of me. Because of what I’ve done. It’s me, Nick. It’s me. I’m not good enough for you.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? You’re the best thing I’ve ever known.”

“No man. No. Didn’t you hear that asshole in the bar? That fucking nasty queer. Man, I fucked him. I fucked that bastard. I was drunk and I fucked his stinking ass in the stall of a goddamned dirty bookstore.”

Nick looked deep into Eric’s green eyes. There he saw anger. There he saw shame.

“I’ve done things,” Eric said quietly.

Nick answered Eric in a slow, calm voice, “I’m not going to lose you because you’re embarrassed by something you did before we met.”

“Nick,” Eric said slowly, “I used to get drunk and go put my cock through glory-holes in dirty bookstores and public johns. I’d stick it through for a blowjob from whoever was on the other side. At night, I’d go to a park or a rest area and wait for some faggot to give me a blowjob. I’d do the same thing in adult theaters. Nicky, I’d fuck any ass that’d bend over for me.”

“Man,” Nick said as he stepped closer to Eric, “what the fuck’s wrong with you? I don’t care about any of that fucking shit. That’s all over. It’s all over and behind you. Don’t do this, Eric. Man, don’t do this. You don’t want to lose me anymore than I want to lose you.”

Eric turned away. “Man, just go,” he said in a sad, low voice.

“Fuck, no!” Nick yelled. “I’m not leaving you.” He took another step closer, grabbed Eric’s upper arm, and turned him around. Eric jerked his arm free.

“I said go!” Eric shouted.

With the palms of his hands, he pushed Nick in the chest. The backs of Nick’s legs were shoved against the edge of the bed. He lost his balance and sat back onto it.

“Who the fuck do you’re think you’re pushing?” Nick shouted in anger as he jumped to his feet.

“Nicky,” Eric said. He grabbed Nick’s shoulders, pulled him close, and wrapped him in his arms.

“I’m sorry, Baby. I’m sorry I pushed you.”

Nick returned Eric’s hug. The two stood and clung tightly to each other. “Eric, you stupid fucker,” Nick breathed into his boyfriend’s ear. “What the fuck’s wrong with you? You know you want me as much as I want you.”

“I do, Baby. I do. But—”

“But nothing,” Nick interrupted him. “Just hold me, Eric. Just hold me. Don’t let go. Don’t ever let go.”

Eric held Nick in a powerful crushing embrace. He burrowed his face into Nick’s neck.

Then, the unexpected: Nick heard Eric’s muffled voice say, “I love you, Nicky. I love you.”

“Oh, my God, Eric,” Nick answered. “I love you, too, Baby. I love you too.”

Nick’s mouth eagerly searched for and found Eric’s. His hands searched and reclaimed what had almost been lost.

After their long kiss, Eric moved his mouth to Nick’s ear. “You’re more real to me than anything I’ve ever known,” he said. “I’m empty and cold without you. But my past, the things I’ve done—I’m dirty. I’m not the man I should be.”

Nick took Eric’s shoulders in his hands and pushed him away so he could look into his face and into his eyes. “Fuck you, Eric,” he said. “You were horny and lonely. You did what you had to do. The only thing you could do. So what? There’s nothing wrong with what you did.”

“Nicky.”

“Eric,” Nick interrupted. “You’re the best thing I’ve ever known. The best thing I’ve ever had. I love you. I want you. I need you, and I’m sure as hell not going to lose you or leave you because you had to

bust a nut.”

“From the first few minutes I was with you, I knew I wanted you,” Eric said.

“And I’ve never been as happy as I’ve been with you,” Nick answered. “I don’t care one goddamn bit about your past. You and me, Eric, there’s something between our souls. We’re connected.”

They embraced again.

“Nicky, I’ve never been in love before,” Eric whispered.

“Me either,” Nick whispered in answer.

“Are you scared?” Eric asked.

“A little. You?”

“Yeah.”

“I promise I’ll do my best,” Nick said.

“Me too.”

“You know, Eric,” Nick whispered, “you’re not the only one who’s cruised.”

Eric leaned his head back and looked at Nick. “What?” he asked.

“You’re not the only one with a past,” Nick answered. “I cruised once.”

“How?” Eric asked.

“One time I was at the beach with Tony and Carol,” Nick answered. “I went to the restroom to take a piss. There was a real hot guy standing at the sink washing his hands. He smiled at me when I came in. I stood at the urinal and the guy kept watching me. I figured out what he was up to. It was exciting. I smiled at him. He came over and stood at the urinal next to mine. He unzipped his pants and pulled out his dick. He was standing back far enough so I could see his big, fat, pretty piece of meat. It was semi-hard. Damn, it was a nice looking cock.”

“What’d you do?” Eric asked.

“I shook the piss off my cock, put it back in my pants, and zipped up. I told him ‘bye’ and left.”

“You didn’t do anything with him?” Eric asked with eyes opened wide in mock-surprise.

“Hell, no!” Nick answered. “I was afraid someone would come in and we’d get arrested. And I didn’t want a kid to come in and see us.”

“Oh, my God, Nick!” Eric laughed. “You whore!”

“Fuck you!” Nick answered.

“Nicky, you didn’t do anything.”

“The point is, I wanted to do something,” Nick insisted. “I wanted to fall on my knees and swallow that big, fat dick.”

“But you didn’t,” Eric said.

“Only because I was afraid,” Nick admitted. “But that doesn’t matter. Wanting and doing are the same thing.”

“Where the hell did you get that?” Eric laughed.

“The Buddha said, ‘we are what we think’. I thought of sucking his cock. I wanted to suck his cock. I wanted to swallow that big, thick piece of meat.”

“Thank you, Baby,” Eric said with a smile.

“Why are you thanking me?”

“Because you’re doing your best to make me feel better.”

“Eric, you asshole, I love you. Don’t—please—don’t let anything that happened before we met ever come between us.”

“I promise,” Eric said as he kissed Nick’s mouth.

During the kiss, he guided Nick down onto the bed. Nick put his arms around Eric’s shoulders and wrapped his legs around his thighs.

Eric’s strong, warm lips caressed Nick’s mouth. As Nick nourished himself with the moisture from Eric’s mouth, he felt hands traveling to the button of his pants. Eric pulled at the button until it released its hold. Then he left Nick’s mouth and brought his face to the zipper he had just parted.

Eric opened the pants and pulled them and the underwear down Nick’s legs. He stopped long enough to remove Nick’s shoes and socks. Nick heard his clothing drop onto the floor.



He looked down his body and saw Eric kneel between his thighs. There was a brave new lust on Eric's strong noble face. Eric leaned close and Nick felt hot breath caress his skin.

"Nicky, your cock is so beautiful," Eric said. "It smells so masculine."

Nick watched with fascination. He knew Eric had never performed oral sex on a man. The redhead moved his face closer, and Nick now felt the warmth radiating from that noble face.

He closed his eyes when he felt the tip of Eric's tongue slowly begin its tentative exploration. The tongue quickly grew braver.

"My God, Nicky!" Eric whispered. "You taste so goddamn good."

"Eric, Baby," Nick breathed.

Eric engulfed him and he gave himself to the pleasure of the hot, wet mouth, but Eric was clumsy. His teeth rubbed the tender skin. Nick said nothing. He knew Eric had to learn.

Suddenly, Nick flinched. Eric released him and backed away. "Baby, did I hurt you?" he asked.

"Just your teeth," Nick answered. "Don't worry. Just be a little more careful. You'll get better. Try again."

He gently pushed Eric's head back down to its new obligation. He felt Eric being more careful as his head glided up and down.

Nick closed his eyes again. He smiled to himself when he heard Eric undressing without releasing him. He knew, he understood, that Eric had discovered the great pleasure of pleasing a man with his mouth.

Long Nick enjoyed his mate's saliva-rich mouth. When he felt his orgasm nearing, he grabbed Eric's head and pulled it to his face.

"Damn, Eric," he gasped. "I don't want to cum yet."

Eric pulled Nick's shirt over his head. Now they were both naked. Now the one again offered his body to the other.

Their tongues, mouths, and hands explored and brought pleasure to one another. They thrilled one another. Their sweat mingled. Their

voices and breathing joined into a choir of lustful, loving sounds.

Several heated hours later, as they lay together before sleep came and took them, Nick asked Eric, “Why didn’t you paste that fucker at the bar? I could see you were getting pissed off.”

“I wanted to, Baby,” Eric answered, “but I didn’t want to make a scene and I was afraid if I lost my temper, you wouldn’t like me anymore.”

“What?”

“You’re always so good and kind to everyone,” Eric answered. “I didn’t want you to see how nasty I can be. Remember, before I met you, I was ready to tank anyone who rubbed me the wrong way.”

“I’m not as good as you think I am,” Nick answered. “I wanted to deck that stupid fucker myself.”

“My hero,” Eric said.

“Your lover,” Nick corrected him as he rubbed Eric’s cheek with the back of his fingers.

“I knew if I hit that asshole I might end up in jail,” Eric said. “Then I wouldn’t be with you. I wouldn’t be able to sleep with you. Nicky, I don’t think I could sleep without you next to me. Not after all the awesome nights we’ve spent together. I’m spoiled, Nicky. You’ve spoiled me.”

“Eric,” Nick whispered. “My sweet, red Eric.”

He kissed Eric’s eyebrows, reached for the lamp, and turned it off. They held each other in the dark and gave themselves to sleep. Sometime late in the night, Nick woke cradled in Eric’s arms. Eric was watching him.

“What are you doing?” Nick asked in a sleepy voice.

“Watching you.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen, and because I love you.”

Nick moved his face closer to Eric’s face. Their lips gently,

lightly touched.

“No one has ever loved me before,” Nick whispered.

“Me either,” Eric answered. “I’m glad it’s you.”

## Chapter 7

### The Black Heart

IN THE morning, Eric and Nick went hiking in the forest east of the city. Along with canoeing, hiking had fast become one of their favorite pastimes.

During their walk, they discovered a small, hidden woodland pond. In the pleasant shade on the marshy bank they stopped, sat on an old log, removed their boots, and soaked their feet in the cool water. Small fish came and nibbled at their ankles and feet.

Nick watched Eric watching the fish playing at their toes. He knew Eric had something he wanted to talk about, something he wanted to tell him. Nick sat, enjoyed the cool shade and water, and waited.

“I’m so thankful I met you, Nicky,” Eric finally said. “I’ve spent my whole life running and hiding. I couldn’t face the truth, so I got drunk, and then I didn’t have to face anything.” He looked at Nick and smiled. “I never found... there was never anything good.”

He looked back at the fish. “Nicky, I turned mean. I’d argue with anyone about anything. I’ve acted like a real asshole to my family and friends.”

Nick wiggled his toes in the still pool. The fish scattered and then quickly returned.

“That’s all changed, Nicky. It’s changed because of you. You’ve shown me love. Real love.”

They sat sharing their silence for a few moments, watching the

fish at their feet and listening to the birds in the trees.

“I wish I knew you in high school,” Eric finally said as he put an arm around Nick’s shoulders.

Nick looked at Eric. “Why?”

“Maybe I would have been happier,” Eric answered, still watching the small fish nibbling at his ankles.

“You weren’t happy?”

“I don’t want to sound all gloomy and stuff like that, but I was lonely. I didn’t have much luck dating.”

“Because you were gay?” Nick asked.

“No, it was something else.”

“What?”

“I... I wanted someone I could share things with,” Eric answered. He looked up at the green canopy above their heads.

“But it never happened. The girls I dated only went out with me because I was a football player and had a good build and shit like that. But they were never happy with me, and I felt the same about them. They were all too stupid for a real conversation. Not like you. You and me talk about everything, any subject. But these girls where all gum-chewing mouth-breathers.”

Nick caressed the back of Eric’s strong neck.

“It didn’t change in college,” Eric continued. “I think it got worse. After college I went to work, and it still didn’t change. I started making good money and learned real fast that’s what the women were really looking for.”

Dappled sunlight sparkled off the pond. Eric pulled his feet from the water and stood on the log. Nick silently watched him.

“Maybe subconsciously, I avoided women where there might have been a future and only went after bitches where I knew nothing would happen,” Eric confessed. “Maybe that was my way of not getting hooked up in a bullshit marriage. I don’t know.” He smiled down at Nick. “All I ever wanted was someone I could love and who would

love me back. Really love me. Love me just for being me. Someone I could talk with and share things with. That never happened until I met you.”

Nick stood on the soft, moist, grassy earth at the edge of the pond. He wrapped his arms around Eric’s hips and rested his face on his T-shirt covered, hard, flat stomach. He closed his eyes when he felt Eric’s fingers glide through his hair.

“I promise I’ll do my best never to hurt you,” Nick said.

“Hurt me?” Eric asked.

“Yeah, like a bullshit marriage would,” Nick answered.

Eric stepped off the log, took Nick’s face in his hands, and kissed him.

On the edge of that old hidden pond, they stood holding each other. After several shared heartbeats, the two young men backed away from one another and smiled. Their smiles expressed more than happiness. There was satisfaction and comfort. Their smiles also spoke of a playful lustiness, the lustiness that pounds its way through the veins of strong, healthy young men. A last kiss and they began their walk out of the forest.

THE path leading back to Nick’s old car wound its way through the deep shadows under the trees. After only a few dozen yards, Nick suddenly dashed ahead and disappeared around a bend. Eric smiled to himself and slowed his steps. He became sensibly cautious. Through much experience, he had learned Nick found an almost boy-like pleasure in harassing him.

Carefully, slowly, Eric walked through the trees. He stepped into the long bend in the path where he had lost sight of Nick. Any moment, he expected to be jumped. He stopped and crouched slightly. He strained his senses searching among the trees. A noise. He turned. Crash!

Nick landed on his back. He spun with Nick clinging to him.

They laughed and fell to the ground. They wrestled and gloried in their youth, their strength, their power, and their love.

DOWNTOWN Monday evening, Eric and Nick stepped out of their favorite Thai restaurant. The air was hot and still.

“Before we go home, let’s take a walk in the park down by the river,” Eric suggested.

In the park, near the river, the air was heavy with the aroma of water and wild mint. Crickets were beginning their nightly courting songs. Walking along the footpath, they heard a woman’s voice cut into the crickets’ song.

“Eric!” a young woman called out. “Eric!”

Eric and Nick stopped and looked back at a woman hurrying towards them.

“You know her?” Nick asked.

“Fuck, that’s my ex,” Eric answered in an irritated whisper. “I think things just turned bad.”

“Damn, Eric,” Nick said. “All of a sudden your voice sounds tired.”

“She wears on me,” Eric answered.

They stood and watched as a thin brunette with too much makeup and hairspray wearing black slacks and a dark blue tank-top hurried to them.

“Hi, Eric,” she said when she reached them. “I keep trying to call you, but I get a recording saying your number’s been changed.”

“I had it changed,” Eric answered.

“Why? So I couldn’t call you?”

“Yes,” he answered flatly.

“Eric, what the fuck did I do?” Shannon asked. “Why do you hate

me so much?”

“I don’t hate you, Shannon.”

“Then why did you change your number? Why don’t you want to talk to me?”

He exhaled loudly. “Because I don’t have anything to say to you.”

Shannon looked at Nick. “Who the fuck are you?” she snapped in a harsh voice. “Don’t you have anything better to do than to stand and listen to a man and his girlfriend trying to work through their problems?”

“Are you talking to me?” Nick asked.

“Stop it,” Eric said. “Shannon, you interrupted us. And you’re not my girlfriend. We’re not working through anything.”

His words seemed to fly past her. She reached for his shoulder. He pushed her hand away.

“Eric, I miss you,” she said.

He knew she wanted her voice to sound like a sad little girl. All she managed was to sound like a barfly who had smoked too many cigarettes.

“I want you,” Shannon said in a gravelly voice. “I want to be with you. I want things to be like they used to be.” She again reached for his shoulder.

Once more, he pushed her hand away. “Things between us weren’t good,” he answered.

“Eric, Honey,” Shannon pleaded. For the third time, she reached for him. Again, he pushed her hand away. She reached for his face. “I want us to be together again,” she said, trying to sound desirable.

This time, he angrily slapped her hand away and told her in a harsh voice, “Don’t touch me! Don’t you ever touch me. I’m not your ‘Honey’. We’re not going to be together. Not ever.” He looked at Nick and then back at Shannon. He calmed and lowered his voice. “This man standing here with me,” he said to her very slowly, “his name is Nick. He’s my partner.” Slowly, emphasizing each word, he asked, “Do you



understand me? Do you understand what I'm saying? He's my partner. My boyfriend. My lover."

She looked curiously first at Eric, then at Nick, then back at Eric. He watched as comprehension suddenly grabbed her. "What?" she shouted.

"I left you so I could be with Nick," he answered proudly.

"You're telling me you're a queer? A faggot!" Her face turned a brilliant red. "You left me for a man! A fucking queer!"

"Yes," he answered slowly and calmly. "That's exactly what I'm telling you."

"You left me for a goddamn faggot?" Shannon screamed. "I don't believe it!"

"I don't care what you believe," Eric answered calmly. "I'm with Nick now. I love him. I'm sorry if I hurt you, Shannon. Really sorry. But we were never happy together. You like my money, and I used you to hide. I've grown up. I'm free now and happy. Happier than I've ever been. Happier than I ever was or could be with you. Nick and I are starting to build a life together. A good life. A damn good life."

Eric saw Shannon's growing rage. She stepped in front of Nick, her fists clenched tight at her sides. Her whole body was trembling. A large, angry vein bulged at her scarlet temple. Suddenly, she screamed and swung her right fist at Nick's face. In self-defense, he dodged the fist and pushed her shoulder. She stumbled back a step, regained her balance, lunged at him, and took another swing. Nick pulled his head back and dodged her fist again.

"I'll kill you, you fucking faggot. You disgusting puke!" the angry young woman screamed as she swung her fist for a third time at Nick's face.

Now it was Eric who pushed her. He pushed her with anger. She stumbled back and fell. Her ass hit the grass hard.

She sat silently on the grass while Eric and Nick turned and calmly walked away.

“I’m sorry, Nick,” Eric gently told his lover after they had walked a dozen yards from the defeated, red-faced woman on the grass.

“What a freak!” Nick said. “But I guess she has every right to be pissed.”

“What are you fucking talking about?” Eric snapped.

“I corrupted you,” Nick answered.

“Asshole!” Eric said as he lightly slapped the back of Nick’s head.

Together, they laughed and walked out of the park.

SHANNON remained where they had left her sitting on the grass. The push from Eric did not surprise her. She had seen him violent before, but not like this. It was his eyes. The anger in his eyes when he pushed her frightened her.

She watched the two men until they were gone from sight. The fear in her slowly morphed into anger. The anger became rage. The rage hardened and changed and found its new expression in a simmering hatred and lust for revenge. Birds in the nearby trees fled from the ugly energy that now surrounded her. Her eyes were slits; her heart was black.

AT THE end of the day, Shannon was no more than an annoying memory. The two men lay together in the soft, warm sheets of Eric’s bed. They had made love and showered and were now awaiting the arrival of sleep. Eric kissed Nick’s temple and gently bit his ear.

“Nicky, I want to share something with you,” he said. “Something I’ve been thinking about.”

Nick rolled onto his side and put his forehead against Eric’s. “You can share anything you want with me,” he answered.

“I’ve been thinking, Nicky. I’ve been thinking about you and me a lot. I want to know you, Nicky. I want to know you completely. I want to experience you freely and cleanly without any goddamn condoms.”

“Eric, I’ve thought about the same thing,” Nick answered. “Every time we make love, I want to feel you inside me without anything between us.”

“Nicky, this is a big step, a real big step. We have to trust each other. We have to know and believe we won’t be unfaithful to each other.”

“I believe in you,” Nick said, rubbing his face on Eric’s face. “Do you believe in me?”

“Yeah, Baby,” Eric answered, “I believe in you.”

“Man,” Nick whispered as his mouth caressed Eric’s mouth.

When their kiss ended, Eric softly touched Nick’s face with his fingertips. “Because so much of my sex was when I was drunk, I’m not sure if I always used a condom. I don’t want to put you in any danger, Nicky, but I so much want to enjoy you naturally, totally.”

“We should start testing as soon as we can,” Nick said. “Then when the doctor says it’s okay, we can get rid of the rubbers and be free.”

“Have you ever had sex without a condom?” Eric asked.

“Only with myself.”

They both laughed.

“You know what I mean, asshole,” Eric said.

“No, Babe, I’ve never had sex with a man without a condom.”

“I’ll make an appointment tomorrow so we can start the tests right away,” Eric said. “I just want to be sure I’m safe and healthy for you.”

“I want to be sure about me for you too,” Nick added.

“I don’t think there’s much of a chance you’re carrying anything if you’ve always used a rubber,” Eric said.

“Let’s be sure about both of us,” Nick answered.

“Thank you, Nicky.”

They cuddled into each other, and Eric started to drift towards sleep. Nick brushed his lips on Eric’s cheek.

Very quietly, he whispered, “Eric, there’s one more thing.”

“What’s that?” Eric asked sleepily.

“I don’t... I don’t know if you’ll think I’m disgusting or what,” Nick said.

Eric heard the nervousness in Nick’s voice. It was a sound he had never heard before.

“I’d never think anything like that about you, Nicky. What is it?”

“I want... I mean, I’ve thought and fantasized about....” He paused.

Eric could tell Nick was trying to find the right words. “Nick, I promise you I won’t think anything bad about you.”

Quickly, Nick said, “Eric, I want to swallow your cum.”

Eric moved his warm hard body tighter against Nick’s. “Oh, man, Baby, I would get off on that so fucking bad,” Eric confessed.

“Yeah?” Nick asked breathlessly.

“Yeah,” Eric answered.

“You’re not just saying that?” Nick asked.

“No, Baby, I’m serious. Dead fucking serious.”

“Good,” Nick said. “If I swallowed your cum, you’d be part of me. You’d become part of my body. We’d be one. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah, it makes sense. If we’re a couple, a faithful couple, it’s part of our love,” Eric answered.

Nick chuckled.

“What?” Eric asked.

“Besides all that, I think it’d be hot as hell,” Nick answered.

Eric laughed and snuggled into Nick. “So the fuck do I, Baby! So the fuck do I!”

## Chapter 8

### One Scary Bitch

A BRIGHT, warm September morning came quickly to Eric and Nick. After breakfast and a kiss at the door, Eric drove to his office, and Nick to the garden center. Nick liked the quiet of the early morning in the nursery before customers started arriving. He enjoyed walking among the young trees, checking their health and growth.

He walked into a group of potted Japanese maples. Their lacy leaves quivered in the gentle morning breeze. Nick was a very hands-on manager. He knelt among the trees and began feeling their soil to see if the moisture was correct.

It was nearing the end of the season, and he wanted to find a home for each of the remaining trees he had so carefully tended throughout the summer. He knew it was time to lower the price of the trees. While he was feeling the soil, he considered how much he could charge and still bring a profit to the nursery.

On his knees in the dappled light among the trees, he was suddenly touched by a strange awareness. Nick stopped his inspection of the soil. He had an uncomfortable feeling he was being watched—not by an early customer looking for help, but by something unfriendly, cold, angry. He stood, turned, and looked straight into the eyes of Shannon, Eric's ex-girlfriend.

A sudden tingling raced through Nick's body. It was the sensation of surprise, not fear.

“You dirty fucking faggot,” Shannon said in a low voice that did very little to hide her rage.

“You want a tree or a bush?” Nick asked.

“I want to know who the fuck you think you are, you scabby shit!” Her voice had risen in volume, but it was not yet a shout.

“Excuse me?” Nick asked.

“I followed you from Eric’s house. From the house that was going to be mine. I followed you so I could find out who the fuck you think you are!” Her voice was quickly rising to a point where it was dangerously close to busting into an angry flood.

Nick kept his voice low and calm, yet solid and proud. “I think I’m the man Eric loves and sleeps with,” he answered.

Instinctively, his arm sprang forward to block Shannon’s sudden incoming right fist. He caught her clenched hand with his large hand and squeezed it until she dropped to her knees with a scream.

“What the fuck’s wrong with you, bitch?” he asked in a loud voice. “You were going to lose Eric whether I came along or not.”

Nick saw a couple of early morning customers who had been attracted by the loud voices. They had stopped and were watching him hold the clenched fist of a kneeling, wild-eyed woman.

“Nick, is there a problem here?” Ken Burns, the nursery manager, asked as he hurried to Nick and the kneeling woman.

“Twice now this woman has tried to assault me,” Nick explained to his manager.

He released Shannon’s hand. She stood and looked at him with malignant eyes.

“This isn’t over, you goddamned faggot bastard,” she spat at Nick.

“Ma’am, I suggest you leave right now, or I’ll have you arrested,” Ken said.

“I’ll get this faggot, don’t think I won’t. He’s fucking dead,” Shannon said as she walked towards the large glass doors.

“Ken, I’m sorry about all this,” Nick apologized after the woman had walked out of the building.

“Who the hell was that?” Ken asked.

“Eric’s ex,” Nick answered. “She thinks I turned him queer.”

“My God, she looked totally flipped,” Ken said.

“Man, I’m sorry,” Nick repeated.

“Don’t worry about it,” Ken answered. “But be careful. That’s one scary bitch.”

AFTER work, Eric picked Nick up at his apartment.

“I called for their last appointment of the day,” Eric told Nick as they drove to the Rainbow Clinic.

“Did they say how they were going to test us?” Nick asked.

“The person I talk to said we could have our mouths swabbed or blood drawn. Our choice.”

“What’d you tell ’em?” Nick asked.

“I told them we wanted both.”

“Both?”

“I think it’s best to be double safe,” Eric answered.

LATER in the evening in Nick’s apartment, while soaking together in his large old bathtub, Nick told Eric about his morning encounter with Shannon.

“Fuck,” Eric said as he hugged Nick’s shoulders.

“That’ll probably be the end of her bullshit,” Nick said.

“I don’t know, Baby,” Eric said as he kissed Nick’s temple.



“HOW long have you and Eric have been seeing each other?” Tommy asked.

“About eight weeks, I think,” Nick answered.

The two were having lunch at Mother Earth’s Kitchen.

“Have you heard anything more from that Shannon bitch?” Tommy asked.

“No,” Nick answered. “I think she knows she’s not going to get back with Eric.”

“So what have you and that big redhead been doing?”

“After work, we go dancing or hiking,” Nick answered. “We’re learning a lot more about one other.”

“Always the romantic, aren’t you?”

“Damn right,” Nick answered.

“Where are you guys sleeping?”

“Sometimes his house, but usually my apartment.”

“Why your apartment?”

“Cause I have food at my place and I cook,” Nick answered.

“When I called you last Friday, you said were getting ready to go camping,” Tommy said.

“Yeah, we’ve been doing a lot of that.”

“It’s September. Isn’t it kind of cold?” Tommy asked.

“We keep each other warm,” Nick answered, smiling. “But it’s really not too bad yet. Up north, the colors in the forest are awesome right now. And at night, we sit close to each other around the campfire, and I play my guitar and sing for Eric.”

“Got it bad, don’t you?” Tommy said.

“Sure do,” Nick answered. “After the songs, we crawl into the tent and Eric and me make love like two horny queers. Damn, he’s good. He’s spoiling me.”

“I think you’re spoiling each other,” Tommy said. “And by the way, you guys *are* two horny queers.”

IN THE middle of October, on a crisp Monday evening, Eric and Nick drove to Nick's parents' home for dinner.

"Don't look so worried," Nick said. "It's just supper with my parents and brother and sister and their families."

"I'm okay," Eric lied. A colony of nervous butterflies had set up home in his stomach.

"You did tell them you're bringing someone?" Eric asked.

"Yeah, I told them you're someone very special."

"Great! Now I'm really nervous."

"Be cool," Nick said. "It's all right. Besides, Tommy and Allan will be there."

"Good," Eric said. Knowing someone at the dinner besides Nick helped calm a few of his butterflies. "Do Tommy and Alan always come to your family get-togethers?"

"Yeah, they're part of the family," Nick answered.

Eric pulled into the driveway and parked behind the other cars. Nick put his hand on Eric's shoulder. "Relax man," he said. "My family's cool."

"I'll live," Eric said.

"I hope so," Nick laughed. "Come on."

They stepped out of the Lexus and walked to the front door. Nick carried a bottle of wine. He was wearing blue jeans, a heavy white sweater, and a dark brown suede jacket. Eric wore a pair of black slacks, a dark rust-colored sweater, and a dark green sports jacket. Eric followed Nick into the house.

"Hi, everybody," Nick said. "This is Eric, Eric Folke."

A chorus of greetings came from Nick's family.

Nick handed the wine to his mother and kissed her cheek.

"Eric, this is my mother, Candy, and my father, Salvador," Nick said.

"I'm happy to meet you, Mister and Mrs. Bertolli," Eric said as he extended his hand to Nick's father.

"Please, Eric," Nick's father said, "call us Sal and Candy."

"I will, sir," Eric answered.

"Eric, this is my brother Marco and his wife Ann," Nick said. "The smiling woman on the sofa is my sister Maggie with her husband Paul. And you know Tommy and Alan."

Eric greeted each person with a smile and a firm hand.

"And this little guy is Gianni," Nick said, taking a year-old baby from Ann's arms. "He's Marco and Ann's son."

"Hi, Gianni," Eric greeted the child.

"Eric, please sit down," Sal said.

Maggie and Paul moved over and made room on the sofa for the two young men. Nick sat next to Eric. Gianni settled into Nick's lap.

"When did you two meet?" Maggie asked.

"We met in August at an afternoon dance at the West Michigan Community House."

"August!" both parents said.

"Nikos, why did it take you so long to introduce Eric to the family?" his mother asked.

"After the last two fools I dated, I wanted to be sure," Nick answered.

"Sure about what?" his mother asked.

"Whether I love him."

"Do you love him?"

"Yeah, Mom. I love him a lot."

"Truly?"

"Yes ma'am, truly."

"You're making Eric blush," Maggie said to her mother.

"I apologize, Eric," Candy said.

"It's okay," Eric said. "I know you're only asking because you

worry about your son.”

“Thank you, Eric,” Candy said with a glance to Maggie.

She handed him and Nick a glass of wine.

“Thank you, Mrs. Bertolli,” Eric said.

“You’re supposed to call us Sal and Candy,” she answered.

“I know; I’m sorry. I’m just a little nervous,” Eric admitted.

Nick’s father was sitting in a large chair near Eric’s end of the sofa. “I remember when I first met Candy’s family,” he said. “I was nervous too, but I survived.” He leaned forward and grabbed Eric’s forearm. “I guarantee I’ll be easier on you than her father was on me,” he said with a wink, a smile, and a lowered voice.

“Sal!” Candy said. “My father was very kind to you the first time you met.”

“Yes, he was,” Sal said, “except for his disappointment at me being Italian and not Greek.”

Their dinner, like Nick, was a spicy and cheerful combination of Greece and Italy. There was good food, good wine, and good talk. The conversation was warm and relaxed. By the time Eric and Nick said their goodbyes, Eric was comfortable. He felt he had established himself well with Nick’s family.

“You have a nice family,” he said on the drive to Nick’s apartment. “I like them.”

“They like you too,” Nick said.

“How do you know that?”

“If they didn’t like you, I would have found out.”

Eric smiled. He wanted to be accepted by Nick’s family. “Your mother’s very beautiful,” he said.

“Yeah, she is,” Nick answered.

“You look like her.”

“I know. People say that all the time.”

“You have your father’s height and build,” Eric said, “but you have your mother’s mouth and eyes.”

THAT evening, Eric lay in Nick's bed. Nick sat on the edge of the bed and they talked about the visit with his parents.

"My parents are in love with each other," Nick said. "I mean really in love. Not like the crappy marriages I see with the parents of some of my friends. They're open in their affection, and they're honest with each other. They talk things out. I've lived with their good example my whole life. I've always expected and wanted the same kind of relationship, but I never found that honesty or that true affection until you came along."

"That's the same thing with my parents," Eric said. "I want the same kind of good, faithful love they have. I've found it with you." He reached for Nick. "Come here, Baby," he said.

"Wait," Nick said. "Something else happened today."

"From the sound of your voice, it wasn't good," Eric said.

Nick reached into the drawer of his nightstand and pulled out a folded piece of paper. "I found this on my windshield when I left work." He handed it Eric.

"This is Shannon's handwriting," he said. He read the note aloud. "'You fucking queer whore. Stay away from Eric or your dirty faggot ass is dead'." Eric looked at Nick. "That bitch," he said.

"I didn't say anything about this to my parents," Nick said.

"I going to go see that bitch," Eric said.

"Don't, Eric. Please," Nick asked.

"Why the fuck not?" Eric asked.

"She's not worth it."

"I don't want that goddamn bitch threatening you with crap like this," Eric shouted.

"I'm a big boy, Eric."

"I know that, asshole. But she's starting to act really weird. She could do anything."

“She’s just making noise,” Nick said. “I don’t want you to get in trouble over her.”

“What kind of trouble?” Eric asked.

“If she swings at you like she did me, you’ll knock her on her ass, and she’ll call the police, and you’ll end up in jail. I don’t want you in that kind of trouble over her.”

“Then I’m going to go talk to my brother, Kirk. He’s a city cop,” Eric said.

“If you do that, she might go to jail for threatening me, and she might not,” Nick said. “Anyway, she’ll only be more pissed. Let her leave her notes. In a few days, she’ll cool down.”

“I don’t know why the fuck you think she’ll cool down,” Eric said.

“She’s hurt and pissed off,” Nick said. “Let her get it out of her system. She’ll go to a bar and get drunk. Some guy will pick her up, and she’ll fall in love.”

Eric looked at the letter in silence. Nick stretched out next to him.

“Please, Baby,” Nick said. “Please, promise me you’ll let it go.”

“Think you got me wrapped around your finger, don’t you,” Eric said.

“I know I do,” Nick answered.

Eric looked at Nick for a moment. “I promise I’ll let it go,” he finally said.

## Chapter 9

### The Bullshitting of Adolescent Boys

“KATIE, what do you think Eric wants to talk about?” Eric’s father asked as he helped set the table.

“I don’t know, Simon,” Eric’s mother answered, “but he said it was important. He sounded serious.”

“He always sounds serious. I wish I knew what’s wrong with that boy. He’s always been a quiet, shy kid, but where did all his anger come from? And the drinking? What happened to him? What went wrong? You don’t think he’s involved in drugs or something like that, do you?”

Katie carefully placed a fork on the table and looked at him. “We’ve had this conversation before, Simon. I don’t think it’s drugs. We raised him to make the right decisions. Let’s just wait and see what he says.”

“I just wish we knew what’s going on,” Simon said.

“The last few weeks, whenever I’ve talked with him on the phone or the few times I’ve seen him, he’s been a lot easier to talk with, a lot calmer and more relaxed.”

“Yeah, you said that the other day,” Simon said.

Their conversation ended when they heard the front door open. Eric walked into the dining room. “Hey, Mom. Hey, Dad,” he said.

He was smiling and appeared happy—happier than his mother had seen him in a very long time.

“Hi, Honey,” Katie said. She stretched up as he leaned down. They exchanged a kiss.

“Hi, Eric,” his father greeted him. “Your mother said you wanted to talk to us.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Come on. Let’s eat first,” Katie said.

They sat at the table. There was quiet as his mother passed Eric the salad bowl. He took the salad and held it for a few seconds. He put the bowl on the table and looked at his parents. “I owe you both a huge apology,” he said.

“What?” Katie asked.

“I’m sorry, Mom. Really sorry.” He looked at his father. “Dad, I’m so incredibly sorry for the nasty way I’ve been acting.”

“Eric—” Katie began.

He interrupted her. “Mom. I know I’ve been a bastard. A mouthy, angry, and sometimes drunken bastard. I’m sorry. I’m sorry for it all.”

“We love you, Eric,” Katie said. “We know something’s been bothering you.”

“What’s on your mind, son?” his father asked. “What brought you here tonight? What do you want to talk about?”

“Dad, Mom,” he said, looking at each of them in turn. “I’ve been living in total denial.”

Katie glanced at her husband.

“There’s really no excuse,” Eric said. “Even though there might be a reason, there’s no excuse for the way I’ve treated you and Kirk and everyone. I’m ashamed and sorry.”

“Eric, what are you talking about? What do you mean by ‘denial’?” his father asked.

Eric took a breath. “Please don’t hate me.”

Katie saw moisture appear in the corners of his eyes. She reached



out and took his hand. The sight of her tall, strong son with tears welling in his eyes almost broke her heart.

“My God, Eric!” she said. “What’s wrong? You’re our son. We love you. We could never hate you. Now what’s going on?”

Eric squeezed her hand. He took another breath. “I’m... I’m gay.”

Katie watched him look his father directly in the eyes. “Dad. I’m gay.”

“My God, Eric. Is that it?” she said gently. “We thought you were mixed up with drugs or something.”

“Gay!” his father said. “Is that what’s been bothering you, Eric? Is that all?”

“What do you mean, ‘is that all’?” Eric asked. “Dad, I’m telling you I’m gay. A homosexual. Doesn’t that bother you?”

“Well, not as much as it seems to bother you.”

Simon smiled at Eric, reached over the table, and took his other hand. “We love you, Eric,” he said. “I wish you had come to us sooner. Maybe we could have avoided all this.”

Eric got up and walked around the table to his father. He knelt at his side, put his arms around his shoulders, and laid his head on his chest. From her chair, Katie watched her husband and youngest son.

“I was afraid, Dad. I was so afraid. I didn’t want to disappoint you. I didn’t want to embarrass you.”

Simon put his arms around his son’s shoulders. “I love you, Eric,” he said softly. “You’re my son. Your mother and I have tried to raise our children to be honest with everyone, including themselves. If gay is who and what you are, you’re still our son. We love you. The door to our hearts will always be open to you. We’re not embarrassed or ashamed because you’re gay. We love you.”

He kissed Eric on the top of his buzz-cut red hair. Eric raised his head and looked at his father. “I love you, Dad,” he said.

“Eric,” his father said, “we’ve raised you kids to be open-minded and tolerant. We’ve never disparaged gays. Why were you afraid to tell us?”

“Dad, in high school my friends use to tell jokes about gays being sissies and all that other crap.”

“Damn, Eric,” his father said. “Don’t base your life decisions on the bullshitting of adolescent boys.”

“I know, Dad. I was just always afraid I’d be an embarrassment to you and everybody.”

“I’m not embarrassed, Eric. I love you, and I’m proud of you. I’ve always been proud of you.”

“We love you, Eric. We’d never be embarrassed by who you are,” Katie said. “But are you sure?”

“Yeah, Mom. I don’t think I’d make a mistake about this.”

“Why did you decide to tell us now?” she asked.

Eric smiled that large smile he’d inherited from his father. She knew that smile.

“Have you met someone?” she asked.

Eric got off his knees and returned to his chair. “Yeah, I have. A very fine and important someone.” He looked at his empty plate. “May I have some of that salad now, please?”

“Of course you may!” she answered. Katie picked up the bowl and handed it back to her son.

“Well, tell us about this someone,” his father said.

Eric put some salad on his dish. “His name is Nick. Nick Bertolli,” he answered.

Katie watched him carefully.

“He’s a good man, Dad. A real good man.” He looked from his father to his mother. “He’s honest and kind and fun and....” He stopped in mid sentence.

“And what?” Katie asked.

“And I love him, Mom. I love him. I love him so much it hurts sometimes. I love him so much.”

His mother caressed the back of his head. “Does he love you?” she asked.

She knew her voice was filled with a mother's concern. She did not care. She was aware of his track record with relationships. It was extremely poor. He had never been in what she thought was a true, healthy, committed relationship. She worried because this big man, this tall, strong man, was still her youngest child.

Eric nodded his head slowly, thoughtfully. "He loves me."

"Are you sure, Eric?" Katie asked. "You're sure he loves you?"

"Yes, Mom. I'm sure. I'm very sure. Nick sees the good things in me that I'd forgotten were there. He knows me and understands me better than anyone ever has—even you guys. He's taught me to relax and enjoy life again. He's taught me to how to play again."

"What about Shannon?" Katie asked.

"What about her?" Eric asked.

"What's going to happen with her?"

"I broke up with her," Eric answered.

"Does she know why?"

"Yeah, she knows."

"And?"

"And she's not happy."

Katie saw a worried look in Eric's eyes.

"Can we meet Nick?" Simon asked.

"Yeah, Dad. I want you to meet him. I want you and Mom and everybody to meet him. I want you to meet him, get to know him, and like him."

"I'm sure we'll like him," Katie answered.

"I hope so, Mom," Eric said. "I really want you guys to like him. He's become the most important thing in my life. He's the best thing to ever happen to me. He's helped me accept myself."

"I can't wait to meet him," Katie said.

"When do you want to bring him over?" his father asked.

"First I want to talk to Kirk and everybody," Eric said. "You know. I want to apologize to them. I want to tell them about me. I want

to explain why I've been acting like an asshole. I'd like to have dinner here with you guys and Kirk, Sandy, Bill, and everybody. I'll buy all the food."

"You don't have to buy the food!" Katie and Simon answered together.

"Just say when you want the dinner," his father added.

"I was thinking of this Saturday night. Would that be okay?" Eric asked. "Then, on another night, if the others are okay with it all, I'll bring Nick over."

"They'll be all right," his mother assured him. "And Saturday will be fine. Do you want to call and invite your brothers and sister, or do you want me to do it?"

"Why don't you do it? They'd probably come faster for you than for me."

"I don't know," she said. "They love you. They've been worried about you too."

"You call them for me. But please keep all this quiet. Let me tell them. Okay? Please?"

"We won't say anything other than you have something important to tell them. You do it in your own way," his father said.

"Thanks," Eric said. "You know, some guys... some guys, when they come out to their families, well, their families desert them. They turn their backs on them. I know a guy like that; Nick's best friend. He was thrown out by his family. That was my biggest fear."

"Eric," Katie said, "no matter what, you're our son. We love you. We'd never desert you. Besides, there's nothing wrong with being gay."

"We'd never turn our backs on you," his father added. "And when you find love, Eric, when you find true, good, honest love, take it. Hold it. Nourish it. Cherish it."

He looked at Katie. "If your Nick can make you as happy as your mother has made me...." He looked back at Eric. "If your Nick can make you that happy, you're in for the ride of your life."

He again looked at his wife and smiled. She understood the words and memories carried in that smile.

"You know, Mom, maybe you can ask Kirk and Sandy not to bring the kids. Not until everyone has a chance to digest it all. I don't want anything said in front of the kids they shouldn't hear."

"Yeah," Simon said to Katie, "that might be a good idea."

"Okay," Katie answered, "I'll tell them, but it'll only make the mystery greater."

"Eric, why all the anger?" Simon asked.

"It was my way of avoiding everything."

"What do mean?" Simon asked.

"If I was angry, I didn't have to think about being gay. I could just be angry."

"How long have you known?" Katie asked.

"I don't know," Eric said. "Maybe my whole life. Like I said, I used anger as a kind of denial. That's why I'm sorry. Not for being gay, but for using anger and alcohol to hide and deny everything. I used alcohol for the courage to be gay and then anger to deny it. I denied it for such a long time, but it kept getting stronger. The stronger it got, the angrier I got, and the more I drank."

"Don't ever be ashamed of who or what you are," Simon said.

"That's what Nick tells me."

"Good," Simon said.

"I want you guys to know when I met Nick, I was stone sober, and I've been sober ever since."

His mother heard pride in his voice.

"You say you met in August?" she asked.

"Yeah. The first week of August."

"That's just a little more than two months," Simon said. "You're sure about your feelings?"

"Yeah, Dad. I've never been more sure about anything."

"It's none of my business, Eric," Simon said. "But are you and

Nick being careful? I mean—”

Eric interrupted his father. “I know what you mean, Dad. We’re careful.”

LATE Saturday night, Eric crawled into Nick’s bed and spooned up to his back. Nick stirred and rolled over to face him.

“How’d it go?” he asked in a deep sleepy voice.

“I’m sorry,” Eric said. “I didn’t mean to wake you up.”

“I heard you in the shower. How did it go with your brothers and sister?”

Eric put his hand on Nick’s cheek and kissed him. “Better than I thought it would,” he answered after the kiss.

“Tell me what happened,” Nick said as he put his left arm around Eric.

“When I said I was gay, the surprise was like dropping a metal plate on the floor of an ancient cathedral,” Eric said.

“My fucking redheaded poet,” Nick chuckled.

“I don’t know about the poet, but tonight went okay,” Eric said. “I apologized to everybody for being a dick. And I’m relieved as hell that it’s all over.”

“What’d your big brother the cop say?”

“He’s the only one I’m still worried about,” Eric answered.

“Why?”

“I don’t think he’s real sure about everything yet. At one point, he said he’s arrested gay men in strange places for doing some strange things.”

“Really?” Nick asked.

“My parents kind of jumped on him for that, but I told him I’d met you at a daytime dance and I was sober.”

“I know you kind of look up to him,” Nick said softly.

“Yeah,” Eric answered. “I’ve always wanted to be like Kirk.”

“You mean you wanted to be a cop.”

“No,” Eric answered. “I mean his strength, his honesty, and his courage. Nothing scares Kirk. Nothing would make him do something he knew wasn’t right.”

“Eric, you’ve just described yourself. You’re all those things. Especially honest.”

“I think it helped when I told him your oldest brother was a sheriff’s deputy,” Eric said.

“Everyone else was cool?” Nick asked.

“Kirk’s wife Diane and my sister Sandy are dying to meet you.”

“They just what to check out who snagged their baby brother,” Nick said.

“I think they want to see what a half-Italian, half-Greek gay man looks like,” Eric answered. “I don’t know why straight women are so interested in gay men.”

“I think they feel safe around us,” Nick answered.

“I hope I’m not safe with you,” Eric said as he pulled Nick closer.

“You’re not,” Nick answered. He pushed Eric onto his back and crawled on top of him.

“Wait, Baby,” Eric said. “Before you molest me.”

“What?” Nick asked as his face settled onto Eric’s furry chest.

“My mom reminded me I don’t know how to cook,” Eric said.

Nick looked up.

“Did you tell her I can cook so you won’t starve?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Eric answered. “I told her if you cooked her shoe, she’d ask for seconds.”

“You asshole,” Nick said.

“I was just bragging about you.”

“I’ll give you something else you can brag about,” Nick said.

Eric felt Nick’s face move down his body.

## Chapter 10

### The Darkening Sky

THE next week, Kirk sat with his family in his parents' home, waiting for Eric and Nick.

"I think I heard a car door," his sister Sandy said. She walked to the living room window and looked out. With an emphasis on each word, she exclaimed, "Oh, my God!" She turned and looked at the others.

"He's gorgeous!"

Within minutes the front door opened, and the two young men walked into the house. Both were wearing tan chinos. Eric was wearing a white sweater and a dark brown sports jacket. Nick had on a dark green pullover and a black sports jacket. Eric looked slightly nervous. Nick appeared relaxed.

Kirk saw Sandy's description of Nick was correct. Nick was an extremely good-looking man. He was tall and dark, with rich, creamy, smooth skin. Eric, carrying a bottle of wine, led Nick a few steps into the living room.

"Hi, everybody," he said. "This is Nick."

Kirk heard pride in Eric voice.

Simon, Kirk's father, smiled and walked to the two young men. He extended his hand to Nick. "Hello, young man," he said. "You ready for the inquisition?"

Nick smiled and took the hand. "I hope so, sir," he answered.



“Stop!” Kirk’s mother said to her husband. She smacked him lightly on his chest with the back of her hand. “Hello, Nick. Welcome to our home. I’m Katie, Eric’s mother. This wise guy is his father, Simon.”

“Hello, sir, ma’am,” Nick said.

Kirk saw Katie reach up and pull Nick down to her level. She hugged him and whispered into his ear. Nick returned the hug and whispered something to her.

After they separated, Nick said, “Mrs. Folke, Eric told me you like chocolate.” He looked at Eric’s father. “He said you like coffee.” Nick pulled a small packet from the inside breast pocket of his sports jacket. He handed the package to Simon. “These are chocolate-covered espresso beans,” Nick said. “You can enjoy them together. Just don’t eat too many late in the day. You’ll be too wired to sleep.”

“Nick!” Katie said. “Thank you. But you didn’t have to bring a gift, and please call us Katie and Simon.”

Eric led Nick further into the room and introduced him to his sister, Sandy, Sandy’s husband, Ken, his brother, Bill, Bill’s wife, Jessie, and his sister-in-law, Diane.

Finally, they came to Kirk. Nick extended his hand. “Hi, Kirk,” he said. “Eric’s told me a lot about you.”

Kirk stood and accepted the offered hand. He noted the firm strength of Nick’s handshake. “Hello, Nick,” Kirk answered, “Eric’s told us a little about you too.”

“You guys sit down,” Katie said.

Eric and Nick found seats in separate chairs.

“Nick,” Simon said, “Eric tells us you work at a garden center.”

“Yes sir,” Nick answered. “I work at Phoebe Hill Nursery. I’m their tree and shrub manager.”

“That’s why you know so much about trees,” Diane said.

“I’ve always liked trees, and I’ve learned a lot about them working there,” Nick answered. “Did Eric tell you I know a lot about trees?”

“Yeah, he did,” Sandy answered.

“Really?” Nick asked with a smile. He looked at Eric. “Are you bragging about me?”

Kirk watched Eric smile and blush as his family laughed.

After a short visit in the living room, Katie went into the kitchen. Soon, she reappeared and announced dinner was ready.

“Nick, Eric tells us you’re a punk,” Bill said after the family was seated at the table.

“What?” Eric and Nick asked together.

“He says you’re always picking on him,” Bill explained. “You know, tripping him and throwing acorns at him. Things like that.”

Nick laughed and looked at Eric with a big smile. “You tattled on me to your big brother?” he teased.

Again, the family laughed, and Eric’s face reddened.

“I didn’t tattle on you,” Eric said with an emphasis on the word tattle. “I just told everyone what a....” He stopped, paused, and then smiled. “Yes, I tattled on you.”

After more laughter, Kirk’s brother-in-law Ken asked, “Have you guys had any problems?”

“What do you mean?” Eric asked.

“You know, this being Christian Reformed West Michigan,” Bill answered. “Any kind of homophobic crap.”

“Only from Shannon after she found out why I broke up with her,” Eric answered. He told his family about their run-in with her at the park and her threatening Nick at his job.

“You guys be careful of her,” Kirk warned. “I never liked her. I always thought she was a little off.”

During dessert, Sandy asked Eric and Nick, “What do you guys do in your free time?”

“We go camping and canoeing,” Eric answered. “We go to movies and plays, things like that.”

“We go dancing or read to each other,” Nick added. “Sometimes

Eric gets smart, and I have to smack him around to keep him in line.”

Eric quickly looked at Nick. “In your dreams, Bertolli,” he said with a wide grin.

The family laughed at Eric and Nick’s teasing. For the first time in many years, Kirk saw happiness in his youngest brother.

“Where do guys go dancing?” Diane asked.

“Sometimes, during the week, we go at a little jazz club we both like,” Eric answered.

“On Fridays or Saturdays, we go to The Hairy Lady here in town or to a bar in Kalamazoo, Lansing, or sometimes even Traverse City or Ann Arbor,” Nick added.

“Nick, is Eric a good dancer?” Sandy asked.

“The best,” Nick answered.

“Eric’s a good dancer?” Bill asked.

“He’s a great dancer,” Nick answered again.

Kirk saw Eric and Nick share a smile.

AFTER supper and coffee in the living room, Eric and Nick were the first to leave. The others sat together talking about the two men.

“I like Nick. He seems very nice,” Katie said.

“I think he’s sweet,” Jessie added.

“He is,” Sandy agreed. “And I love those long eyelashes.”

“He sure teases Eric a lot,” Bill added.

“Yeah, he does,” Simon agreed, “I think Eric likes it. That, more than anything else, shows me there’s been a real change in him. We all know how Eric never lets anyone joke around with him.

“Eric was smiling all through supper,” Katie said. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen him smile that much.”

“He seems to be a lot more calm and relaxed,” Ken added.

“That’s something we noticed when he first came over and told us

about Nick,” Katie said.

“I don’t know if that’s because of Nick, or because he finally accepted himself, or a combination of both,” Simon said.

“It’s probably a little of both,” Diane suggested.

“It’s probably a lot of both,” Sandy added.

“Kirk, you haven’t said anything,” Simon said to his oldest son.

“I was just wondering,” Kirk answered slowly.

“Wondering about what?” Katie asked.

“Like I said before, Mom, I’ve arrested gay men for some pretty disgusting things,” he answered.

“Have you ever arrested straight people for disgusting things?” she asked.

“Yeah, sure I have,” he answered.

“Kirk, we don’t judge people by the actions of others,” Simon reminded his son.

“I know, Dad,” Kirk answered. “I just wonder what’s going to happen.”

“I think that’s up to them,” Katie said.

“Yeah,” Kirk said thoughtfully.

“I think they look real happy together,” Jessie said.

“Did you see how proud Eric was sitting there next to Nick?” Sandy asked.

“Yes,” Katie answered, “I saw that pride. I also saw maturity and love.”

After the rest of their children had left, Simon and Katie sat together on the sofa. Simon had his arm around his wife. She rested her head on his shoulder.

“What do you think of our son’s boyfriend?” he asked.

“He’s a very handsome young man,” she answered.

“Yes, he is.”

She kissed Simon’s cheek.

“When Eric looks at Nick, I see you looking at me,” she said softly.

DURING their drive to his apartment, Nick said, “Damn, you and Kirk look an awful lot alike. Your voices even sound alike. And you both look like your dad.”

“What did you and my mom whisper to each other when we first got to the house?” Eric asked.

Eric felt Nick’s hand caress his powerful thigh. “She thanked me for bringing you home. I thanked her for you.”

They fell silent as they drove through the dark night. Nick turned on the radio. Soft jazz was playing. Eric caressed the hand resting warm on his thigh. He kept thinking about his oldest brother.

“I really want to reconnect with Kirk,” he said.

“What do mean?” Nick asked.

“I want to be his friend again. I want him to know I’m not that angry drunk anymore.”

“I think he knows,” Nick said.

“I hope so.” Eric squeezed the hand on his thigh. “Nicky, I want Kirk to see how proud I am of you.”

Nick lifted Eric’s hand and kissed it. “Eric, I love you.”

NICK waved goodbye to the woman working the checkout. She smiled and waved in return. He stepped through the glass doors out into a chilly November afternoon. Walking to his old Ford, he thought about what he was going to make for Eric’s supper. His tall boyfriend was exceptionally fond of the egg and lemon soup he had learned from his Greek grandmother.

Shannon suddenly stepped from behind a parked pickup truck only a few feet from his car. Startled, he lurched to a halt and looked at

the wide-eyed face staring at him.

After his initial surprise, he quickly wondered to himself, *What the hell did Eric ever see in this woman who's always covered with too much makeup?*

"Not you again," he said aloud in exasperation.

"Yeah, it's me again," Shannon answered. Her voice was low and rough.

"I don't know what you think you're going to get by coming here. Eric doesn't want anything more to do with you," Nick said as he resumed his walk towards his car.

"I came to tell you I'm not going to stand around and let some goddamned faggot steal my man," Shannon said with quiet hate.

"I didn't steal your man," Nick said as he walked past her. "He realized you and him had no future."

"You fucking perverted bastard," Shannon said. "I'm going make you pay for all this shit."

Nick stopped, turned around, and looked at the angry woman. Spittle was hanging from her mouth.

"What the hell does that mean?" he asked.

"It means when it happens, I want you to know where it came from. I want you to know it was me," she answered with ugly hate.

Nick looked at her with his own hard, cold hate. He did not hate easily. At one time, he had felt sorry for her, sorry she had been unintentionally hurt when Eric accepted his sexuality. That sympathy, however, was quickly being eroded by Shannon's aggressive refusal to accept reality. Nick's gentle heart was disturbed by the hate he felt. He turned back to his car, opened the door, and climbed in.

"Hey, faggot! Don't forget—it's coming," Shannon hissed as he closed his door.

Nick rolled down his window. "Hey, bitch, just so you understand, Eric is my man. He sleeps with me."

Shannon went pale as he rolled his window back up and started his car. When he pulled from his parking spot, he looked into his

rearview mirror. Shannon was frantically looking for something on the ground. Finally, she pulled off her left shoe and threw it at his car. He had driven far enough away, so the shoe landed harmlessly on the asphalt.

IN THE evening, Eric and Nick sat in the warm comfort of Mr. Blackport listening to the rich, mellow tones of the house trio and sipping dry martinis.

“My mom called me today,” Eric said. “She told me she met your mother today.”

“At the college?” Nick asked.

“Yeah, she said she went to your mom’s office,” Eric answered.

“How’d it go?”

“She said they had a nice visit and they exchanged phone numbers and e-mail addresses,” Eric answered. “She said you mom’s very beautiful. She saw your smile and eyes in her face.”

“I’m glad they met,” Nick said.

Eric ate the olive from his martini. “How did things go at the nursery today?” he asked.

“Great, until it ended.”

“Why? What happened?” Eric asked.

Nick told him about his third meeting with Shannon.

Eric reached out to Nick and caressed his silky hair. “Man, I’m sorry about all this crap,” he said.

“Hey, it’s not your fault,” Nick reassured him.

“I don’t like this,” Eric said. “You don’t know Shannon. She has a nasty temper when things don’t go her way. She can be real vindictive.”

“I’m not worried about her,” Nick said. “I just don’t like the way she makes me feel. I don’t like to hate. And I want to know what the hell a nice guy like you ever saw in that bitch.”

Eric smiled and squeezed Nick's hand. He picked up his martini and took a small drink. He sat the glass back on the table and lazily stroked the stem. "Baby," he said slowly with his eyes still on his glass, "you forget what I was and how I lived before I met you."

He looked at Nick and saw his beautiful mouth and warm brown eyes smiling at him. Nick took Eric's hand and stood. Eric stood and allowed Nick to lead him to the dance floor. The two tall men took each other in their powerful arms and danced to the rich, silky music.

NICK put a dish of diced cantaloupe, strawberries, and plain yogurt on the table in front of the still-sleepy Eric.

"Thanks, Nicky," Eric said.

Nick picked up his own plate from the counter and sat at the table across from Eric. It was a cold November morning. Eric, as usual, had stayed the night in Nick's apartment. The two had spent most of their night making love in the living room, the shower, and Nick's bed. That had left them only three hours for sleeping. It did not matter. They were young and healthy and deeply in love.

"Hey, Nick," Eric said in a voice deepened by his lack of sleep. "I was thinking about having my brothers and sister over to my house for a little party to meet some of the new friends I've made."

"You mean your new gay friends?" Nick asked. He picked up the French press. Eric held up his cup for Nick to refill.

"Yeah, something like that," Eric answered.

"I think it's a good idea," Nick said. "You have a close family, like I do. It's important we be with them, share with them."

"Yeah," Eric agreed. "I've shut them out for too long. I want my family in my life again."

"Especially Kirk," Nick said.

"Yeah, especially Kirk," Eric answered.



TUESDAY evening at supper, Diane told Kirk, “Eric called me today and invited us to a party at his house tomorrow night.”

“A party? What kind of party?” Kirk asked.

“Just a little party,” she answered.

“He’s never invited us to a party before.”

“Well, he has now.”

“Who’s going to be there?” he asked.

“Eric said he was inviting you, your brother and sister, and some of his friends.”

“Gays?” Kirk asked.

“I don’t know. Is that a problem?”

“Maybe,” Kirk answered.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “Eric said he’d like us to meet some of his new friends.”

“Yeah, gay friends,” Kirk answered sharply.

“So?” Diane retorted.

“I’m a cop, Diane. I’ve seen the crappy side of gay life. You know, closeted married men having sex in public restrooms, bookstore trolls, and rest area queens.”

“Kirk, you know as well as I do gays aren’t the only ones who do that kind of stuff. You know your brother isn’t like that. You’ve met Nick. Now come on, Eric needs our support right now. He especially needs yours.”

“Why mine especially?” Kirk asked with an emphasis on the word “especially.”

“Because you’re his big brother,” she answered. “He looks up to you.”

“What’ll we do with Lucy?” he asked in the voice of surrendering agreement.

“I called my sister after I talked with Eric. She said she’d watch Lucy.”

“You already decided we’d go?” Kirk asked with a smile.

“Of course I did,” Diane answered with a smile of her own. “I knew in the end you’d agree. No matter how tough you act, Honey, you love your brother.”

“Why didn’t he call me about the party?” Kirk asked as a quiet afterthought.

“Because he knew you were on duty.”

## Chapter 11

### Kirk

THE next evening, Kirk and Diane rang the doorbell of Eric's house. Nick opened the door and welcomed them with the same warm, beautiful smile that greeted Eric every morning.

He led the couple into the house, where they were surrounded with an array of mouthwatering aromas. Nick had spread the dining room table with a marvelous Greek and Italian vegetarian buffet. A welcoming fire danced in the fireplace and warmed the air.

"Kirk," Eric called from across the room. He hurried to his brother and the two men greeted each other with smiles and handshakes. "Hey man, thanks for coming," Eric said.

"I always like a party in the middle of the week," Kirk answered.

"Hi, Diane," Eric said as he kissed his sister-in-law.

"Hey, Eric. Something smells great," she answered.

"I told you Nick was an awesome cook. Go check out what he's made."

"I'm on my way," she answered. She took off her coat, handed it to her husband, and walked with Nick to the dining room.

"Kirk, there's someone here I want you to meet," Eric said. He led his brother to a tall, dark, handsome man talking with a pretty brunette. "Kirk, this is Nick's brother Marco and his wife, Ann."

Because Marco was a deputy sheriff, he and Kirk shared many of the same interests. That evening, the beginning of a solid friendship

was born between the two men. Half an hour after their meeting, the two men stood at the buffet in the dining room, stuffing themselves with fig and fried goat cheese sandwiches.

“Hey, man,” Kirk asked, “what do you think about our brothers?”

“What do you mean?” Marco asked.

“You know,” Kirk answered slowly and in a low voice, “haven’t you ever busted gays in public toilets?”

“Yeah, I have,” Marco answered. “But last summer, I also arrested a man and his girlfriend in a men’s room stall at the rest area on I-96 outside of Ionia. He was a vice-president of the Fortiay Corporation. He could have afforded an entire hotel suite, but he said he liked the excitement of doing it in a public place. Kirk, gay men aren’t the only people having sex in restrooms.”

“My wife said almost the same thing to me,” Kirk answered.

“Listen to her. Gays have to deal with enough shit from bigots without having to worry about their families,” Marco said.

“I know,” Kirk agreed.

“There’re people who would do all kinds of bullshit to a gay man, including killing him, and then try to justify it all kinds of ways, including religious,” Marco said.

“That’s one of the other things I’m worried about,” Kirk said.

“There’s lots of dangers in life,” Marco said. “Gay men have to face lots of extra ones. Eric and Nick know that better than we do.”

“Yeah, I’m sure they do,” Kirk agreed.

“Eric and Nick are two people who fell in love, and like any couple, they want to share that love with their family and friends,” Marco answered.

“I worry because my brother’s never had a real relationship before,” Kirk said.

“Hey, man, Nick’s not the kind of person to purposely hurt somebody,” Marco said.

“I’m not worried so much about Nick as I am about Eric. I keep

wondering if he's jumping into things too soon," Kirk answered.

"I think you're being a little overprotective," Marco said with a smile. "Eric's a grown man."

"I know," Kirk agreed, "but no matter how old he gets, he's still my little brother."

Marco smiled and put his hand on Kirk's shoulder. "Watch them," he said. "You'll see there's a strong, deep love there. We might not understand it, but those two love each other. And isn't that what it's all about?"

"Yeah, I guess it is," Kirk agreed.

During the remainder of the party, Kirk took Marco's advice and closely watched his brother and Nick. He liked the interaction he saw between the two men. He liked the way they looked at each other. He liked the new maturity he saw in Eric. That evening, the reservations he had about Eric and Nick's relationship were slowly and carefully put to rest.

SOMETHING else happened that evening. Something in Eric. Standing by the kitchen door, he watched Nick, Sandy, and Diane laughing together near the fireplace. Sandy looked at Eric and smiled. She said something to Nick and Diane and walked over to Eric.

"Hey, little brother," she said. "You look happy."

Eric put his arm around Sandy's waist and pulled her close. "I am happy," Eric said. "You know, Sandy, for a long time I've wanted a home, a mate, and a life I could share with my family."

"You have it now," Sandy said.

"Yeah, I do," Eric said. He kissed Sandy's forehead. "Nick's given it to me," he said. "Now I can share my home with you, with the whole family."

"You could have done that before," she said.

"No. I just lived here. It wasn't a home, not until Nick came

along.”

“I like Nick,” Sandy said.

“I’m glad,” Eric said.

“Diane likes him too,” Sandy added.

THE next day, Eric had lunch with Kirk in the same Mexican restaurant near his house where he and Nick often ate. Kirk was in his police uniform, and Eric was in a dark brown business suit. This was the first time they had been alone since Eric had told his family he was gay, since Kirk had met Nick.

“What do you think of Nick?” Eric asked his brother after they were seated and had ordered their food.

“I like him,” Kirk answered. “He seems like a good guy.”

“Yeah, he is,” Eric said. Then he asked the question that had been lying heavy in his heart. “Are you disappointed in me?”

“What?” Kirk asked. “Why?”

“You know, because I’m with a man. Because I’m gay.”

Before he answered, Kirk looked long at his youngest brother. “You’re my brother and I love you,” he finally answered. “I don’t understand gayness, but I don’t think anyone does. Maybe that doesn’t even matter. At first, when you told us, I was surprised. I was worried too. In my job, Eric, I see things. But I also see how you and Nick look at each other. I see there’s something real between you two. Something honest. If you’re happy, Eric, I’m happy. Just be sure he loves you as much as you love him.”

“That’s the one thing I’m sure of, Kirk. Nick’s love is real, and it’s all mine.” Eric spoke with a strong pride in his voice. He was proud; he was also happy. For the first time in a long time, he was happy.

FRIDAY afternoon, in the garden nursery, Nick saw Kirk walking towards him.

“Hi, Kirk,” Nick said with surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“Hey, Nick,” Kirk answered. “Do you have a minute?”

Again, Nick was taken by how much Eric and Kirk resembled each other. “Yeah, I can talk. Is anything wrong?” Nick thought about the visits Shannon had made to the nursery. Maybe Eric had said something to his oldest brother about her threats.

“No. I just wanted to thank you for what you’ve done for Eric.”

Nick looked curiously at Kirk. “What have I done?” he asked.

“You’ve helped him get control of his damn temper. He’s opened up and come out of his shell. He’s stopped his binge drinking. I like the changes I see in him. He’s Eric again. I... I just wanted to thank you.”

“I appreciate that, Kirk,” Nick said. “I really appreciate that. But I don’t know if I deserve your thanks. I’ve never seen an angry, drunk Eric.”

“Believe me, there’s been a big improvement,” Kirk said. “But I also came because I wanted to welcome you into the family.”

“What?” Nick asked with a smile.

“I see the way Eric looks at you,” Kirk answered. “I see the way you look at him. I think you two are going to be together for a long time.”

Nick smiled again. “I hope you’re right, Kirk,” he answered. “More than anything, I hope you’re right.”

“I wish you guys the best.”

“Thanks, Kirk. I love your brother.”

“That’s obvious, Nick,” Kirk answered with a broad smile that was so similar to Eric’s.

They stood silently for a moment.

“Is there something else?” Nick asked.

“Yeah there is,” Kirk admitted slowly. “Nick, I accept Eric being gay and all that, but there’s something I’m kind of uncomfortable

with.”

“What?” Nick asked.

“Oh,” Kirk hesitated. “How do I say this? Um. You know, Eric being under another man.”

Nick smiled. “Maybe I can help you,” he said.

“How?” Kirk asked.

“Eric always does the driving,” Nick answered. “Always.”

“I don’t understand,” Kirk said. “What does that have to do with what we’re talking... oh.” Comprehension spread over his face. He smiled. “Thank you, man.”

Nick smiled.

“One more thing,” Kirk said.

“What’s that?”

“I really like your cooking,” Kirk answered.

“I’m glad. I cook to make people happy.”

“Eric told us you were a vegetarian, so the other night at his house, I was expecting a boring supper with beans and lots of cheese. But what you made was great regular food. Excellent food, in fact.”

“I like to cook,” Nick answered. “I like to be creative.”

“Eric’s lucky,” Kirk said.

“He is,” Nick agreed. “He has a wonderful older brother.”

Kirk extended his hand to Nick. There in the nursery, surrounded by potted Norwegian Spruce trees, the cop and the gay shook hands and started to become a family.

VERY early in their relationship, Eric learned how much he loved to shower and bathe with Nick. A short time after they started dating, he had a large double tub installed in his bathroom. In this tub, they often ended their days. In this tub, they shared their thoughts, their hopes, their plans, and their dreams.



That evening, they lay soaking together in the large tub, listening to their favorite jazz CD.

“Kirk came to see me at work today,” Nick said.

“He did?” Eric asked. “Why?”

“He said he wanted to welcome me into the family,” Nick answered.

A large smile spread over Eric’s face. “Did he really?”

“Yeah. He also said he liked my cooking.”

“Oh, man this is awesome,” Eric said as he settled deeper into the hot water.

“Because he likes my cooking?” Nick teased.

“No, fool!” Eric answered with mock sarcasm. He turned towards Nick and smiled again. “This means he likes you and he’s not embarrassed by me.”

“You thought he’d be embarrassed because you’re gay?” Nick asked.

“Yeah,” Eric answered quietly as he turned away, looked at the ceiling, and closed his eyes.

“Why did you think that?” Nick asked.

“Because he’s a cop and stuff,” Eric answered.

“And stuff,” Nick repeated. “Eric, I think this fear you had about your family being embarrassed because you’re gay says a lot more about you than it does about them.”

“What do you mean?” Eric asked with his eyes still closed.

“Eric,” Nick answered, “you spent years running from yourself. You hid in alcohol and behind your anger. Baby, I think you were the one who was embarrassed.”

“Fuck you!” Eric snapped. With his eyes still closed, he turned his head to the side of the tub, away from Nick.

“Eric,” Nick said softly, “I love you. I love you beyond anything I ever thought possible. I would never do anything to purposely hurt you, but I just don’t understand where this fear of facing your family came

from. They're good people. There's no bigotry there."

Eric turned and faced Nick. He opened his eyes and softly touched Nick's face with his fingers. "Nicky," he said, "I love you too. I never thought I would ever love anyone until I met you. I know you'd never hurt me. I trust you more than I've ever trusted anyone in my whole life."

The two men leaned together and kissed one another. Eric put his arms around Nick, pulled him close, and held him tightly. Softly, he whispered into Nick's ear. "I was ashamed, Nick. I was embarrassed. The only people I ever hung with were jocks. Damn self-righteous, arrogant jocks, and I was one of them. In fact, I was their leader in high school. They all made fun of queers. I made fun of queers. It was what we did. It was part of the way we proved we were tough."

"I love you," Nick whispered in answer.

"Baby, I'm sorry," Eric whispered.

Nick backed away and looked into Eric's eyes. "You don't have to apologize," he said. "You were a victim of the same superstitious nonsense as your homophobic friends."

"Nick, I was a coward. I didn't stand up for myself. I hid and pretended to be something else. I wasn't open and honest like you."

"Eric, you found the courage you needed and you freed yourself," Nick insisted.

"I wish I had the courage you had. I wish I had come out in high school like you did. I wish I knew you then. I would have taken you to the prom," Eric said.

"Your jock friends would have loved that," Nick teased.

"Fuck them," Eric said. "I would have kicked their asses. I could do it too, and they all knew it. I was the best football player my school ever had. I was six feet tall when I was fifteen. And I was the king of the locker room. Everybody looked up to me. That's why I had to be the toughest. If I had taken you to the prom, no one would have had the balls to say anything to me."

Nick kissed Eric's mouth. The two men leaned their foreheads

together. "Eric, I told you once before, the past is over. You can't change it. Besides, I've had to hide being gay a couple of times myself."

Eric sat up and pushed Nick away so he could look into his face. "What are you talking about?" he asked.

"One time Tommy and I went to the Wooden Nickel," Nick answered.

"What's that?" Eric asked.

"It's a tavern next to the United States Chair Company on Fourth Street. Tommy took me there because he'd heard they had the best deep-fried mushrooms in town. While we were having a beer and eating our mushrooms, these four big, hairy-assed guys from the factory came in and started drinking beer and shooting pool. They made all kinds of jokes about fags and said they wanted to kick some queer ass and stuff like that."

"What happened?" Eric asked.

"Nothing," Nick answered. "We hurried up, ate our mushrooms, and left."

"What the fuck does that have to do with anything?" Eric asked.

"Well, if it had only been one or two guys, or in a different part of town, I would have gotten in their faces. With the four of them in that bar, I knew if I said anything Tommy and I would have been beaten to a bloody pulp."

"You always try to make me feel better, don't you?" Eric asked.

"You're too hard on yourself," Nick answered. "Every gay man has had to lie to protect himself. I don't like it, but the hate, the truly violent hate makes us do it sometimes. And Eric, there might come a time when you and me are in a place where we have to lie about our relationship."

"Where?" Eric demanded.

"I don't know. A biker bar."

"You plan on taking me to a biker bar?" Eric asked.

"Not now, but who knows where we might find ourselves

someday?”

Eric smiled and kissed Nick. They settled back in the hot water and relaxed again.

After a few minutes, Nick quietly told Eric, “There was something else your brother said to me.”

There was a tone in Nick’s voice that made Eric open his eyes and look at his him. “What else did he say?” he asked.

“He said he wasn’t comfortable with you being my bottom,” Nick answered.

“What?” Eric asked as he sat up.

His quick movement splashed water against the sides of the large tub. “He said that?” Eric asked in a loud voice.

“Well, he didn’t use those words,” Nick answered.

“What words did he use?”

“He said he was uncomfortable with you being under another man.”

“Motherfuck,” Eric angrily shouted. “I’m not your bottom, but even if I was, what the fuck business is it of his?”

“Calm down, Eric. I understand him. I know gay men who don’t like being the bottom. They’ve never learned to enjoy it, or they think the bottom means they’re less than the other man. I think that’s the problem straight men have. They freak at the idea of surrendering to another man.”

“Do you think it means surrender?” Eric asked.

“Not with you,” Nick answered. “Between us, it’s love and pleasure.” He kissed Eric’s temple. “Extreme pleasure,” he added softly.

“Yeah?” Eric asked quietly.

“Yeah,” Nick said with a wicked smile as he caressed Eric’s face with his fingers. “You’re a fabulous fuck. You push every button I have and a few I didn’t know were there.”

“Asshole,” Eric laughed.

They kissed each other and again settled deep in the hot water.

“What’d you tell Kirk?” Eric asked after a few minutes.

“I told him you always drove.”

Eric was still for a moment.

“I see that smile spreading over your face,” Nick said.

Eric turned to Nick. “Thank you, Nicky.”

With his crimson lips, he caressed Nick’s lips. Quietly, softly, tenderly, he whispered into his lover’s mouth, “We belong to each other.”

“Yeah, we do,” Nick agreed as he happily surrendered to Eric.

## **Chapter 12**

### **The Trouble with Women**

NOVEMBER winds swirled through the colorless city streets. The windows of the East Hill Gallery shook and rattled with each biting gust. Inside the bright, warm gallery, the sounds of Chopin mingled with the voices of the guests.

On this cold Monday evening, Eric's sister Sandy had brought Nick to an exhibition of the work of local artists. When Sandy excused herself to go to the lady's room, Nick wandered to a painting that had earlier sparked his imagination. The work was a swirl of lazy green and blue strokes that conveyed to Nick the idea of peace. His study of the painting was so focused that he was unaware of a young woman standing close beside him.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" she said.

"What?" Nick asked. He looked at the woman.

"This painting. I think it's beautiful," she repeated.

"Yes, it is. I was just lost in it."

"I could see that," the young woman answered with a smile.  
"Does your wife like it as much as you do?"

"Wife?" Nick asked.

"The woman you're here with."

“Oh, she’s not my wife. Just a friend.”

“Girlfriend?”

“No.”

Nick was suddenly uncomfortable. He had little experience with women and was often unsure of their intent.

“I’m Connie,” she said.

“I’m Nick.”

He offered her his hand. She did not accept it but placed her hand on his forearm. She smiled and gave a light squeeze to the arm.

“Do you work out?” she asked. “Your arm is solid.”

“I canoe,” Nick answered. He lowered his arm from Connie’s touch.

“Are you and your friend romantically involved?” she asked.

“No,” he answered.

Connie smiled.

“I’m glad. My father dragged me here. I’ve never been to one of these exhibits before, but if I knew sexy men like you came to them, I wouldn’t have fought coming. Are you free afterwards?”

Nick became flustered. It was rare that women came on to him. He did not like these types of advances and was never sure how to respond. “I’m going home,” was the only answer that came to him.

Connie laid her hand on his chest.

“Would you like some company?” she asked, smiling coyly.

The look on her face, which might have aroused the heart of a straight man, only irritated Nick. He was now sure of her intent. “You don’t even know me,” he answered. “And you’re with your father.”

“I want to get to know you. As for my father, I can always give him some story. When I like something and want it, I go after it. I usually get it too.”

“Not me,” Nick answered. His irritation was evolving toward anger. He turned and walked to the next painting. The insistent girl

followed him.

“Are you shy?” she asked.

Nick examined a painting of a bare tree standing in an empty field. He did not answer.

“That’s all right,” Connie said. “I like shy. I find it very attractive. Especially in someone as sexy as you.”

Nick walked to the next work. He found himself staring at a pencil drawing of a broken bowl.

Connie followed him again. “I can help you get over that shyness,” she said. She lowered her voice to what she probably thought was a sexy whisper. “I promise you won’t be disappointed.”

Nick felt her hand settle lightly on his shoulder. Slowly, the small hand began to slide down his back. He jerked away and stared hard at the woman before he turned his back on her.

She circled to face him. “Hey, Nicky,” she said in a hoarse whisper. “Let’s go have drink together.”

Nick stepped back and stared at her. “Nicky” was the wrong name for her to have called him. He simply would have kept walking away, but she had used that name, the name only Eric called him.

She stepped towards him again. His frustration at his own inexperience with women fueled his anger.

“Don’t call me Nicky,” he said slowly. “Only one person calls me Nicky. And please don’t touch me anymore. There’s a lock on my zipper and my heart. Only one person has those keys.”

Nick suddenly felt Sandy grab his arm. “Back off,” she said to the now-deflated girl.

Holding his arm, Sandy led him away. When they stopped, Nick took two glasses of white wine from a waiter. He gave one to Sandy.

“Thanks,” Nick said. “I can’t believe her. I turned my back on her twice, but she just kept it up.”

“Sometimes nice doesn’t work,” Sandy answered as she took a sip from her glass.



“I wish women would just leave me alone,” Nick said.

“Did you tell her you’re gay?” she asked.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I shouldn’t have to,” Nick answered. “A ‘no’ should be enough.”

“Yeah, it should, but you have to realize you’re incredibly handsome. And there are some women, like some men, who don’t have a lot of boundaries when it comes to sex.”

“I can’t take any credit for my looks,” Nick said. “I inherited everything from my parents.”

“True,” Sandy answered, “but you’re still beautiful and sexy, and some people want to enjoy your body.”

Nick laughed. “Your brother is the only person I want or will ever allow to enjoy my body.”

Sandy laughed and hugged him. “You’re too much, Nick,” she said. “I love you and my brother. You guys are wonderful together. You’re a gift to the rest of us.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Nick asked.

Sandy took Nick’s face in her hands and pulled his head down to her level. She kissed his forehead. “You and Eric remind the rest of us of how we felt when we first fell in love.”

“HI, NICKY,” Eric said when Nick answered his phone, “are you home now?”

“Yeah,” Nick answered. “Sandy just dropped me off.”

“How was the exhibit?” Eric asked.

Nick told Eric what had happened at the gallery.

“I’m sorry, man,” Eric said.

“Why are you sorry?”

“I know how that kind of stuff bothers you,” Eric answered.

“I just never know what to do,” Nick sighed.

“Do you care if I come over and spend the night?” Eric asked.

“You dumb fuck! You never have to ask that question. Get your pretty white ass over here.”

Soon, a smiling Eric joined Nick in his warm bed.

IN THE morning, at breakfast in Nick’s kitchen, Eric telephoned his best friend Scott and asked him if they could get together for a beer after work. Like Eric, Scott was a tall redhead. He and Eric had been friends for most of their lives. That afternoon, they met at a little tavern in Eastown and sat in a corner booth. Eric ordered a pitcher of dark stout. When they had been served and the waitress had left, Eric poured them each a glass.

“So, Eric,” Scott asked, “I haven’t seen you in a while. What’s on your mind? You said you wanted to talk to me about something important.”

“Yeah, man. I do.”

“What’s up?”

Eric took a long drink of the dark rich stout. He refilled his glass as he answered his friend. “You’ve stood by me, Scott.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hey, I know. People might think I don’t, but I do. I know I’ve turned into a bastard. I know you and Karen have put up a lot with my drinking, my temper, and my fucking attitude.”

“You’re my friend. You’re Karen’s friend.”

“I know, and I appreciate that more than you’ll ever understand. And I’m sorry for all the bullshit I’ve dumped on you and Karen. I’m sorry about that night I came over drunk and got mouthy with your cousin.”

“Eric, it’s over. It’s history. You and me have been friends ever since the third grade, you and Karen since junior high. We know you. We know you’re a good guy, but we also know something’s been bugging you.”

“I like you, Scott. I like you a lot. You’re my best friend. You’ve always been my best friend. And I like Karen too. In fact, I love both you guys a lot.”

“Oh, my, God!” Scott said in a worried voice. “You don’t use words like love. Are you dying or something?”

“No, man!” Eric laughed. “It’s nothing like that.”

“Then what is it, man? What?”

“I don’t want to lose you as my friend, as my best friend. And that’s what I’m afraid of.” Eric drained his glass and signaled to the barmaid for a new pitcher.

“Why the fuck do you think I’d stop being your friend?” Scott asked.

The waitress came with the new pitcher. She set it on their table, took the empty and the money, and walked away.

“What’s going on, Eric?” Scott asked quietly.

Eric looked around the bar before he leaned closer to his friend. “Scott,” he whispered, “I’m gay. That’s why I’ve been drinking and all that other shit. I’ve tried to hide from it, but I can’t hide anymore. It’s me.”

“Are you bullshitting me?” Scott asked.

“No,” Eric answered, “I’m serious. Dead-ass serious.”

Scott was silent for a moment.

“What do you think, man?” Eric asked.

“I was just thinking about the double dates we use to go on,” Scott said. “I remember the girls who always chased after you.”

“Yeah,” Eric answered. “They chased me; I didn’t chase them.”

“I...” Scott started to say. He paused for a minute. Finally, in

almost a whisper, he spoke again. “I don’t know what to say, Eric. I’m... You’re the last person I’d ever think would tell me this kind of thing.”

“I know,” Eric answered.

“Damn,” Scott said. “There’s a lot of questions. I’m not sure what to ask first.”

“Let me help,” Eric offered.

He explained everything to Scott, including the dance and meeting Nick.

“Wow!” Scott said when Eric finished his story.

“Please, Scott. Are we still friends? I have to know. Are we still friends?”

“Hey, man. Of course we’re still friends.” Scott put his hand on Eric shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “We’ll always be friends.”

“Thank you, Scott,” Eric said as he fought a rush of emotion. “Thank you. You don’t know what that means to me. You’re like my brother.”

“Hey, man,” Scott answered. “Let’s not get mushy.” He smiled. “But you’re like a brother to me too.”

“Thanks, Scott. Thanks. I feel a lot better. A lot better.” He poured them each another glass. “I’d like you and Karen to come over to my house for supper tomorrow and meet Nick.”

“Who’s going to cook?” Scott asked.

“Don’t worry—I’m not,” Eric laughed. “Nick will do it all. He’s a great cook.”

“Good, ’cause man, you just can’t cook.”

“I know. I have trouble nuking a frozen dinner. Will you guys come?”

“You bet we will. I want to meet... what do you call him?”

“Nick.”

“No. I mean, is he your... boyfriend or... what do you call him?”

“Boyfriend will work,” Eric said with a grin.

“What’s he like?” Scott asked.

“He’s cool,” Eric answered. “He’s tall and strong. He’s friendly. You’ll see. You can make your own decision. But I have to tell you, Scott, I’m real with Nick. I’m clean with Nick.”

“What about Shannon?” Scott asked.

“What about her?”

“Does she know?”

“Yeah,” Eric answered quietly.

“And?” Scott asked.

“She’s not happy, if that’s what you mean,” Eric said.

“I’ll bet she’s not.”

“She’s shown up a few times at the garden center where Nick works and gave him some shit,” Eric said.

“She knows him?” Scott asked.

“A few weeks ago we ran into her,” Eric said.

“What’d she do?” Scott asked.

“She was pissed.”

“I’ll bet she was,” Scott said.

“She took a couple of swings at Nick.”

“Man, Eric,” Scott said, “I never said anything before because she was your woman, but I never liked her.”

“I don’t think a lot people did,” Eric said.

“I think she’s strange,” Scott said.

“She’s proving that,” Eric answered. “And that’s what worries me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” Eric answered. “But something in my gut tells me....”

“Tells you what?” Scott asked.

“I’m not sure,” Eric answered.

WITH the coming of night, when they were warm in his bed, Eric told Nick, “I think it’s time you moved in with me.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Why?” Nick asked.

“You know damn well why,” Eric answered.

“Tell me,” Nick said.

“Because we love each other. Because we want to be together. Because we want a life together.”

“We do?” Nick asked with a smile.

“Yes, we do, you little fucker,” Eric answered. He grabbed Nick’s face and pulled it close to his own. “You want this as much as I do.”

Nick rubbed his forehead against Eric’s forehead. “Yeah, I do, Baby. I do.”

“Then move in here, Nicky. Let’s do it. It’s the next step.”

“I’ll have to give my landlord a thirty-day notice.”

“Do it. Please.”

“Okay.”

“We can hire a truck and probably move everything in a day,” Eric said.

“We don’t need a truck,” Nick said. “My apartment’s furnished, so all I have to move is my clothes, my books, the houseplants, and the stuff from my kitchen. I can move a little at a time, so at the end of thirty days, I’m here.”

“A lot of your plants are here already,” Eric said.

“I know,” Nick said. “Your house needed to be warmed up a little.”

“You’ve made it warm and friendly,” Eric said.

“Before I move in, I want us to buy a new bed,” Nick said.

“What?” Eric asked. “Where the hell did that come from?”

“I want us to get a new bed,” Nick repeated.

“Why? What’s wrong with this bed?”

“Nothing,” Nick answered. “Just that it’s yours. If we live together, I want us to sleep in our bed.”

Eric smiled, put his arms around his lover, and pulled their bodies tighter together. “We’ll go this weekend and get a new bed,” he promised.

“We have to pay for the bed fifty-fifty,” Nick insisted.

“What?”

“If the new bed is going to be really ours,” Nick explained, “we have to pick it out together and pay for it together. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Eric answered. “We’ll find the perfect bed.”

“It’ll only be perfect with you in it,” Nick said.

“Oh, good fucking God!” Eric laughed. “Stop shoveling. I’m not wearing boots.”

“Fuck you!” Nick said as he punched Eric in his hard stomach.

Eric grabbed Nick’s shoulders and pushed him onto his back. They wrestled. They loved. They fell asleep in each other’s arms.

WEDNESDAY evening, Scott and Karen shared supper with Eric and Nick. During supper, Scott and Karen told Nick stories about Eric in high school. When the evening ended, Eric was very happy.

“They liked you,” he told Nick as he closed the door behind their departing friends.

“I liked them too,” Nick said.

After they had bathed and made love, but before sleep took them,

Eric whispered into Nick's ear. "Sandy called me at work today and told me what you said to that woman at the gallery."

"I told you about her."

"But you didn't tell me what you said to her."

"What'd I say?" Nick asked.

"You told her I was the only one with a key to your heart and your pants."

"Oh, that."

"I'm glad I'm the one," Eric whispered very quietly. "I'm glad I'm the only one."

"You are, Eric. You're the only one. You're all I want. All I need."

EARLY Monday morning, Eric sat in his employer's office. Don Czarnopys was a good-natured man in his mid-forties with thick black hair. Gray was just being to make its appearance at his temples. Don had hired Eric at a college job fair because of the great potential he saw in the tall young redhead.

Eric liked and respected Don. He wanted to be honest and not have Don learn about his sexuality and about Nick from someone else. "Don, I don't want to cause any problems for you or your business," Eric said after he had explained everything.

"Thank you, Eric," Don answered. "I appreciate your concern for the firm and our clients. And I understand your worries. There is a lot of bigotry and intolerance in this city. Too often, good people are hurt by narrow prejudice."

Eric sat quiet. Secretly, he expected to be terminated for the good of the company.

Don smiled. "Take that worried look off your face, Eric. Your job is secure."



Eric smiled and exhaled loudly. "Thank you, Don."

"I understand something of what you're going through. A dozen years ago, my older brother came out to my family."

"Really?" Eric asked.

"Yeah. It was a surprise at first, but he's still my brother. He's a good man, like you. Don't worry Eric, like I said, your job is secure."

"Thank you, Don."

AS PROMISED, Saturday morning, Eric and Nick went shopping for their new bed. They found an old-fashioned four-poster oak farm bed. It was delivered to Eric's house the following Monday afternoon.

It was late autumn. The world outside was cold. The first night in their new bed, the temperature dropped below freezing. After making love, Eric spooned up to Nick's back.

In the stillness of the dark room, Eric asked, "Why me, Nick?"

"What?" Nick asked sleepily.

"Why me?" Eric repeated.

"Why you what?"

"Why do you love me? What do you see in me?"

Nick sat up and turned towards Eric. "What?" he asked again.

Eric rolled onto his back. "You're an incredibly beautiful man," he said. "Everybody thinks that."

"Big deal," Nick said. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Big deal!" Eric said as he sat up and looked at Nick. "Why me? I keep thinking, why me? I can't figure it out. You can have any man you want. You could be on a yacht with some millionaire sailing around the Greek Islands. Why me?"

"I don't want any other man. I want you."

"Why?"

“I want you because I love you,” Nick answered. “I love you because you’re a good, honest man. Besides being in love with you, I like you. I have fun with you. We’re not only lovers, Eric, we’re friends. I feel good when I’m with you. I’m comfortable with you. You fill my heart. And like I told you before, I think you and me are made for each other. I believe we belong together.”

“But there’re other guys out there who are a lot better-looking than me,” Eric answered in a small voice.

“Eric,” Nick said, “I never thought I’d get mad at you. Not about something like this, anyway. But I’m so pissed at you right now. You dumb motherfucker. Would it make you feel better if I took a knife and cut my face?”

“Of course not,” Eric answered, “but look at me. I look like a redheaded Joaquin Phoenix.”

“I think Joaquin Phoenix is a very handsome man,” Nick said. “Now quit trying to make me out to be some kind of superficial queer. I love you, Eric. I love you.”

He calmed himself and stroked Eric’s buzz cut hair. In a softer, gentler voice, he said, “Eric, I love you because you’re a good man, an honest man. You’re a decent, true man. You’re intelligent. You’re creative. We have the same taste in music. We like to do things together. And Eric, believe it or not, I think you’re a very handsome man. A very sexy man. If I have to be superficial, I can. I can easily do that. Is that what you want? Is that what you want to hear?”

He paused and looked at his lover. In the dim light of the street lamp coming in through the window, he saw Eric looking at him. Nick thought of the things Eric had told him about the women he had dated. Then it hit him. Suddenly, he realized Eric’s need. The women in Eric’s life had denied him the one thing all people wanted—the one thing all people needed, even if they said they didn’t, even if they said it was unimportant to them. It had taken time for Nick to realize this want in Eric, this need.

His entire life, Nick had been told he was beautiful. It bothered

and annoyed him. Suddenly, Nick understood. He finally saw. His deep love for Eric guided him. Nick realized he was like a well-fed man telling a hungry man food was unimportant.

“Oh, my baby,” Nick said. He touched his face to Eric’s face. He caressed Eric’s cheek with his hand. He backed away and smiled at the tall redhead sitting quietly in the darkened room.

“You’re tall and strong,” Nick said quietly and slowly. “You have a handsome, manly face with spectacular crystal green eyes. I always get lost in your eyes. They’re with me wherever I go. In my mind, I always see your eyes.”

He leaned forward and kissed both of Eric’s eyebrows.

“You have the most beautiful golden eyelashes I’ve ever seen. Your smile is warm and happy, and you make me feel so goddamned good inside every time you smile at me.”

He backed further away from Eric and looked at him. He felt an almost wicked smile spread on his face.

Then he leaned his forehead to Eric’s and, with an even softer voice, he told his mate, “Your lips are wet, red, and delicious. They’re made for kissing. You have a beautiful throat that’s smooth, creamy white, and so warm. Your arms are thick and strong. And look at your powerful hairy chest and your hard flat stomach, your round manly ass. You carry the whole magnificent package on a pair of powerful, beautiful thighs.”

He hugged Eric and rubbed his hands down his muscular back. “And your back,” he said. “My God, Eric, your back is strong, silky-smooth, and pure white. I love to lay my face on your back.”

“I know you do,” Eric said quietly.

“Eric, you have beautiful white skin. A white that only redheads are blessed with. I love your skin. I want to eat every motherfucking inch of your perfect skin.”

Nick reached under the blanket and grabbed Eric’s penis. “And this baseball bat you carry between your legs. I never told you, but that first time I saw you with a hard-on, I was scared to death.”

“You damn liar!” Eric said as he punched Nick in the chest.

Together, they laughed and grabbed each other’s forearms. Nick again took his mate in his arms.

“The point is, Eric, I love you, you fool. You fill my heart. Now stop all this talk. Please know I think you’re beautiful. I’m so proud when people see you and me together. I feel cocky and arrogant when people know I have a giant beautiful redhead for a lover. I love you, Eric. You’re the most beautiful man I know. I love you, and I need you, and I want you to love me and need me.”

“I do love you,” Eric answered. “And I do need you. Goddamn, I need you!”

Nick took Eric’s face in his hands. Slowly, emphasizing each word, Nick said, “I think you’re beautiful. I love you. I don’t want anyone but you. No one can satisfy me like you do. Your hands, your fingers, your mouth. No one has ever thrilled me the way you do.”

Eric lay back onto their bed and pulled Nick with him. “Yeah?” Eric softly asked.

“Yeah,” Nick answered.

In the still darkness, in their warm bed, the two strong young men gently held each other as sleep claimed them.

## Chapter 13

### Faggot

IN THE cold parking lot of the Anchor Bar, Eric saw Scott's SUV. He parked his Lexus next to it and hurried into the warm tavern. The two young men were meeting after work to enjoy a couple of beers and a few games of pool.

In the middle of their first game, Scott said to Eric, "Hey, man, a guy came in a few minutes ago. He's sitting at a table by the wall over there. He keeps watching you."

Eric turned and looked. "That's George, Shannon's brother," he said.

George stood and walked toward them. He was a few inches shorter than Eric, with a bull neck, thick arms, and a beer drinker's growing stomach. He was wearing construction boots, old jeans, a black and white flannel shirt, and a very worn brown leather jacket.

"Hey, Folke, Shannon told me you turned into a faggot," George said with disgust.

"No, I'm gay," Eric calmly answered.

"What the fuck's the difference?" George asked.

With his voice still calm and controlled, Eric answered, "A gay man respects himself. A faggot is a punk-ass dickhead like you."

Molten anger filled George's eyes. He stepped closer to Eric. "What the fuck did you call me?"

Eric laid his cue stick on the table. "I said you're a punk-ass faggot," he calmly repeated.

George took a deep breath. Eric saw him clench his fists.

"You really want to carry this to the end?" Eric asked.

Without a word, George swung his fist. Eric blocked the incoming punch with his left arm. With his own hard right fist, he smashed into George's face, slamming his body against the wall. George fell to his knees.

The bartender, a short woman in her sixties, screamed at the men. "What the hell's going on?"

George staggered to his feet. He used his jacket sleeve to wipe the blood running from his nose and the corner of his mouth.

"Not a goddamned thing," he said, spitting blood onto the floor.

"All of you get your asses out of here, or I'll call the cops. We don't want no fighting in here," the woman yelled from behind the bar.

"He fucking started it," Scott shouted, pointing at George.

"I don't give a goddamn. All of you, out! Now!" the woman ordered.

Scott threw his cue onto the table. He and Eric picked up their coats and walked to the door.

"That punk-ass started it," Scott repeated.

"Out!" the woman yelled.

Eric and Scott walked out the door into the fading light of the cold November afternoon. They stood in the parking lot next to Eric's car and watched George walk out of the bar. As he walked to his car, he stared at Eric. Blood still oozed from his nose.

"This ain't over, Folke, not by a long shot," he snarled before he climbed into his car.

Showing his rage, he squealed his tires when he pulled out of the lot. The tires continued their angry protest up the street.

"Nick told me someday I'd come up against this kind of shit,"

Eric said when George and his squealing tires were gone.

“He’s a fucking asshole,” Scott said.

“I’ve never been called a faggot before,” Eric said.

Scott put his hand on Eric’s shoulder. “Like you said, he’s the faggot; you’re the man.”

DRIVING to Nick’s apartment from the tavern, Eric felt a dry, prickly anger squeezing his heart. George had spat the word “faggot” at him with self-righteous hatred. In the back of his mind, Eric had always known this verbal intolerance would someday come to him. He had known it, and he had thought he was ready for it. Now, driving in the colorless cold of a dying, overcast November afternoon, he realized he was not prepared for the intense, violent hate behind that word. He felt he had been relegated to an inhuman caricature of a man by that one word.

When he had parked along the curb in front of Nick’s apartment, he sat in his car for a moment. He knew that when he walked into the apartment, Nick would be smiling and happy. He knew Nick would kiss him and hold him with love. He cherished that love, that new love. He did not want to tarnish that love in anyway. He decided he would say nothing about the meeting with George.

He got out of his car and walked to Nick’s door. When he walked in, he was greeted with a marvelous aroma. He smiled and relaxed. “Nick, what are you cooking?” he asked as he walked into the kitchen.

“Hi, Babe,” Nick said cheerfully. He gave Eric a warm, welcoming kiss. “I’m sautéing some chicken breasts and onions in butter and bacon fat with a little sage and cumin.”

“What?” Eric asked. “You’re a vegetarian.”

“I am, but you’re not,” Nick answered. “I’m making this for you. I thought I’d serve it over brown rice or maybe over some egg noodles and green peas. What do you think?”

“I told you I’d change for you,” Eric insisted.

“You’re willing to make that sacrifice for me,” Nick said. “This is the least I can do for you.”

“I can’t let you eat this and go against everything you believe,” Eric said.

“I’m not going to eat it,” Nick exclaimed in a shocked voice. “I don’t eat dead animals. I’m cooking this for you.”

Eric laughed at the remark about the dead animals. “I don’t understand. Why are you cooking it for me?” he asked.

“I decided I’m going to start cooking you some meat,” Nick said. “I was thinking maybe every other day.”

“Why, Nicky? Your beliefs are very important to you.”

“They are,” Nick answered, “but so are you. I don’t want food to come between us a few years down the road.”

Eric smiled at Nick and put an arm around his waist. He leaned his forehead against Nick’s forehead. With his other hand, he caressed Nick’s face and asked, “A few years down the road?”

“Yeah, Baby,” Nick answered. “I think you’re stuck with me. I think we’re going to be together for quite awhile. For the rest of my life, if I’m lucky.”

“Damn, I hope we’re both lucky,” Eric said as his mouth found Nick’s mouth.

“Why don’t we compromise,” he suggested after they parted from their kiss.

“What do you mean?” Nick asked.

“You only cook meat when I ask for it.”

“Okay, but promise you’ll ask.”

“I promise.”

“Good,” Nick answered. “Now, what do you want under your dead chicken, brown rice or egg noodles and peas?”

“The noodles and peas,” Eric answered as he slapped Nick’s



delicious butt.

When everything was ready, Nick put the food on the kitchen table. Eric had his chicken over the noodles and peas. Nick had the noodles and peas without the dead bird. Both shared a clean Greek wine.

“Did you beat Scott at pool?” Nick asked.

“Oh, we never really played. We just had a drink,” Eric answered.

“How come?” Nick asked.

Eric shrugged his shoulders. Nick took a bite of his noodles. After he had swallowed, he looked thoughtfully at Eric. “So what’s the problem?” he asked.

“What are you talking about? What problem?” Eric asked.

“I realize we’ve only known each other for about four months, but I’m learning how to read you. Now, one more time, what’s the matter?”

Eric felt a mixture of surprise, confusion, and happiness.

“Eric, you love to shoot pool, and I can see you’re kind of tense. Something’s bothering you. And your knuckles are skinned.”

Eric smiled and shook his head. He sat back in his chair and told Nick about Scott and his adventure with George. He also told Nick how the word “faggot” had infected him with anger.

“Say to whoever calls you a faggot or queer, ‘yeah, I am a faggot’ or ‘yeah, I am a queer’.”

“Fuck you! I’m not going to accept that shit from anybody,” Eric snapped.

“I didn’t say accept it,” Nick answered. “I just said throw it back at them. They don’t know what to do then.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“They think they’re insulting you,” Nick said. “It’s just a word. It only means what you let it mean. If you agree with them, it throws them off.”

“I don’t know, man.”

“Eric, when we own those words, when we laugh at them and make jokes with them, they don’t mean anything anymore. They’re just words.”

Eric looked at Nick for a moment. “They’re empty,” Eric said slowly. He smiled at Nick. “You’re pretty smart for a punk,” he said.

“See, there’s another word,” Nick said. “‘Punk’ is usually an insult, but when you say it to me, it means ‘sweetheart’.”

“No, it means you’re a punk,” Eric said. He reached across the table and took Nick’s hand. “But I understand what you’re telling me,” he said.

THE first Saturday in December, Nick finished the move into his new home. After the last load had been carried into the house, Eric left Nick sitting on the floor of what was now their bedroom while he went to take a shower.

Nick was refolding clothes that had been packed in a large travel bag. Several neat piles of pants and shirts were on the floor around him. He had stripped down to white briefs and white socks. From the bathroom across the hall, he could hear the sounds of Eric in the shower. He imagined the hot water turning Eric’s perfect milk-white skin a bright pink. A mischievous smile appeared on his face. He jumped up and ran down the stairs to the kitchen.

Nick returned to their bedroom as Eric was turning off the shower. He quickly hid himself behind the bedroom door. When he heard Eric leave the bathroom, he prepared himself. Moist and pink, Eric walked naked into their bedroom. Nick grabbed him from behind and pulled him to the floor. With sudden graceful speed, Eric spun his body to face his assailant, who sat straddling his naked hips. Nick held a plastic bag filled with crushed ice. He quickly dumped the ice on Eric’s chest and rubbed it into the golden-red forest.

“You punk! You fucking little punk!” Eric yelled through his laughter.

He grabbed Nick’s upper arms and pulled him down so their chests met with a loud thud. With his powerful legs, Eric pushed up and around. Nick suddenly found himself lying on his back with Eric sitting triumphantly on his stomach. The crushed ice was scattered onto the floor around them.

“You’re not as bad as you think you are,” Eric laughed at his lover.

“Yes, I am,” Nick said from his position of defeat. “I always win.” He relaxed and looked at Eric through half opened eyes. He parted his full lips. Nick knew he had a power in his lips Eric could not fight. Eric leaned forward and, with his mouth, took possession of the mouth of his attacker. Nick put his hands on the back of Eric’s neck and held him tight as he gave his mouth to his lover’s mouth and tongue.

Through their kiss, Nick whispered, “See? I always win.”

ON A cold, sunny afternoon during their first week of living together, Eric and Nick drove to the Hairy Lady after work for a drink and a few games of pool. As the evening was becoming night, Terry Farwell, a middle-aged Evangelical Christian employed by the same firm as Eric, drove past the Hairy Lady with his wife.

Terry stopped for the red light at the corner and looked at the bar. “There’s that disgusting sodomite hangout,” he said to his wife.

“The city should shut down that awful place,” she answered.

“I don’t believe it!” Terry exclaimed.

He saw Eric walking out of the bar with Nick. He did not know Nick or know of him. All he saw was Eric coming out of the bar holding the hand of another man. Then, to his amazement, he watched Eric give Nick a kiss before they got into their car.

The red light turned to green.

“I’ve got that young hotshot now,” Terry triumphantly said to his wife as he drove away. “I’m going to get that faggot fired. His corner office will be mine within a week.”

IN THE morning, Terry went to speak with Don Czarnopys, his and Eric’s employer. He told Don what he had seen the night before in front of what he called “a notorious gay bar.” Don immediately telephoned Eric’s office.

“Eric, can you come to my office for a moment?” he asked over the phone.

A few minutes later, Eric walked in and stood in front of Don’s desk. Terry sat quietly in a chair and did not look at Eric.

“Good morning, Eric,” Don greeted the tall redhead. “This will only take a minute. Terry here says yesterday evening he saw you leave a gay bar holding a man’s hand. He says you kissed this man before getting into your car. Do you want to comment?”

Eric looked at Terry. Terry quickly looked at the floor.

“Nick and I went out for a beer last night,” Eric answered.

“Okay,” Don said in a matter-of-fact voice. “That’s all, Eric.”

Terry looked back at Eric and watched him walk to the door.

“Oh, Eric,” Don called after him. “How are things going with Snider Electronics?”

Eric turned back to Don. “Great,” he answered. “I’ll have everything ready for them this afternoon.”

“Good. Please, keep me up to date.”

“Sure thing.” Eric walked out the door without looking at Terry.

“Anything else?” Don asked.

Terry looked at Don. “No,” he answered, somewhat stunned. This was not how he had planned things. This was not what he had thought

or hoped would happen.

“Tell me, Terry, do you have any brothers?” Don asked.

“Yeah, I have two.”

“Do you love them?”

“Yes. Of course I do.”

“I have a brother too,” Don said, “and I love him. I love him very much.”

He paused for a short moment. Terry became uncomfortable. Don stood and walked around his desk. He stopped in front of Terry. “My brother is gay,” Don said slowly.

Terry felt his face go pale.

“The man you saw Eric kiss is named Nick,” Don said slowly. “I’ve met him. My wife has met him. My wife and I have been out with the two of them. He’s a good, decent young man.” Then he added sternly, “Now get back to your desk.”

Terry stiffly rose from his seat and walked to the door.

“Oh, Mr. Farwell. If you ever try anything like this again, your hateful, bigoted ass will be out the door faster than you can say ‘praise the Lord’. Do I make myself clear?”

“You do, Mr. Czarnopys. I was just—”

Don interrupted him in mid-sentence. “I said get back to work.”

Terry walked towards the door.

“One more thing, Mr. Farwell.”

Terry stopped and turned around to face Don.

“I’m taking the Kanderson project from you and giving it to Eric. Now get out of my office.”

Terry left sheepishly.

Twenty minutes after Terry had left Don’s office, both an e-mail and a paper memo went out to every employee of Czarnopys Consulting. The memo stated that any employee who discriminated against a fellow employee or a client of the firm because of race, creed,

color, religion, nation of origin, or sexual orientation would be terminated without a severance package.

EARLY the following morning, Eric was back in Don's office discussing a proposal for a new client. When they finished, Eric stood and began collecting his papers.

"A few months ago, I decided I was going to let you go," Don said.

"Yeah?" Eric asked without looking at Don. "What stopped you?"

"Nick," Don answered matter-of-factly.

Eric looked at Don. "Nick?" he asked.

"Yes, Nick."

"You didn't know Nick a few months ago," Eric said.

"No, I didn't," Don agreed. "Nor did I know he was the reason I decided not to fire you."

"I don't understand," Eric said.

"Eric, you're an exceptionally talented man, but at one time you were also an angry, brusque man. You had a harsh attitude that made a lot of people uncomfortable."

"I know," Eric admitted, "and I'm sorry for all that crap."

"I know you are," Don said.

"You're saying things got better after I met Nick," Eric suggested.

"I didn't know he was the reason," Don said, "but there was a sudden change in you. A change for the better. The whole office noticed it. You started saying good morning to everyone. You began joking with people. You turned into the nice guy everyone here now respects and likes."

"Everyone except Terry," Eric added with a wry smile.

Don laughed. “You can’t have everything,” he said.

“I guess I just needed to be true to myself. Nick helped me with that,” Eric said as he picked up the last of his papers.

“I know,” Don said.

Eric walked to the door. Before going out, he stopped, turned, and looked back at Don.

“Thanks, Don,” he said. “Thanks for your patience.”

“It paid off,” Don answered. He picked up a sheet of paper from his desk and began reading it. “Get your ass back to work,” he said without looking up.

Eric smiled as he turned and walked out the door. On the way to his office, he passed the young intern who had recently started with the firm. The lad was carrying an armload of files.

“Hi, Ben,” Eric greeted the boy with a warm smile and true friendliness.

“Hi, Mr. Folke,” Ben answered with his own youthful, optimistic smile.

DECEMBER arrived with bitter cold and little snow. Across West Michigan, only a fine dusting had fallen, and Christmas was coming. Saturday morning, the city woke to a clear blue sky and a sparkling blanket of fresh, deep snow. It was just in time. Now the holiday spirit was set for the Czarnopys Christmas Party being held that night.

Don’s employees, along with their spouses or dates, were invited to a formal holiday dinner and dance at the Ottawa Hills Country Club. The tables in the ballroom were covered with shimmering white cloths and a centerpiece of a small poinsettia with two white candles in golden holders. A tall, traditionally-decorated Christmas tree stood before a large window overlooking the snow-covered golf course. The room was decorated with potted fir trees wreathed in tiny white lights. Alternating silver and gold silk bows were hung along the walls.

Eric's secretary, Nancy Kuikstra, and her husband were sitting at a table with two other couples. Everyone at the table was happily chatting about their plans for the holiday vacation.

"Nancy, who's that with your boss?" Caitlyn, another secretary with the firm, asked.

All heads turned to look. Eric and a handsome dark man, both wearing black tuxedos, were being greeted by Don Czarnopys and his wife Beth. The dark man walked as tall as Eric.

"I don't know, but he's gorgeous, isn't he?" Nancy said.

"I wonder who that dark hunk's with," Caitlyn said.

"Maybe he's dating Jennifer or Chloe," Nancy suggested.

"He does have a handsome smile," Sam, Nancy's husband, said.

Everyone at the table looked at Sam.

"Well, he does," Sam said.

"Look, there's some kind of little buzz going on," Caitlyn said.

Within minutes, Aaron, one of Eric's colleagues, came to their table.

"What's all the excitement?" Nancy asked.

"You guys see that man with Eric?" he asked.

"Who is he?" Nancy asked.

"Eric's boyfriend," Aaron answered.

"What?" everyone at the table asked together.

"He's introducing him as his boyfriend," Aaron repeated.

"Eric's gay?" Caitlyn asked.

"Apparently," Aaron answered.

"No," Nancy said. "No, no. I've worked for him for a year and a half. He doesn't..."

"He doesn't what?" Caitlyn asked.

"He just doesn't..." Nancy stammered. "Eric's not gay."

"Look," Sam said. "Now he's holding that guy's hand."



“I wonder if that’s why that non-discrimination memo came out earlier this week,” Caitlyn said.

They watched Eric and his friend take their seats at Don’s table. Later, before the meal was served, Eric brought Nick to Nancy’s table and introduced him.

After the introductions, when Eric and Nick had walked on to another table, Caitlyn whispered to Nancy. “You see his beautiful eyes and long lashes?” she asked.

“God! I wanted to touch his silky black hair,” Nancy replied in a whisper.

“What are you two whispering about?” Sam asked.

“We just want to know why the most beautiful men are always gay,” Caitlyn answered.

After dinner, when the jazz quintet began to play, the two men stood and walked hand-in-hand to the dance floor. Nancy noticed the many eyes following the two men. On the dance floor, Eric took Nick in his arms. With dignified, sensual grace, the men moved to the music. Don and Beth joined them on the floor. Slowly, others, too, began to dance.

## Chapter 14

### The Sudden Fist

FAT snowflakes fell softly across Michigan's lower peninsula on St. Valentine's Day. Eric surprised Nick by driving him to East Lansing for dinner at the Buddha's Table, a vegetarian restaurant.

The decor was a fusion of Thai and Indian styles. A large green statue of the Buddha stood against one wall in the restaurant's dining room. A small pond filled with goldfish surrounded the statue.

"Eric," Nick said excitedly, "this place is just too cool."

"I thought you'd like it," Eric said with a triumphant smile.

During their dessert, Eric asked, "What do you know about Bodh Gaya?"

"You mean in India?" Nick asked.

"Yeah."

"It's the place where the Buddha found his Awakening," Nick answered. "Today, it's a place of pilgrimage. It's also where the Bodhi Tree stands."

"What's that?" Eric asked.

"It's the fig tree the Buddha was sitting under when he found his Awakening twenty-five centuries ago," Nick answered. "A lot of people think it's the oldest tree on Earth. Why are you asking these questions on St. Valentine's Day?"

"Well, we're eating at the Buddha's Table," Eric answered.

“And....”

He signaled the waiter. The young man brought a package wrapped in pale green paper to their table and handed it to Eric.

“Thank you,” Eric said to the waiter. With a smile, Eric handed the package to Nick. “Happy Valentine’s Day, Nicky. I love you.”

Nick first looked at the attached card.

“Hey, a charcoal drawing of a river in a forest,” he said. He opened the card. “Damn, you have nice handwriting,” Nick said.

“Never mind that. Just read the card,” Eric said.

Nick read the card out loud. “Nick, you are the most precious thing in my life. I love you forever. Eric.” He smiled and looked at Eric. “You’re the most important thing in my life too,” he said.

Carefully, he opened the gift. It was a framed leaf from the Bodhi Tree in Bodh Gaya.

“Eric!” Nick quietly exclaimed. “How did you get this?”

“You don’t ask that kind of question about a gift,” Eric said.

“I do,” Nick said. “Now come on. How did you manage this?”

“I have my connections,” Eric answered with a broad, arrogant smile.

“Oh, man. Thank you, Eric. Thank you. I love you, Baby.”

Nick reached his hand into the inside breast pocket of his sports coat. He drew out a slim package wrapped in shiny gold paper and handed it to Eric. There was a small card attached.

Eric looked at his card. It had a pastel drawing of a canoe lying on the grassy bank of a calm river. Inside, Nick had written, *Eric, I waited and I searched. I never found what I was looking for until one day, at a noisy, crowded dance, love found me. Thank you, Eric. Thank you for finding me, for wanting me, for loving me. Thank you for your love, your kisses, for being my lover, my best friend, my truest friend, my shoulder to cry on, my heart. I love you more every day. Love, your Nicky.*

Eric looked at Nick after reading the card. “God, I love you,” he

said. Eric could feel the moisture in his eyes. “What did I do to deserve you?”

“You asked me to dance,” Nick answered. “Now open your gift.”

Eric smiled and slowly opened the small package. It was a book bound in gold cloth—gay love poetry, both modern and ancient, from around the world.

WHEN the weekend arrived, Eric and Nick spent Saturday night dancing to the smooth jazz at Mr. Blackport. Later in the night, after they had returned home, Eric sat on the edge of their bed and watched Nick undress.

“What’s on your mind?” Nick asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You have one shoe off, and you’re just sitting there looking at me. A couple of times tonight I got the feeling you wanted to ask me something.”

Eric sat silent for a moment. “Why did you and Dennis break up?” he finally asked.

“He was a dick.”

“Tommy said he was possessive, jealous, and controlling,” Eric said.

“When’d he say that?”

“At the Hairy Lady the night I met him and Allan. He said the breakup was nasty. That’s all he’d say.”

“I’m glad he stopped somewhere,” Nick said.

“He cares about you,” Eric said.

“I know,” Nick said. He sat on the edge of the bed next to Eric. “Dennis is a very possessive and jealous man,” he said. “I broke up with him when one of his jealous fits got to be too much.”

“What does that mean?” Eric asked.

“Eric, I’m not proud of that day.”

“Please, Nick,” Eric said. “I’ll always wonder. And we’re not supposed to have any secrets.”

“That’s not fair,” Nick said.

“Please,” Eric asked.

Nick took a deep breath. “Okay,” he said. “Dennis pushed me into the wallboard in my living room.”

“What?” Eric stood and looked down at Nick.

“Sit back down,” Nick said. He pulled Eric by the hand back onto the bed. “I took my sister shopping for her birthday. When I got home, Dennis was sitting on the porch looking really pissed off. I thought it best if I just ignored him.

“‘Where the fuck have you been?’ he fucking shouted when I walked past him into my apartment.

“I didn’t answer, but he followed me in.

“‘I asked, where the fuck have you been?’ he shouted again.

“I told him I’d taken Maggie out to buy her a birthday present. He started shouting about me always going off with other people. I was getting tired of his mouth and shouted it was none of his fucking business what I did. That really pissed him off.

“‘It’s my fucking business because when I come here I expect you to be here. I don’t want to fucking have to wait around for your dumb ass. Do you understand me?’

“Then he grabbed me by the shoulders. I don’t know how I looked at him, but he yelled, ‘Don’t give me that look. You don’t go anywhere without asking me. You fucking understand that?’

“Before I could say anything, he pushed me backwards into the wall. The wallboard broke. Without thinking, I slapped his face with the back of my hand.”

“Good for you, Baby,” Eric said.

“Damn, he was surprised. So was I. I’ve never been so mad in my life. I didn’t think I could hit anybody. But I think Dennis was more

surprised than me.

“I told him to get his fucking queer ass out of my apartment and never to come back and never to call me. He left without saying or doing anything. That really surprised me. Dennis is a tough-ass man who never gives an inch in any argument. A few days later, when I was at the Hairy Lady, a friend told me Dennis had a broken jaw.”

“Damn, Nick,” Eric said. “Good for you.”

“Eric, I broke the bone in another human being,” Nick said. “There’s nothing good about that.”

“It was a natural reaction,” Eric said. “Your self-defense mechanism kicked in.”

“I know,” Nick said slowly. “I’m still not proud of any of this, but I’m not going to let anyone push me.”

“That’s right, Nick. A man has to protect himself.”

“Eric, you know I don’t want to be a violent person,” Nick said. “But he pushed me.”

“You’re not violent,” Eric said as he put an arm around Nick’s shoulder. “You’re the kindest, gentlest man I know. I think you’re being too hard on yourself.”

He held Nick in his arms. With his fingertips, he gently stroked Nick’s chin and lower lip. Softly, he kissed Nick’s temple.

“I love your breath on my skin,” Nick whispered.

“Be easy on yourself, Nicky. I don’t want to see you beating yourself up. You’re too important to me.”

“Am I?”

“Don’t give me that innocent ‘am I’ shit,” Eric said. “You know you are.”

Nick leaned his forehead against Eric’s forehead. “Tell me,” he whispered.

“I never thought I would ever love anyone as much as I love you,” Eric whispered in answer. “I didn’t know I could love somebody this much. I never thought anyone would ever love me the way you do.”

You've overwhelmed me, Nicky. I love you. I love you forever."

Eric pressed his mouth to Nick's mouth. The two men lay on the bed and undressed one another.

ON A cold snowy evening on the last Thursday in February, Eric asked his oldest brother Kirk and his wife Diane to join him and Nick for dinner at a restaurant north of the city. While they were eating, Eric noticed Nick stiffen in his chair and take a sudden deep breath.

"What's wrong, man?" Eric asked in a low voice.

"See those two guys that just walked in?" Nick said, nodding towards two men being led to a table.

Kirk and Diane both turned to see the men Nick was talking about.

"Yeah. What about them?" Eric asked.

"The guy in the dark blue coat," Nick answered. "That's Dennis."

"Dennis? The guy who knocked you through the wall?"

"Yeah."

"He knocked you through a wall?" Diane asked, turning back to face Nick.

"Yeah," Nick answered. "It was before I met Eric."

Dennis was shorter than Nick, but heavier in build. He looked like a well-built wrestler. Eric thought some people might think Dennis handsome, but he only saw the person who had attacked the man he loved. As he watched Dennis, Eric's anger woke. He was not disposed to feel anything but hate for anyone who would ever try to hurt his lover.

Eric's growing anger was quickly checked when he felt Nick's hand on his powerful thigh. Eric placed his hand on Nick's hand and gave it a tender squeeze. This small act of private intimacy brought awareness and calm back to Eric.

“Why?” Diane asked Nick.

“Why what?” Nick asked.

“Why did he knock you through a wall?”

“Because he’s a dick,” Nick answered. “Only thing, it took me a little while to realize how much of a dick he really is.”

“What did you do to him?” Kirk asked.

“You mean after he knocked me into the wall, or why he did it?”

“Well, both,” Kirk answered.

“He was jealous,” Nick explained. “Jealous of my sister and anybody else I spoke with or spent time with or looked at or whatever. And after he put me in the wall, I broke his jaw.”

“Nick! You?” Diane asked in wide-eyed surprise.

“I’m impressed,” Kirk said. “He looks like a solidly built man.”

“He is,” Nick answered, “but after he slammed me into the wall, he knocked me to the floor. I just jumped up and hit him. It was a reflex. I think I was more surprised than he was. I didn’t know until later I’d broken his jaw. It’s not something I’m proud of.”

Eric felt his anger suddenly return. “You didn’t tell me he knocked you down,” he said.

“After I broke the wallboard with my shoulder, he pushed and tripped me. I fell on the floor,” Nick said.

“He knocked you down?” Eric asked quietly and very slowly. “That son of a bitch tripped you and knocked you down?”

“Yeah,” Nick answered.

“That bastard,” Eric cursed in an ugly voice.

Memories of an almost-forgotten push returned to Eric’s mind. Memories of his hands on Nick’s chest. Memories of Nick falling back onto a bed. Eric forgot his awareness and left his calm. He started to stand. Nick grabbed his wrist and pulled him back down to his seat.

“Chill, Eric,” Nick said sternly. “I’m not going to have you arrested because of that asshole.”



Eric looked into Nick's eyes. Calm slowly returned. "Sorry, guys," he said, looking at his brother and sister-in-law.

"You don't have to apologize, Eric," Kirk said. "If some punk bastard hurt Diane, no matter how long ago, I'd feel exactly what you're feeling right now. Just don't act on that feeling."

"That's a very Buddhist thought," Nick said to Kirk.

"I guess you're rubbing off on me," Kirk answered.

Laughter and smiles replaced the anger and tension that had invaded their evening.

From his seat, Eric was the only one who could see Dennis and his friend at their table. After Nick and his family had ordered their dessert, Eric saw Dennis leave his table and walk to the restroom.

"I've got to use the john," Eric said.

He got up and walked to the restroom in the back of the restaurant. He paused at the oak door. He thought of Nick—tall, strong, yet supremely gentle Nick. How could anyone push Nick? He thought of Nick laughing and smiling. He felt Nick's arms around him. He could feel Nick's breath on his face. He could see Nick softly close his eyes as their lips came together.

He heard Nick whisper into his ear, "I'm yours."

Eric put his hand on the door and pushed it open. The aroma of urinal cakes greeted him as he stepped into the small room. There was a stall, two urinals and a sink. Dennis was at the sink washing his hands. Eric walked to one of the urinals.

"Hey," he said to Nick's former boyfriend.

Dennis looked into the mirror at Eric. "Hi," he answered.

Eric pretended to piss. "Hey, man, is your name Dennis?" he asked.

"Yeah," Dennis answered. He turned and looked at Eric. "Do I know you?"

"Didn't you once date a guy named Nick?" Eric asked.

"Yeah. Nick Bertolli," Dennis answered. He pulled a piece of

paper towel from the dispenser and wiped his hands. “Have we met?”

“No,” Eric said. He turned from the urinal. “I’m with Nick now. I just want to know how you could knock down somebody you’re supposed to love.”

“Fuck, I didn’t love Nick,” Dennis answered. “He was just a fine piece of ass who knew how to work a cock. If you’re with him now, you know that. Shit, he’s the best cocksucker I’ve ever known. Damn, I’d love to fuck his pretty face again.”

When Eric had followed Dennis into the restroom, his plan was simply to confront him and tell him what he thought of a man who assaulted a person as gentle and peaceful as Nick. But suddenly, Eric saw Dennis lying on the floor with blood pumping out of his nose. Eric stood with his fist at his chest, looking down on the man who had attacked his Nick. His reaction had been sudden and swift. He did not even remember the moment his arm swung and his fist met Dennis’s face.

Eric turned, walked out of the door, and rejoined his family at their table. Ten minutes passed before he saw Dennis leave the restroom. His face was clean. Apparently he had stopped the bleeding and washed himself. He went to his table and rejoined his friend. He kept his eyes lowered and did not look around the restaurant for the man who had hit him. Eric knew then Dennis was a true coward.

VERY early on a cold and wet Tuesday morning in the beginning of March, Eric flew to Windsor to help settle a problem at a small company.

Thursday morning, he telephoned Nick.

“Hey, big guy,” Nick said when he answered his phone.

“Hi, Baby,” Eric said.

“Damn, I miss you,” Nick said.

“Don’t even get me going, Nicky.”

“I’ve had to sleep on the couch in the living room,” Nick said.

“Why?”

“Because our bed is too big and cold and lonely without you.”

Eric took a deep breath.

“What was that?” Nick asked.

“You may have to spend a few more nights on that couch.”

“Why?” Nick asked in a voice that was slightly louder than usual.

“I just got off the phone with Don,” Eric answered.

“Oh, fuck,” Eric heard Nick moan.

“He wants me to fly to Ottawa and meet with a prospective client.” Loud silence touched Eric’s ear. “Nicky?”

“Why the hell are you so damn good at your job?” Nick asked slowly.

“I’m sorry, Baby,” Eric said.

“No, man. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to act like some whiny woman. I just miss you.”

“Like I said, don’t get me started,” Eric said softly.

FRIDAY evening, a very tired Eric sat working in his Ottawa hotel room when a knock came at the door. He slowly walked to the door and opened it.

“Nick!” he gasped. His face exploded into a giant smile. He grabbed Nick’s arm and pulled him into the room. “What the hell are you doing here?” He pressed his mouth to Nick’s.

“I flew here,” Nick breathlessly answered when his mouth was freed from Eric’s kiss. “I missed you.”

“Oh, fuck, Baby,” Eric said, “I’ve missed the hell out of you too.”

Later, while they dried themselves from their shower, Nick asked, “Eric, you know how I sometimes pick on you?”

“Yeah. What about it?”

“Do you want me to stop?”

Without looking at Nick, Eric softly answered, “No.”

“Good!” Nick shouted. He snapped Eric’s bare ass with a wet towel and dashed from the bathroom. Eric ran after his lover, caught him, and threw him onto the bed. The two young men wrestled and rolled off the bed onto the floor. Eric’s joy now filled every part of his life.

SATURDAY, April Fool’s Day, the sky was overcast and trying to rain. Eric sat working on a proposal for a new client in the living room. His laptop was on the coffee table surrounded by papers. In the fireplace, a happy blaze warmed the room. Nick was upstairs putting away laundry. He yelled down to Eric. “Hey, man, will you heat some water for tea?”

“Yeah, Baby,” Eric yelled back. He walked into the kitchen, grabbed the kettle from its place on the stove, went to the sink, and turned on the water. He gasped as he was instantly hit with a shot of water from the sink-sprayer. He turned the water off and saw a rubber band around the sprayer. He smiled and shook his head. He knew his Nick had gotten him once again.

“Nick!” he yelled.

His cell phone rang. Eric took the phone from his pocket and looked at the caller ID. It was Nick. “You fucking punk,” Eric yelled into the phone. “Where’re you hiding?”

“In our bedroom,” Nick answered.

Eric snapped his phone closed and ran from the kitchen, up the stairs, and down the hall to their bedroom. He stopped short just inside the door. Nick was lying on his left side on a white cotton sheet on their turned-down bed. He was naked except for a pair of snow-white socks bunched around his ankles. His head rested on a white pillow. There was a bouquet of pure white camellias trying to hide his penis.

“Happy spring, Eric,” Nick said. “I love you.”

Eric saw a bottle of champagne chilling in a silver bucket sitting on the chest at the foot of their bed. Two crystal wine flutes stood waiting next to the bucket. Eric slowly walked to Nick. By the time he arrived at their bedside, he, too, was naked. Together, they welcomed spring as only two strong young men in love could welcome her.

SATURDAY morning in late spring, the two young men were in Eric’s Lexus driving home from the Rainbow Clinic.

“I knew we were healthy,” Nick said.

“What do you want to do first when we get home?” Eric asked.

“Get rid of every goddamn rubber in the house,” Nick proclaimed.

“You want to have a yard sale?” Eric asked.

“I don’t know what the neighbors would say,” Nick joked.

“After we get rid of the condoms, what do you want to do?” Eric asked.

Nick put his hand between Eric’s thighs.

“Everything,” he answered.

## Chapter 15

### The Birthday Party

ERIC walked into the kitchen where Nick was making supper. The air was filled with the rich aromas of slowly simmering tomatoes, cinnamon, and chilies. Nick was standing at the sink rinsing a bowl. Eric walked to him, hugged his waist, and kissed the back of his neck.

“Supper smells good, Nicky,” he said.

“Finish all your calls?” Nick asked.

“Yeah, I did.”

“So are your high school and college buddies going to come to our birthday party?” Nick asked.

Eric let go of Nick, sat at the table, and looked at him. “Some of them,” he answered. “A few of the guys said they didn’t want anything to do with me because I’d ‘turned gay’. I know they wanted to say ‘queer’, but they said ‘gay’.”

Nick came to the table and sat across from Eric. “You told them about your coming out?” he asked.

“Yeah, about that and about you.”

Nick saw the deep hurt in Eric’s face. He reached across the table and caressed Eric’s hand.

“It’s all right, Nicky,” Eric said. He smiled. “Those who are coming are excited about the party and about meeting you.”

Nick heard the sadness and hurt Eric was trying to hide. “Eric, I’m sorry.”

“Willie Curl and Chuck Rove were good friends of mine,” Eric said. “Scott and me and those two guys were tight. We did everything together.”

“It’s not really their fault,” Nick said. “It’s hard for some people to get past the superstitious shit that’s been pumped into them.”

Eric raised Nick’s hand and kissed it.

ON A warm sunny Saturday in June, Eric and Nick celebrated their shared birthday at the Bertolli family cottage. The quarter-mile-long two-track that wound through the trees from the dirt county road to the cottage was lined with the cars of family and friends. A large cloth banner proclaiming “Happy Birthday Eric and Nick” had been strung between two trees at the side of the cottage where the two-track ended.

Under a giant ancient oak behind the cottage, tables and chairs had been set up for the celebration of Eric’s twenty-fifth and Nick’s twenty-fourth birthday. The two young men had asked their guests not give them any gift other than coming into the woods and celebrating with them.

A gentle breeze moved the hanging edges of the white tablecloths. The four long, cloth-covered tables were heavy with good food and wine. There was micro-brewed beer, lemonade, and lime water. Tommy had placed a bouquet of white camellias in the center of each table.

When everything was ready, Sal invited everyone to lunch. Kirk and Marco, under the direction of Nick’s paternal grandfather, were in charge of barbecuing. A line quickly formed and the two men were kept busy serving Italian sausage, souvlaki, burgers, hot dogs, and fat portobello mushrooms.

After the long, leisurely feast and the birthday cake, Tommy announced it was time for Eric and Nick to exchange gifts. Allan brought Nick two packages. With a boyish grin, Nick handed one of the packages to Eric.

“Nick!” Eric said after he had opened the gift.

He held up a rust-colored T-shirt with the words “Private Property. No Poaching Allowed” printed in dark blue letters across the chest. Laughter and applause came from crowd.

Eric pulled off the dark green Dave Matthews T-shirt he was wearing and tucked it into the back pocket of his jeans. He smiled as several women and a few gay men whistled at the beauty of his strong chest and powerful back.

“Feels good,” he said.

“It looks good,” Tony added.

“Sure does,” Nick agreed with a satisfied smile.

Over Nick’s shoulder, Eric watched Kirk quietly slip away from the crowd. That was his signal.

“Okay, Nicky, now it’s my turn,” Eric said.

He looked at Nick standing beside him in the shade of the giant old tree. Nick was smiling. The warm breeze gently stirred his rich black hair. Eric again felt the soft, powerful fingers of love caress his heart. He knew beyond all doubt his heart and Nick’s heart had become one. They were two different men who had joined to create one love. He wanted to take Nick in his arms and love him with his hands, his mouth, his whole body. Instead, he took out his cell phone and made a call.

“We’re ready, Kirk,” he said into his phone.

“Why are you smiling like a little kid?” Nick asked.

The sound of an approaching vehicle stopped Eric before he could answer. Nick turned. From around the cottage, a new, dark blue Jeep Wrangler appeared. Kirk was driving. A giant white bow fluttered in the breeze on the Jeep’s hood. The cheering guests parted to allow the Jeep room to pull up and stop near the young lovers.

“Hey, Eric,” Diane shouted, “I think Nick’s in shock.”

Eric smiled at his sister-in-law. “Happy birthday, Nicky,” he said to his lover.

Nick looked at Eric, at the Jeep, then back at Eric. “What’s this?”



he asked.

“Happy birthday, Nicky,” Eric repeated.

“You got me a Jeep?” Nick asked in a low voice.

“Yeah.”

“You got me a Jeep,” Nick said in a louder voice. “Are you crazy? We can’t afford a new Jeep!”

“For you, we can,” Eric answered.

“A Jeep!” Nick shouted.

He hit Eric in the chest with the flats of his hands. Eric stumbled back a step, regained his footing, and laughed. Nick wrapped his arms around Eric’s shoulders and gave him a powerful hug. He pressed his cheek against Eric’s cheek and his right hand cradled the back of Eric’s head. Eric put his arms around Nick’s waist. Suddenly, he remembered himself. He looked at the others and dropped his arms from his mate. Nick let go and slowly took a step back.

“You’re too much,” Nick said.

The two young men walked to the driver’s side of the Jeep, and Nick looked in at the instrument panel. Eric stood with his hand on Nick’s back.

“What do you think?” Eric asked.

“It’s beautiful!” Nick answered.

“How does it drive?” he asked Kirk, who was still sitting behind the wheel.

“Great,” Kirk answered. “You’re going to love this.”

“I know,” Nick said. “I’ve always wanted a Jeep Wrangler.” Nick turned around and looked at Eric. “Before we take the Jeep for a ride, I want to give you your other present,” Nick said. He led Eric by the hand to Allan, who held the second package. Nick took the gift and gave it to Eric.

“Awful light,” Eric said.

“Just open it,” Nick answered.

Eric opened the gift and looked inside. Puzzled, he took out and

held up a white card with the single word “song” embossed in golden calligraphy on its surface.

“There’s just a piece of paper with ‘song’ written on it,” Eric said.

“Sit down, Eric,” Nick said. “Will everyone please find a place to sit,” Nick said in a loud voice.

When everyone was seated, Tommy walked out of the cottage carrying Nick’s old guitar. He handed it to Nick.

In the shade of the old oak, Eric found a seat on the near side of the table closest to the cottage. He was only a dozen feet from his lover. With curious anticipation, he watched Nick address their guests.

“Hey everybody,” Nick said loudly. “Eric and I thank everyone for driving all this way to celebrate with us today. We especially thank Eric’s high school and college friends for coming. Your being here means an awful lot to both of us.

“And you, Eric,” he said with a smile. “You buy me a Jeep and I give you a T-shirt. My parents didn’t raise no fool.”

The guests laughed. Some applauded and whistled. Eric grinned and shook his head.

“Eric,” Nick continued, “I thought a long time about what to give you. You’re so fine, man. There’s really nothing good enough for you, but I finally figured it out. I wrote a song. A song just for you.”

Eric flashed his broad Folke smile at Nick. A few of the guests lightly clapped. Eric thought of all the songs Nick had sung for him when they camped alone. For a silent moment, he and Nick looked into each other’s eyes.

“Eric,” Nick finally said, “there’re other people here, but that doesn’t matter. This song is just for you. Only for you. Happy birthday. You’re the best. The very best.”

Nick began playing his guitar. His voice came deep and warm. It entered Eric’s heart like a sweet, golden arrow.

*Last night you held me,  
You held me close and tight.*

*Our bodies moved together;  
We loved all through the night.*

*I never thought I'd love this strongly,  
Never thought I'd be loved so powerfully in return.  
You've entered my heart,  
And led me into yours.  
Baby, I never thought it would turn out this way.*

*Every day, it just gets better.  
You're the constant smile on my face.  
Every night you take me higher  
And I sleep in your embrace.*

*I never thought I'd love this strongly,  
Never thought I'd be loved so powerfully in return.  
You've entered my heart,  
And led me into yours.  
Baby, I never thought it would turn out this way.*

When the song ended family, and friends jumped to their feet with applause and cheers. Nick handed his guitar to Tommy. Eric slowly rose from his seat and walked the few steps to where Nick stood waiting with his hands in his pockets and a smile on his face. The tall, redheaded Eric stopped in front of his tall brown-eyed lover with his own smile. Eric's hands were at his sides. The two men leaned towards each other until their foreheads touched.

Nick whispered, "Do you like your gift?"

"Yeah, Nicky. I love it," Eric whispered in answer.

Then, in a softer voice, he added, "And I love you, Nicky. My God, I love you. I've been waiting for you my whole life."

Softly, Nick breathed a single word. "Eric."

Slowly and gently, Eric took Nick's face in his hands and kissed his mouth. Nick's hands circled Eric's shoulders.

Afterward, Eric could never recall how long that kiss lasted. When his mouth finally released Nick's mouth, he went to his ear and whispered, "You've done this to me, Nicky."

"Done what?" Nick asked in a whisper.

"Made me so happy I just don't know how to act."

SEVERAL hours later, after Nick and Eric had taken the Jeep for a ride on the wooded county roads, Eric stood talking with several of his school friends and Nick's brother Marco. Eric saw a curious look on Marco's face. He turned to see what had caught Marco's attention. He saw Nick. He saw Nick carrying a large water rifle. He watched Nick slowly raise the rifle and point it directly at him.

With his arms at his side and his palms forward, Eric said to Nick, "You're not that stupid!"

"Don't count on it, Eric," Marco said.

"I'll bet he is that stupid," Tommy yelled from the riverbank, where he was standing with Sandy.

Nick smiled and fired the gun. The blast of water hit Eric square in the stomach. He gasped in shocked surprise. Nick stopped the stream and lowered the gun.

For a breath, there was silence. Then, in a sudden explosion, Eric roared with the voice of a large bull and charged Nick. Nick dropped the gun as he turned and ran. Eric was a few steps behind him. Nick made a sharp turn. Eric attempted the turn but fell onto his side. He was up in an instant.

Nick stumbled but did not fall. The misstep, however, was enough to slow him so Eric could get his arms locked around his waist. They crashed heavily to the ground. Eric, with his powerful legs and arms, lifted Nick, but Nick was also a strong man. Eric felt that strength as they rose and fell and rose again.

Neither man spoke. Both noisily sucked air deep into their lungs as they battled against one another. Eric held Nick in an iron grasp.

Nick fought against that power with his own great strength, but Eric knew he was the stronger man. Slowly, he moved them to the small river.

At the river's edge, Eric struggled with Nick for a balanced second. Their feet slid on the long grass overhanging the bank, and with a great splash, they fell into the cold water.

When he popped up out of the chilly water, Eric heard their watching families and friends roaring with laughter.

Together, Eric and Nick sputtered and spat. At this point, the river was slow and only four feet deep. The two were able to stand and face each other. Looking at one another, they broke into laughter.

"You dumb fuck!" Eric yelled.

With his hand, Nick splashed water at his mate. Eric dove to Nick's feet and pulled him back under the surface. They came up again. Eric put his left hand behind Nick's head and pulled him near as he leaned towards him. For an instant their foreheads were joined. Then their mouths found each other.

In the cold river, they stood kissing as their families and friends crowded on the bank and cheered. They parted.

"I ought to kick your ass," Eric laughed at Nick.

He turned and climbed up out of the river. On the bank, he knelt down and offered his hand to Nick. Nick took the offered hand. With a wicked smile, Eric let go, and Nick, gasping in surprise, fell back with a mighty splash into the chilly water. Quickly, Eric jumped back into the cold river.

"I'm sorry, man," he said when Nick came to the surface.

"I deserved that," Nick laughed.

Together, the two young men climbed out of the river and stood dripping and shivering on the grassy bank, surrounded by their laughing families.

Eric playfully rubbed the back of Nick's head. "What do we do now?" he asked the trembling Nick. "We're gonna freeze to death."

"I've got dry clothes in your trunk," Nick said.

The two young men left the laughter at the riverside, hurried to Eric's car, and retrieved a large travel bag from the trunk. They were getting colder, so they ran at full speed into the guest bedroom of the cottage to dry themselves and change their clothes.

"This is why you borrowed my cell phone, isn't it?" Eric said. "It wasn't because you wanted to show Kirk and Diane those pictures I took in Manistee. It was because you were planning on getting me wet."

Nick smiled and nodded yes.

"I didn't want to ruin it and lose all your contacts."

"What a fucker!" Eric exclaimed.

While they were dressing, Nick looked at Eric. "Hey, big red," he said, "you'll probably always be able to throw me into that river. But unless you have someone help you or you tie me up, you're always going to go into the water with me. And that's a promise."

Eric reached with both hands and grabbed Nick by the collar of his dry shirt. He pulled him close so their foreheads were touching. Quietly, he said, "That's a promise I'm counting on."

Eric looked at the door to make sure no one was coming in. He put his mouth on Nick's mouth and took the lower lip with his own lips. He lost himself to the magic of Nick's mouth. Their lips and tongues eagerly played together as their arms tightened around each other.

Nick pushed his groin tight against Eric's and slowly moved his hips in a sensual dance. Eric's hands traveled the path they so often did down Nick's back. His strong hands found and caressed the delicious, hard, round mounds of Nick's butt. Eric caressed the two glorious orbs and pulled Nick's groin even tighter against his own. He rubbed the hard passion imprisoned in his trousers against that in Nick's.

Suddenly, Eric remembered where he was. He raised his hands to Nick's face and slowly pushed his lover away.

"We have to stop now, or we're not going to stop at all," he said to his mate.

“So why stop?” Nick whispered as he continued to rub his thighs against Eric’s thighs.

“Sure,” Eric said, “and have one of our parents walk in while you’re pulling down my pants.”

They laughed, parted, put on their socks and hiking boots, picked up their wet clothes, and returned to the others.

The party lasted past sunset. Guests slowly began to say goodnight. Hours later, in the still dark of the forest night, Eric and Nick lay warm together in their tent. Their parents were in the cottage. Tommy and Allan were in their own tent twenty yards away. Everyone else had left. Nick relaxed on his left side, and Eric was spooned tight against his back. Their naked bodies were moist from the sweat of their lovemaking.

“Nicky, this was an awesome fucking day,” Eric said as he nuzzled into Nick’s thick silky hair.

“Oh Baby, it sure as hell was,” Nick answered.

“And that was the best birthday present I ever got,” Eric added with a kiss to Nick’s ear.

“You mean the song or the sex?” Nick asked.

“The sex is always the best. I meant the song.”

## Chapter 16

### Confession

THE first anniversary of Eric and Nick's meeting at the dance fell on a Monday. Early in the morning, they slipped quietly away in Eric's Lexus and headed north to Traverse City. Nick put a David Sanborn CD into the player as they avoided the highway and drove the back roads through the beautiful green forests that blessed Michigan. Nick put his hand on Eric's hard, powerful thigh while they listened to the mellow jazz. Eric laid his hand on Nick's hand.

"Thanks, Eric," Nick said.

"For what?"

"For everything. For this past year."

Eric squeezed Nick's hand. "Hey, Baby, it was my pleasure, all my pleasure," Eric said.

"I owe you so much, man," Nick said in an almost whisper. "So much."

"Nicky, it's me who owes you."

"Eric."

"No, Nick. Let me tell you. I remember all the drinking I use to do. The slipping off to sleazy, dark holes. I remember the anger I used so I wouldn't have to think about what I'd done. This past year, you've brought me peace. You've made me feel clean. You've helped me get away from my fear and embarrassment."

"Eric, man," Nick said.



“No, Nicky. Please, let me finish. For a long time, I carried a secret shame from all my hiding, sneaking, and lying. I was always afraid somebody might find out my secret. That shame and fear blinded me to what you saw, to what you see.

“Nick, you see a beauty in me I didn’t know was there. You’re always telling me how much you love my white skin, what you call my noble face, my strong back. You once said I have brave, pure eyes. You told me I have a large, infectious smile. Nick, you’ve opened my eyes. You make me feel good about myself.

“Nicky, I’m a strong man. I know I could probably kill a man with a single punch. I’ve never met a man who frightened me. But you—you, Baby, you can bring tears to my eyes. Not sad tears or painful tears, but tears of love and wonder. I might be strong, maybe even stoic like my dad says, but Nicky, you can make me laugh and blush. You can stop me dead in my tracks with a look, or a smile, or a whisper.

“I love you, Nick. I love you so much.”

Nick sat quietly for a few minutes. Finally, he said, “What do I say to that?” He leaned over and kissed Eric’s temple. “You know, man,” Nick said, “you’ve helped me too. You’ve helped me understand myself.”

“What do you mean? How?” Eric asked.

“Eric, I know I’m beautiful. I know I have a beautiful face and a great body. I’ve been told that my whole life. Sometimes being this good-looking just bothers me. I mean, it really bothers me.”

“I know, Nicky,” Eric said. “So much about the gay community is superficial. We’ve both seen men who are kind of dull-looking or overweight. They get overlooked, teased, and even shunned by a lot of gays.”

“Yeah, Eric,” Nick said. “That’s what bothers me about my looks. I don’t want to be superficial and hollow like that. I think people should be accepted because of their character, not their passing beauty.”

“I know that, Nicky,” Eric said. “I saw that in you that first week when we were getting to know each other. That’s one of the reasons I love you so much.”

“Thank you, Eric,” Nick said. “I know there’re people, gay and straight, who only like me because of my looks. I know I can say almost anything, and these people will accept it. A couple of times, I’ve said stupid things just to see the reaction. Most of these people don’t care if I’m stupid or not. They just can’t get past my looks. That’s an empty, cold way to relate to someone. I want to be judged by what I am inside, not the good looks I inherited from my mom and dad. I want to be liked, to be loved, for being me, that’s all. You do that, Eric. You love me. You love Nick, the real Nick.”

“Yeah, I do,” Eric answered. “But, man, and don’t get me wrong, I love your passing beauty. I love your face and your awesome body. Your strong arms and smooth skin. And I could eat that round, royal ass of yours every night and every day.”

“Man, Eric,” Nick said, “you’re going down the wrong road.”

“I’ll get back on the right road,” Eric said. “Even with all your beauty, I mean your face and your body, it’s the beauty in your heart that holds me to you. Nick, I adore you. It’s your heart, your goodness, your fairness, your little-boy zest for life that I love.”

THEY arrived at the inn an hour before noon. Don had given Eric Monday and Tuesday off as an anniversary gift. The young men planned on spending most of their time wandering among the dunes and the forest before they returned home. The two loved to spend time together hiking, exploring, and discovering their world and each other. Monday afternoon and evening, they wandered the forest.

Early Tuesday morning, they hiked in the dunes. Hidden from the world behind a large dune, Eric gently pulled Nick by the hand down onto the sand. He tenderly caressed Nick’s face with his powerful yet gentle hands. Nick gave himself to the redheaded man he adored.

Holding with urgent strength to Eric's shoulders, Nick gasped in pleasure as his mate entered his body and made love to him under the domineering sun on the hot white sand.

TWO days after their return home, the city was baking under a hot August sun. The air was still, without any breeze to help against the heat. The neighborhood was quiet. Everything seemed to be resting and waiting for the relief of cooling night. After a long day at work, Eric sat on the sofa staring into the dark fireplace. He heard Nick walk in from the kitchen and stop behind him.

"Eric, is something wrong? You've been awful quiet."

Eric slowly turned his head and looked at Nick.

"You look worried, man. What's wrong?" Nick asked.

"Nick, I don't want any secrets between us."

"What does that mean?" Nick asked.

"It means I've got something I want to tell you, but I'm not quite sure how. And I don't know how you're going to take it."

"Well, just tell me," Nick said as he walked around the sofa.

Eric stood and faced Nick. "Do you remember that night when we went to the Greek Patio with Kirk and Diane?"

"We've been there a couple of times with them," Nick answered.

"This was the first time. This was the night Dennis came in."

"Yeah, I remember."

"I went to the bathroom."

"So."

Quietly, Eric answered, "I went because I saw Dennis go in."

Eric saw Nick look hard at him.

"And?" Nick said.

"And I hit him. I didn't follow him because I wanted to hit him. I wanted to talk to him. I wanted to tell him what I thought about a man

who hit and knocked down the person they were suppose to care about.” Eric could hear Nick’s breathing. “Nick, I don’t know if I hit him because I was pissed because he knocked you down, or if I was jealous because you used to have sex with him.”

Nick was quiet. He stood looking at Eric.

“He said some things, Nick. He said some things about you.” Eric worked hard to keep his voice calm. His lower lip felt tight. Nick stepped closer, wrapped his arms around Eric’s shoulders, put his cheek against his throat, and held him. Eric was very aware of Nick’s breathing. “Nick...,” he started to say.

“Shh,” Nick interrupted him. “Don’t say anything, Eric. Don’t say anything.”

Eric closed his eyes and carefully, hesitantly, put his arms around Nick’s waist. Eric was not sure how long they stood in their living room holding each other in silence. He slowly became aware that the arms around him began to hold him tighter. Nick turned his head and kissed Eric’s neck. Then he spoke. His voice was a low whisper. “Eric, I’m not mad because you hit him. Fuck, I broke the son of a bitch’s jaw. I’m not mad at all. I’m scared, Eric. I’m scared because I could have lost you that night. You might have killed that bastard with your hard, badass fist. You might have ended up in prison. Then we’d be apart for a very, very long time.”

Eric heard something in Nick’s words. Actually, it was something he did not hear. He ventured to speak. “Nicky,” he said softly, “you didn’t say I’d be out of your life if I went to prison.”

“Of course you wouldn’t be out of my life, you asshole. I love you. Even if you went to prison, I’d still love you.”

“I’m sorry, Nick.”

“What did he say that made you hit him?”

“Nick.”

“Please, Eric.”

With his chin on Nick’s shoulder, Eric took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. When he spoke, his words were loud and hoarse. He

spoke quickly. “He said you knew how to work a cock. He said he wanted to fuck your face. He said he wanted to fuck your face again.” He emphasized the word “again.”

“I’m sorry, Eric.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“I’m sorry ’cause I lowered myself to that bastard.”

“Nick, remember what I did before I met you?”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t have anything to apologize for,” Eric assured him.

“I gave my body to that pig,” Nick whispered.

“Nick, before I met you, when I got drunk, I did some piggy things myself. Remember?”

“Yeah. You’ve told me,” Nick said. “I guess we both stepped into some shit while we looked for love.”

“Yeah, but now we’ve cleaned each other,” Eric said.

He took Nick’s shoulders in his hands and pushed him back so he could look into his eyes. “I need you,” Eric said. “You need me. I’ve learned that about us. We’re two broken bowls. Only together can we carry enough water to keep the garden green.”

“Oh, my fucking God!” Nick said with a great smile. “You are a poet. You’re my poet. My big, beautiful, red poet.”

With his mouth, Nick caressed Eric’s mouth. With his hands, Eric caressed Nick’s body. With their love, they caressed each other.

## Chapter 17

### The Island

ERIC sat on the small sofa in his office and laced up his hiking boots. He had just changed into shorts and an old green T-shirt. When he finished tying his boots, he stood and walked to the window. People were walking the tree-lined city street below. The warm August afternoon promised to be a perfect day for his plan.

Standing at the window, Eric called Nick on his cell phone. “Hey, Baby,” he said. “I’ve got a surprise for you.”

“What kind of surprise?” Nick asked.

“Never mind. Are you home?”

“Yeah.”

“Put on your hiking gear. Be quick. I’ll be there in a few minutes to pick you up.”

“Why?” Nick asked. “What’s up?”

“Never mind. Just hurry up and change.”

Eric tried to keep his voice calm. He did not want to give his plans away by letting Nick hear his excitement. On his way out, he stopped at the door of Don’s office and looked in on his boss. “Wish me luck,” he said.

“You don’t need it, Eric,” Don answered, “but good luck anyway. I know everything’s going to be okay.”

“I hope so. I’ve never been so nervous in my life.”

Don smiled and said, "Call me later and let me know how things went. Beth wants to know too."

"You told Beth?" Eric asked.

"Yes, now get out of here."

"Tell her to keep it a secret," Eric said.

"She will. Now go!" Don repeated.

Eric hurried to his car. He was sure—he was pretty sure—things would work out as he hoped, but....

When Eric arrived home, Nick he was sitting on the steps of the front porch wearing hiking shorts and his favorite dark green T-shirt. He got up and walked to Eric's car.

"What's the surprise?" he asked.

"A picnic."

"Cool," Nick answered.

"Help me get the stuff out of my car and into your Jeep," Eric said.

Together, they took a cooler, a wicker basket, and a folded blanket from Eric's trunk and loaded them into Nick's jeep. Then they strapped the canoe onto the Jeep.

"I'll drive," Eric said.

They jumped into the Jeep and Eric drove several miles north of town to the spot on the Indian River where they often started their canoe runs. "We're going to have our picnic on that island over there." Eric said. He pointed to a small wooded island near the opposite bank.

"What's going on?" Nick asked.

"I told you," Eric answered. "We're going on a picnic."

They unloaded the canoe and slid it into the river. Nick secured the canoe's lines to the exposed tree roots along the bank. Then they took all the supplies from the Jeep and loaded them into the canoe. Nick stepped in and took his place in the bow seat. Eric stepped in and took his place in the stern seat. They released the lines and, together, they used their paddles to push the canoe from the bank and headed

across the river towards the island. The river current was strong, but so were Eric and Nick. They crossed the water easily and smoothly.

They paddled up onto a sandy shore on the island. Nick stepped out, grabbed the bow, and pulled the canoe and Eric further up the landing. Eric stepped out of the canoe, and together they unloaded their supplies.

They spread the blanket on the leaf-littered ground under the trees and sat on it facing each other. Nick reached for the wicker basket. Eric stopped him.

“No, Nicky” he said. “You always serve me. Let me serve you for a change.”

“Okay,” Nick answered with a smile.

Nick sat quietly as Eric laid out their supper. There was Metsovone cheese, pita bread, and hummus from their favorite deli. Eric had also brought tomatoes, pepperoncini, dried figs, fresh pears, and a bottle of Nick’s favorite white wine from Crete.

Eric knew how Nick hated paper plates and plastic knives and forks, so he had brought real dishes and flatware. “Look, Nicky. I even remembered to bring olive oil and vinegar for the tomatoes,” he bragged.

“Did you remember the salt and pepper?”

“Absolutely. Here they are.”

A smiling Eric served dinner to a smiling Nick. They ate and spoke of the things they usually shared with each other at the end of their workday.

When their leisurely supper was finished, Eric reached into the cooler and took out a bottle of sparkling Italian wine. From the wicker basket, he took two wine flutes. He opened the bottle and poured wine into the flutes. He handed a glass to his lover. “To you and me, Nick,” he said as he raised his glass.

Nick raised his. They gently touched their glasses together and took a drink. The big, red Dane put his hand on the back of Nick’s head, gently pulled him close, and kissed him.



“Nicky,” he said, looking into his mate’s warm brown eyes, “I love you. You’re the most important thing in my life. You’ve made my life good and clean again. You’ve filled me with so much happiness. More happiness than I ever thought possible. You’ve helped me learn to enjoy life again.”

He took Nick’s glass and set it with his on a dish. Then he carefully took Nick’s hands and held them tightly. Slowly, Eric bowed his noble head, lifted Nick’s hands to his mouth, and kissed both palms. He raised his head and looked long at his partner. “I love you so much, Nicky,” he finally said. “So fucking much. We’ve talked about spending our lives together. I want that. I want that very much. And I want you, Nicky. I want you always with me, always in my life. I want to always be with you and in your life. I want us to build our lives together. I want us to grow old together.”

He paused for a moment and smiled self-consciously. “I know I sound selfish when I say I want this and I want that, but I believe you want these things too.”

“I do,” Nick answered softly.

Eric looked at the blanket for a moment and then back into Nick’s eyes. He spoke slowly. “Nicky. Nick. Nikos. Oh, man. I’m sorry. I’m just so nervous.”

“Eric....”

“Nicky, let me finish.” He paused, put his right hand into a pocket of his hiking shorts, and took out a small, black jeweler’s box. Carefully, he opened the box and showed Nick a golden ring set with a sparkling bright emerald. “Man, I’ve rehearsed this a hundred times, but now I’ve forgotten everything I was going to say.” He took a deep breath. “Oh, man. Nicky, my love, my life. Will you marry me?”

Before the sound of Eric’s question had faded away among the trees, Nick threw himself forward. He landed on Eric, pushed him onto his back, and crushed his body against the earth with his own. Dishes and wine glasses were pushed aside with a clatter. Uneaten food was spilled and scattered onto the blanket.

“Eric, you fucker! You beautiful fucker!” Nick shouted between the kisses with which he bathed Eric’s face and mouth. “I love you, you big, red Viking. I love you so fucking much, you Great Dane! Yes, I’ll marry you! Of course I’ll marry you.”

After Nick’s answer, the two young men shared a deep, long kiss. Slowly, deeply, passionately, they kissed one another. When the kiss ended, Nick raised his head. Eric looked up at the face of his fiancé. Sunlight filtering through the leaves of the tall old trees framed Nick’s beautiful head with a halo.

“You sure?” Eric asked the beautiful face looking down at him.

“Eric, you own me,” Nick said. “My heart, my body, my love are yours. Only yours. All for you. Only for you.”

Eric smiled up at his lover. “Nicky, that’s all I want. All of you.”

“You’ve had me, all of me, from that first beautiful day.”

“Nicky, you’ve filled my heart with so much love, sometimes I think it’ll explode. I love you, Nicky. I love you so much.”

“Eric, I love you too. I want you to know that. I want you to know beyond all doubt, I love you. If nothing else in this world is real, my love for you is real.”

Eric smiled up at Nick. He searched the beautiful face above him, the warm brown eyes and the smiling mouth. He remembered his life before Nick—the loneliness, the emptiness, the cold, hard blankness. Those days were now dust that had been blown away by a warm breeze. He pulled Nick’s mouth to his and caressed those beautiful lips with his own.

“You know, Baby,” he said when their mouths finally parted. “Most of our lives will probably be common, dull days. Boring workdays. The everyday.”

“That’s all I want, Eric. I want to be bored with you. I want common, dull workdays with you. I want life with you.”

“You dumb fuck,” Eric quietly said as he pulled Nick back down to him.

Their mouths joined together once again. Their hands caressed

one another.

“Here,” Eric said when their kiss ended.

He took Nick’s left hand and tried to slip the ring onto the third finger. It stuck at the second knuckle. Nick reached over with his other hand and pushed the ring into place.

Again, their mouths sought one another. They kissed long with gentle passion. When their lips parted, Nick backed his head away from Eric and looked at him. Eric saw something in Nick’s eyes that gave him small worry.

“What’s wrong, Nick?” he asked.

“When you told me you hit Dennis, you said you didn’t want any secrets between us. Remember?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“I have a secret I’ve never told you,” Nick answered. “Something I think you should know.”

“What?” Eric asked.

“Eric, it’s a dark secret,” Nick confessed. “My darkest secret. Not even Tommy knows. You might not want to marry me when I tell you.”

Eric rolled onto his side and Nick slid off his body. They lay on their sides with their bodies tight together and their faces only inches apart.

“I don’t care what it is, Nicky,” Eric assured him. “Nothing will stop me from loving you or wanting to marry you.”

“But it might stop you from liking me.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? What’s your dark secret?”

Nick put his mouth next to Eric’s ear and whispered, “I don’t like women.”

“What?” Eric asked.

In a voice that was only a little louder, Nick answered again. “I don’t like women.”

“What are you talking about?” Eric asked. “Tony’s one of your best friends, and so is Karen. There’s your sister and my sister. There’s

Diane and all the dykes at the bar you hug and kiss every time we go there. There's all kinds of women you like, or at least I thought you liked."

"I do like them. I love them," Nick answered, "but they're different."

"Different? What do you mean?" Eric asked.

"They're individuals. I'm talking about in general."

"I don't understand," Eric said.

"I don't know if I can explain it," Nick said.

"Try."

"When I know a woman, she's a person. My feelings are for that person. But as a whole, females bother me."

"How?" Eric asked.

"They try to manipulate you with their eyes or their tits or their tears," Nick answered.

"Those are things they learned from their fathers and the other men in their lives," Eric said.

"Maybe," Nick answered, "but I just don't like them hitting on me all the time, always coming on to me. I hate it when a woman uses sex to control or punish a man."

"If you were a woman, you might think differently," Eric added.

"I know," Nick answered. "I've tried to look at it from a woman's point of view. I know there are disgusting, nasty men, brutal men who crush and manipulate women, but that doesn't make a woman using her pussy as a weapon or a lure any better."

Eric took a deep breath. He kissed Nick and smiled. "In my job, I've learned to look at both sides of an issue. It helps to see things from all vantage points. There are woman who do punish men with their pussies. But there are men who control women with their wealth or their physical strength. I think your problem is probably having women hit on you all the time and not quite knowing how to deal with it."

"Are you disappointed in me?" Nick asked. "Do you still like

me?”

Eric kissed Nick between the eyes and answered him with his lips brushing his brows. “Yes, I like you. I like you, and I love you, and I understand you. When I dated women, I hated it when one of them would tell me she wasn’t going to have sex with me because she was pissed about some damn thing. And a lot of times, it was something she’d created in her own head.”

“That’s another thing,” Nick said. “They can create a problem where no problem existed.”

“They’re a hard bunch to decode,” Eric agreed.

“And I really hate that arrogant, bitchy look on some of their faces when they walk into a room and think every man there wants them,” Nick added.

“Ha!” Eric said. He sat up pulling Nick with him.

“What, ha?” Nick asked.

“It’s like I said, you just don’t want them coming on to you. And when they walk into a room with that look, you don’t like them thinking they can control you like they do straight men. Right?”

Nick looked at Eric thoughtfully for a moment.

“Right?” Eric asked again.

“Yeah,” Nick answered slowly. “You don’t think I’m rotten or bad?” he asked.

“Oh, Nicky,” Eric answered as he hugged him. “You’re the sweetest, nicest person I know. You just don’t have enough experience with women. You have to learn to deal with them properly. I think most of your dislike is simple fear.”

“I still don’t like it when they come on to me,” Nick added.

“I don’t like that either,” Eric agreed.

“You still want to marry me?” Nick asked.

“You asshole,” Eric answered. “Of course I want to marry you.”

“Even knowing what I just told you?”

“Nick,” Eric said in a very serious voice, “you know the darkest

secrets I have. You know the places I use to stick my cock. You know the mindless drunk I used to turn into in order to have sex. Don't worry, Nicky. You're learning, and you're growing. The most important thing is you're being honest with yourself, and you're always honest with me. You can't grow until you accept the fact that you have to grow."

"Yeah?" Nick asked.

"Yeah." Eric answered. "Now let's plan a wedding."

Sitting together on their blanket on a small wooded island in the middle of a river in West Michigan, they made their wedding plans. They would have their life partner ceremony in October, a month they both loved. When they were finished with their planning, Nick went to Eric's zipper with his mouth.

After their lovemaking, as they lay naked together on their blanket, Eric confessed a secret visit he had made a few weeks earlier to Nick's parents. He told Nick he had gone to ask for their blessing for the wedding. Nick sat up suddenly.

"You're not serious?" he asked.

"I'm totally serious."

"You went to my parents? Did you give them a cow or a goat for my hand?"

"Don't be a smartass!" Eric said as he sat up.

"Man! Why did you do something like that?" Nick asked.

"Because family is important to both of us," Eric answered. "I just wanted to be respectful to your parents. Besides, I knew they'd agree and give their blessing."

"Fucking sure of yourself, aren't you?" Nick asked.

"Yep. I'm downright arrogant." Eric answered.

"What'd they say?"

"They gave me their blessing," Eric smiled. "I also asked them to keep the wedding a secret. You know, so you and I could tell everybody."

“Do you think I should go to your parents now and ask for their blessing?” Nick asked.

“No,” Eric answered. “I asked you to marry me. The *asker* is the one to get the blessing from the *askee*’s parents”

“You asshole,” Nick laughed. He pushed Eric onto his back. Eric grabbed his arms and pulled him down onto his chest.

“Listen, while I was there, your dad and I talked about some legal steps we can take to help make us a union even without a legal marriage.”

“Like what?” Nick asked.

Eric explained everything he had discussed with Sal, Nick’s attorney father. When they finished with all their plans, the two men dressed, repacked everything, loaded the canoe, and began to paddle back across the river.

“Eric, is that Tommy and Allan waiting on the bank?”

“Looks like it,” Eric answered.

“Why are they here?”

“I think they’re curious about your answer.”

“They knew you were going to propose?” Nick asked.

“I was so nervous, Nicky,” Eric said. “I had to talk with someone.”

“You didn’t think I’d say no, did you?”

“I thought you’d say yes, but I was still nervous,” Eric answered as he glided the canoe parallel with the riverbank.

“What’d you say?” Tommy asked before they got out of the canoe.

“I said yes,” Nick answered looking up from his seat. “What the fuck else do you think I’d say?”

When Eric and Nick stepped out of the canoe, Tommy and Allan excitedly, happily hugged and kissed them. After the congratulations, Allan handed Eric a small, black, wooden box.

“What’s this?” Eric asked.

“A gift,” Tommy answered. “Open it.”

Eric opened the box and took out a small bronze statue of a naked young man in the classic Greek style. Eric and Nick both looked at their friends.

“It’s a statue of Antinous,” Allan explained. “He’s the god of gay love.”

“Here,” Tommy said. He pulled a large white envelope from his back pocket and handed it to Nick. The envelope had several folded papers inside. “I printed some information about Antinous I found online. It’s a cool story.”

“Man, you guys are too much,” Nick said.

“Do we have to make an altar or anything?” Eric asked with a wide smile.

“No. Just put him on your nightstand next to your bed,” Allan explained.

“I hope he doesn’t shock easily,” Nick added with a wicked smile.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Eric asked as he lightly slapped the back of Nick’s head.

The four young men laughed together and loaded the canoe onto the Jeep.

“We want to take you two out for supper tomorrow night to celebrate,” Allan said.

“Thanks, guys. You’ve done so much already,” Nick answered.

“We’ll pick you up at eight,” Allan told them.

“Okay,” Eric answered. “And please keep this a secret. Let us tell everybody.”

“We won’t say a word,” Allan promised.

At Nick’s insistence, once the canoe was loaded, the newly engaged lovers drove to visit Eric’s parents to tell them about their plans to form a vowed union and the legal steps Sal was helping them prepare.



During the drive, Nick telephoned his parents and told them he and Eric were engaged.

That evening, the two young men composed an e-mail about their decision to join into a vowed union. They sent the message to all their family and friends.

## Chapter 18

### Bleeding Faces

EVER since he had been a small child and had discovered the camera, Nick had been taking photographs. He liked the intimate: close-ups of moss, flowers, insects, and frogs, shadows on stones, and sprouts poking through the soil. These were also what sold best for him at street fairs and the farmer's market.

He had always enjoyed taking these kinds of photographs, but over the years, as he learned and perfected his craft, his vision expanded. He came to realize he wanted to create photographs of people that reflected their love for and connection to one another. He thought the best way to fulfill this concept and to make a living was to someday open a photography studio. Before he had met Eric, he had begun saving money for his dreamed-of studio.

On a bright morning a week after their engagement, the two lovers sat at their kitchen table sharing breakfast.

"Nicky," Eric said, "I think it's time you quit your job and started concentrating on getting your studio going."

"I can't quit my job," Nick said. "Not yet."

"You have enough money saved," Eric said. "I can help with any extra expenses that will probably turn up."

"But the household expenses," Nick said. "My share of the bills. My Jeep insurance and cell phone bill. And my health insurance is through the nursery."

“Don’t worry, Nicky. I’ll support both of use while you look for a studio and then work to get it going. I asked Don, and he said I could cover you with my health insurance. Don’t worry about anything except your studio. I want you to put all your talent and energy into getting the business off to a good start.”

“No way, man,” Nick told him. “I don’t want someone else paying my bills, paying my way.” Nick stood and walked to the sink. He looked out the window and watched a pair of goldfinches at the feeder he had hung from the maple tree.

“Why not?” Eric asked. “If I were hurt and couldn’t work, wouldn’t you help me? Wouldn’t you take care of me?”

He turned to face Eric. “Of course I would,” he said. “You know I would.”

”So what’s the problem?”

“I’m not hurt, and I don’t like the idea of being a kept man, not paying my own way.”

“You’re not a kept man, you asshole,” Eric said. “If it were the other way around, wouldn’t you do this for me?”

“Yes, absolutely!” Nick answered quickly.

“So what’s the problem? You quit the nursery. You look for a store to rent. You put together a studio, create masterpieces of photography, and make lots of money so I can quit my job and be your kept man.”

Nick turned and again looked out the window at the birdfeeder. He stood silent watching the birds.

“Nick,” Eric said in a softer voice, “I know you’re uncomfortable with this. If things were turned around, I’d probably feel the same way you do. But Nicky, couples do things like this for each other. They help each other. Someday, I might ask you to do this for me if I want to go off in a new direction.”

Nick looked at Eric. “What new direction?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Eric answered, “maybe opening a repair shop or something. You know how I like to fix things.”

“I think any new direction for you will be a partnership with Don,” Nick said. “He already treats you like you’re his son.”

“Nick, please. Please let me do this for you. Let me be part of this with you.”

Nick looked back out the window.

“Nicky, what are thinking?”

“What if I fail?” Nick asked in a small voice. “You’re so good at business. You know so much. I get confused balancing my checkbook.”

“For God’s sake, Nick. I thought you had more balls than that,” Eric said.

“I don’t want to embarrass you.”

“Nick, you won’t embarrass me. Man, I was afraid, too, when I went to work for Don, but I tried, and I made it. I still sometimes worry I’m going to make a big-ass mistake and fall flat on my face, but if I do, I’ll get up and try again. We never know unless we try.”

“But you weren’t opening your own business,” Nick said.

“No, I wasn’t, but Nicky, I’m here. You’re not alone. I’ll always be here. If you fail, try again. I’ll always be here. I won’t be embarrassed. I won’t get mad. I’ll only be mad if you don’t try. Please, go after your dream. I know you can do it.”

“I’m just so worried sometimes,” Nick said.

“Hey, I’ll help you with any advice I can, in anyway I can. We’ll have Don and Beth over for supper and you can pump him for all the advice you need. You know, he started his business when he was in his twenties. Do it, Nicky. I promise I’ll help anyway I can.”

Eric’s support and the idea of guidance from Don helped ease Nick’s concern. “I just can’t say no to you, can I?” Nick asked.

“No more than I can say no to you,” Eric answered.

Nick sighed and smiled. “Okay,” he said slowly. “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Nicky. This is what you and I are. We’re a team. Together, we can do anything.”

“You really believe that, don’t you?” Nick asked.

“Yeah, I do,” Eric answered.

“Man!” Nick said. He walked to Eric, took his upper arms, pulled him to his feet, and hugged his waist. Eric put his arms around Nick’s shoulders as they leaned their foreheads together. “Not only a poet, but a philosopher,” Nick said softly.

“Yup,” Eric answered. “And after work today, we’re going to go tell your parents.”

“What?” Nick asked. He backed away from Eric. “Why?”

“I want them to know you’re going to be all right,” Eric answered.

“Why do they need to know anything?” Nick asked.

“They’re going to find out you quit your job. I don’t want them to worry.”

Again, Nick exhaled loudly. “Okay,” he answered.

“Good,” Eric said. “Now let’s hurry up and get going. You don’t want to be late for work the same day you tell your boss you’re going to quit.”

That morning, Nick gave his employer his two weeks’ notice. Because of his job as a manager, he was asked to stay on for thirty days in order to train his replacement. He agreed. That afternoon after work, he and Eric drove to Sal and Candy’s house.

Sitting in the living room, the two young men explained their plans.

“I give you my word of honor,” Eric told Nick’s parents. “You don’t have to worry. I won’t abandon Nick. I’ll help him until his studio gets going. I’ll be there for him after the studio gets going. I’ll be there for him as long as I live, just like he’ll be there for me.”

“Thank you, Eric,” Sal said. “We appreciate you telling us what you guys have planned, but I wonder, have you two really thought this through? You’ve known each other for such a short time.”

“Yeah, Pop, we have,” Nick answered. “Eric and I plan on growing old together.”

“I understand your concern, Sal,” Eric added. “We’ve thought it

through carefully. We've spent lots of nights discussing our future together."

"I hope this doesn't put pressure on your relationship," Candy said.

"This is one of the reasons for the relationship," Eric explained. "You know, to build a life together. But as for money, I make a very good living. I make more than enough to take care of Nick and my needs and wants. You know your son; he's not extravagant. He'd rather hike in the woods than go shopping."

Nick's parents smiled at the two young men.

"Sometimes you guys act older than your age," Sal said.

"We both have great parents," Nick answered.

"Eric," Sal said, "Candy and I liked you the first time we met you. Your promise to help our son and stand with him only strengthens our affection."

"We have a gift for you," Candy said. She left the room. When she returned she handed Nick a check.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Look at it," his father said.

He looked at the check. "Fifteen thousand dollars!"

Nick looked at his parents as he handed the check to Eric.

"What the hell's this?" he asked.

"Like your mother said, a gift," his father answered.

He stared at his parents for a moment. Surprise, shock, disbelief—he was not sure what he felt.

"Mom, Pop," he protested. "We can't take this."

"Of course you can," his father said. "We gave this same amount to your brother and sister when they chose their careers."

"I didn't know that," Nick said.

"It was a secret," his mother admitted. "When we gave it to your brother, we told him not to say anything to you or Maggie. When we gave it to Maggie, we told her not to say anything to you. We wanted

you kids to make your own choices and to use your own abilities. You've done that. Now we can help you, because you've helped yourself."

Nick stood, went to his parents, and hugged them. "You guys are the best," he said.

THE last Friday in August was hot and cloudless. Eric and Nick drove to Eichenwald County Park in Nick's Jeep. Kirk, Diane, and their five-year-old daughter, Lucy, followed in their Suburban.

"I left my camera in the Jeep," Nick said as they were putting the food on the picnic table. "Hey, Tumbleweed, you want to walk back with me to get it?" he asked Lucy.

Lucy jumped from the bench where she was standing. "Yeah!" she answered.

Lucy loved her uncles Eric and Nick. Often, they took her on outings around the city. Sometimes, she spent the night, and Nick would let her help make supper and breakfast.

Nick was teaching Lucy how to compose and create photographs of everything from people and pets to insects and flowers and small creeping things. He usually called her Tumbleweed because of her long, soft blonde hair and the way she always followed him wherever he went.

Lucy took Nick's hand. Chatting happily together, they walked towards the parking lot and Nick's Jeep to fetch the camera. When they walked into the lot, Nick saw two men standing a few feet from his Jeep. The men were only a few years older than Nick. They were built heavier than him but not as tall. And though they had full bellies, they were not fat.

One wore loose-fitting denim carpenter pants and a black T-shirt with a red anarchist symbol. The other was dressed in a sleeveless black and white flannel shirt and baggy jeans. Both wore dirty construction boots.

They looked almost as if they were waiting for him.

“Hey, faggot!” the man with the anarchist symbol shouted when Nick and Lucy were a dozen yards from the Jeep.

“Run back to your dad!” Nick said to Lucy. “Hurry!”

The girl turned and ran towards her parents. As she ran, the two men walked closer to Nick.

“I’m Shannon’s brother,” the man with anarchist symbol said. “She told me you turned Eric into a queer.”

The other man suddenly sprang at Nick and pushed him violently against a parked car. “Queer! Motherfuckin’ faggot!” the man screamed.

Nick’s back was slammed savagely against the car. The impact of his body hitting the car set off the alarm. Shannon’s brother threw a crashing punch into Nick’s face. He swung again. Nick dodged the second punch but caught one from the other man in the ribs on his left side.

In defense, Nick hit Shannon’s brother in the face with his powerful fist. The man staggered, caught his balance, and came at Nick again. Shannon stepped from behind a parked SUV. She screamed at the attackers. “Kill that faggot! Break his fucking neck!”

FROM where he was sitting, Eric heard the shouting and the car alarm. He looked and saw Lucy running towards them. He looked beyond Lucy and saw Nick block a punch from George, Shannon’s brother, at the same time the other man hit him in the chest. Eric saw Nick’s body slam against a car. In an explosion of ferocious rage, Eric jumped to his feet.

“Nick!” he yelled. He sprang from the picnic table and charged to the rescue of his Nick.

Driven by a ruthless anger, Eric crashed into the two men from behind. He grabbed both the attackers by their necks and savagely slammed their heads together with a loud crack. George fell to the



ground and did not move. With the fury of a lioness defending her cubs, Eric went at the other man with his hard, pounding fists. The man crumbled to the ground after the third punch.

Eric dropped heavily onto the man's chest with his knees, pushing the air from his lungs. Eric renewed his brutal assault on the now-bloody face. He pounded that face with his large, angry fists. Eric suddenly became aware of Kirk holding his upper arms and pulling him off Nick's attacker.

As Kirk pulled him from the man's bleeding body, the maddening car alarm stopped. Eric jerked himself free from his brother's hands and looked for Nick. He saw his lover several yards away, sprawled face down on the rough, hard, dirty parking lot pavement. He rushed to Nick, knelt at his side, and gently, fearfully rolled him onto his back.

When Eric saw Nick's face, it was as if a large, burly man had struck his chest with a two-by-four. That beautiful face he awoke with every morning was covered in smeared blood and tiny specks of asphalt. Eric's heart prepared to stop beating.

"Oh, fuck! God!" Eric fearfully cried. "Nicky! Nicky!"

Nick slowly, painfully opened his eyes. "I'm all right, man. I'm all right," he answered in a low, dry voice. He braved a weak smile.

Eric carefully lifted Nick's head and rested it on his left arm. Confused and anxious, Eric did not know what to do. The fingers of his right hand danced hesitantly in the air around Nick's face. The blood—the dirt.

"Baby. Oh, my baby," Eric breathed in fearful panic.

He wanted to crush Nick to his chest. He wanted to hold him and soothe him. Fear stopped him. He was afraid he would aggravate the injuries and cause more hurt.

"Eric," Nick said in a voice heavy with pain.

"Shh," Eric answered.

He pulled off his T-shirt and slowly, tenderly began wiping away the blood and dirt from that beautiful face. He was extremely gentle. Even though Nick was silent and did not complain, Eric knew he was

in a great deal of pain.

WHILE Eric was tending to Nick, Kirk took out his badge and identified himself to the conscious man as a police officer. He immediately placed the man under arrest and ordered him to lay on his stomach with arms behind his back.

“My nose is bleeding!” the man shouted at Kirk.

“You’re lucky you’re alive,” Kirk said. “Use your left hand and only your left hand to pinch your nose to stop the bleeding. Keep your right hand behind your back.”

Kirk looked up from the prone man and saw Shannon slowly slinking away.

“Stay where you are!” he ordered. He stood, walked to Shannon, and grabbed her wrist. “I’m placing you under arrest,” he said.

“What the fuck for?” she shouted as she tried to pull free from his powerful grasp.

“For assault,” he answered. He pulled her to the man lying on the pavement and ordered her to lie on her stomach next to him. “Don’t move,” he barked.

He then went and checked George, her brother. He was afraid Eric had killed him. Two fingers to the man’s neck found a pulse. Kirk rolled George onto his back. The bloody-faced man groaned and slowly crawled back into consciousness.

Using his cell phone, Kirk called the sheriff. He identified himself as a Grand Rapids police officer, informed them of the situation, and requested aid. They told him they had already received several emergency calls and deputies had been directed to the scene.

Kirk helped George to his feet. With an arm around his shoulders, he helped the staggering man to his sister and friend and made him lie on the pavement next to them. “Don’t any of you move. We’ll all wait here until the deputies arrive,” he said.

Kirk was a large, powerful man. He knew his size and the

forcefulness of his voice would convince the trio to remain still.

TENDERLY, Eric helped Nick to his feet. Blood was still slowly oozing from Nick's nose and the corner of his mouth. Eric walked Nick to his Jeep and helped him onto the passenger seat. Then, he turned to the attackers.

In an angry, stone-cold voice he told them, "You ever come near Nick again and I'll fuck your faces with the business end of a shovel."

Eric again felt a hand on his arm. This time, it was Nick. He gently pulled Eric back to the Jeep. Eric forgot the attackers and once more helped Nick into the seat.

Eric heard the sound of an approaching siren. Within minutes, a sheriff's deputy pulled into the parking lot. The officer stopped his car near Nick's Jeep. He jumped from the cruiser with his hand on his holstered gun. Kirk held his badge up to the deputy. Within minutes of each other, two more deputies arrived in the parking lot.

While Shannon, George, and the other man were being loaded into the patrol cars, Eric returned his attention to Nick. His nose had stopped bleeding. Eric again used his T-shirt to gently wipe more of the blood and grime from Nick's face.

The deputies took statements from Kirk, Eric, Nick, and the man whose car alarm had gone off.

"That woman, Shannon Dirne, twice came to the garden center where Nick works and threatened him," Eric told the deputies.

One of the deputies checked Nick's injuries.

"I'm okay," Nick said. "I think there's more blood than damage."

"We can call the paramedics," the deputy said.

"Nick?" Eric asked.

"No, I'm all right," Nick repeated.

Because the deputies all knew Nick's brother, Marco, and because Kirk was a police officer, they accepted Nick's refusal of the

suggested paramedics.

“I’m going to take some pictures of his face for evidence,” the lead deputy told Eric.

The man went to the trunk of his patrol car and came back with a camera and first aid kit. From different angles, he took photos of Nick’s face. After taking the photographs, the deputy carefully cleaned the scrapes and applied an antibiotic cream.

FROM their spot on the picnic table, Diane and Lucy watched the deputies drive off with their prisoners. They sat and waited as the three men walked across the green grass to them. Lucy ran to Nick and hugged his legs. He lifted her up and gave her a gentle hug.

“I’m all right, Tumbleweed.”

“Lucy, be careful of his face,” Kirk said.

Diane could see a bruise developing on Nick’s left cheek. There were also smears of dried blood on his T-shirt. She handed Eric a bottle of water and some paper napkins.

“You can use these to clean the rest of the blood from his face,” she said.

Nick sat on the ground with Lucy in his lap. A shirtless Eric knelt in front of him. For the third time, he gently cleansed Nick’s face. Lucy laid her head on Nick’s shoulder and watched Eric wash away the remnants of the drying blood.

“Uncle Nick,” she asked in a small voice. “Why did they hurt you?”

“The lady was jealous of your Uncle Eric and me,” Nick gently explained. “The two guys with her are what people call bigots.”

“What is bigots?” she asked.

“Bigots are people who don’t want your uncle Eric and me to live together,” Nick said. “They think it’s wrong for us to be friends.”

“Why?” Lucy asked.

“Because they’re superstitious,” Nick answered.

“What’s that?” Lucy asked.

“Some people are afraid of black cats or they think thirteen is an unlucky number. That’s superstition.”

“Superstition,” Lucy repeated.

“Yeah,” Nick answered. “Before people knew the truth, they thought the world was flat or lightning was caused by angels in the clouds fighting each other.”

“That’s not why there’s lightning,” Lucy said with youthful authority.

“That’s right,” Nick said. “You know the truth, but like that superstition about lightning, there are some people who don’t think two men can love each other.”

“But you and Uncle Eric love each other. And you and Uncle Eric love Daddy and Daddy loves you guys back,” she said.

“That’s right, we do,” Nick answered. “And that’s the most important thing, Tumbleweed. Love is always the most important thing people can do. Hate and superstition aren’t good things.”

“Nick,” Kirk interrupted, “did you ever get your camera?”

“No,” he answered. “We never made it that far.”

“Give me your keys,” Kirk said. “I’ll go get it. I think it’d be a good idea to take some pictures of our own.”

Still holding Lucy, Nick stood up, gave Kirk his keys, and sat at the picnic table. The little blonde girl stayed on his lap and tenderly kissed his bruised cheek. Kirk returned with the camera and took more photographs of Nick’s face for their own records. The family then had their picnic on the table in the shade of the tall old oak trees. Lucy remained on the lap of her Uncle Nick.

WHEN it was time to leave, Eric would not allow Nick to drive. He got behind the wheel and drove home. Nick did not watch the passing trees

and farms. He watched Eric's face. Something was wrong. He put his hand on Eric's strong thigh.

"What's up, Eric?" he asked.

"This is all because of me," Eric answered.

"What's all because of you?" Nick asked.

"Her brother and that other guy Shannon sicced on you," Eric said. "She did it to get back at me."

"Pull over," Nick said.

"What?"

"Pull over."

"Is something wrong?" Eric nervously asked.

"Just pull over."

Eric pushed in the clutch, stepped on the brake, and pulled onto the side of the road beside a gnarled old apple tree. Nick looked at Eric and squeezed his shoulder.

"Hey, man," he said. "What happened today wasn't your fault or my fault. It happened because a woman is unable to accept reality. She's angry and hurt. She's blown off her steam. The police have her. I think in jail, she'll have time to calm down and move on with her life."

"I don't think so," Eric answered. He leaned back and looked up at the old branches above their heads. "You don't know this woman. She doesn't let go easily."

"Eric," Nick said, "I'm not going to worry about her. She'll cool off in her cell. I don't think we'll see her again."

Eric looked at Nick and smiled. "I don't know, but I hope you're right," he said. He leaned to Nick and kissed him.

"Let's go home," Nick said.

"I think we should have you checked out just to be safe," Eric said.

"I'm all right, man," Nick assured him.

"I'd still feel better if a doctor looked at you."

Nick knew there was no point in arguing. "Okay," he answered.

“Don’t roll your eyes at me,” Eric said. “When you’re feeling better, remind me to slap your ass.”

“I will,” Nick promised with a sore smile.

Eric shifted the Jeep back into first. They drove away from the friendly old apple tree back into the city.

Eric drove to the hospital. After several hours in the emergency room, Nick was found to be unhurt except for minor cuts and many bruises.

## Chapter 19

### Bloody Boots

SATURDAY afternoon, Kirk sat with Eric and Nick at their kitchen table. He was on duty and in his uniform. Nick poured them all a cup of coffee.

“How are you doing?” he asked as Nick handed him his coffee.

“I’m okay. A little sore, but I’m okay,” Nick answered.

“Have you told your parents yet?” Kirk asked.

“Yeah,” Nick answered. “I called them yesterday when we got home. They came right over.”

“What’d they think?”

“They weren’t happy,” Nick answered. “They were glad you and Eric were there. Mom kind of freaked because of my black eyes and everything.”

“Anyone else come by?” Kirk asked.

“Are you kidding?” Eric answered. “Once word got out, people started dropping in all night and all this morning. I’m surprised you’re the only one here now.”

“I spoke with the Sheriff’s Department,” Kirk said. “They interviewed Shannon, her brother, and his friend.”

“What’d they find out?” Eric asked.

“George told the deputies they’d been following Nick for a couple of days waiting for a chance to get him. When he walked back



to his Jeep at the park, they saw their chance. They thought they could kick his ass and get away before we knew anything was going on.”

“Don’t Shannon and her brother know you’re a police officer?” Nick asked.

“Yeah, but they thought they’d beat you and get away before Eric or me knew anything was happening,” Kirk answered. “And they didn’t think you’d fight back.”

“What?” Eric asked.

“Well, from what the deputies told me, those punks thought because Nick’s gay, or a sissy, as they put it, he’d wouldn’t fight back,” Kirk answered.

“Did they say why they did it?” Nick asked.

“We know why they did it,” Eric said.

“Kirk, did they say anything?” Nick asked again.

“Yeah. Shannon said she wanted to get back at you because you turned Eric queer and made him break up with her.”

Eric jumped from his chair and walked to the back door. “Fucking bitch!” he spat. He stood looking out the door. Nick rose from his seat, walked to him, and put his hands on his upper arms.

“Hey, man, it’s not your fault.”

Eric turned and looked at Nick. “This wouldn’t have happened if we weren’t together,” he said.

“Well, asshole, if you think I’m going to leave you, you’re crazy,” Nick said with a smile.

Eric smiled and wrapped his arms around Nick’s shoulders. Nick put his hands on Eric’s hips.

“Eric,” Kirk said, “you can’t blame yourself for what happened. Shannon made the choice, not you.”

“Listen to your brother,” Nick said softly.

Eric looked over Nick’s shoulder at Kirk. “I just don’t want anything else to happen to him,” he said.

“They’re in so much trouble now, I don’t think you have anything

to worry about,” Kirk answered.

“I hope you’re right,” Eric said.

“I’m sorry Lucy had to see everything,” Nick said.

“You answered her questions really good,” Kirk said.

“I am glad you were with us,” Eric said. “Thanks, Kirk.”

“Me too,” Kirk said.

“I didn’t even know you were behind me until you pulled me off that bastard,” Eric said.

Nick turned and looked at Kirk. He and Eric stood side by side with their arms around each other’s waists. “Did you call the sheriff?” Nick asked.

“No. When I ran after Eric, I shouted at Diane to grab Lucy and call 911,” Kirk answered.

“I bet those two assholes were surprised when they saw the two of you,” Nick said.

Kirk chuckled. “Actually, they never saw Eric coming,” he said. “Remember, Eric, you smashed their heads together before they saw you. They thought it was me.”

“They never saw me?” Eric asked.

“No, they said they only saw the guy going to turn off his car alarm and me.”

“Is Eric in any kind of trouble for beating on that guy?” Nick asked.

“No,” Kirk answered. “The onlookers who’d gathered in the parking lot all gave the same eyewitness accounts. Their statements corroborated everything Eric, you, and I reported. He was defending you from an unprovoked attack.”

“Thanks again, man,” Eric said to his brother.

Kirk stood and patted Nick’s shoulder. “I have to get back to work now. I just wanted to make sure you both were alright,” he said.

THURSDAY after work, Eric said to Nick, “Go take a hot shower and then stretch out on the bed. I’ll give you a nice massage.”

“Eric, it’s been five days. You’ve taken me to dinner twice. You’ve bathed me, given me massages, and waited on me. You don’t have to keep doing all these things. I’m fine.”

“I know, Baby,” Eric answered, “but I just want to do something.”

“Me being jumped wasn’t your fault. And you did do something. You banged their stupid-ass heads together.”

Eric laughed. “I whacked them together good, didn’t I? Kirk was a couple of yards behind me. He said he heard the noise and thought he was going to see brains on the ground.”

“I’m glad you didn’t kill them,” Nick said.

“Why?”

“Because there’d be all kinds of questions and investigations. Life is simpler by just letting the assholes live.”

SATURDAY morning came bright and fresh with a cloudless blue sky. Early, while the city was still and quiet, Eric pushed his Harley out of the garage and down the driveway. He was going to his employer’s country house for a meeting about one of their larger clients.

Eric was very aware the Harley’s thunder would reverberate in the stillness of the sleeping neighborhood. He did not want to disturb his neighbors, but he wanted very much to ride on what promised to be a beautiful day. He pushed his bike into the street and then several yards towards the corner. Jumping on and holding his breath, he turned the ignition. The Harley exploded to life, roared down the street, and around the corner. Quickly, the beautiful noise faded away, leaving only the morning song of the birds.

AN HOUR after Eric left, Nick stepped out of the house into the clear new morning. Except for the singing birds, the neighborhood was still silent. Using the old towel he kept in his Jeep, he wiped the dew from the driver's seat. He got in, backed out of the driveway, and drove to Tommy and Allan's.

Nick enjoyed diving in town in his open Jeep in the morning. He passed a few people walking their dogs. Birds greeted the world with their noisy, communal voice. Everything was fresh and new and hopeful.

Nick picked up Tommy. The two drove north of the city to visit Nick's sister Maggie and her husband, Paul, at their new house in the country.

After lunch, the two young men climbed into Nick's Jeep and headed back toward town. On the drive home, Nick stopped at a gas station at a wooded crossroads. While he was paying for the gas, Tommy went into the restroom.

The cheerful, portly, middle-aged woman working behind the counter gently kidded with Nick. He joked with her for a few minutes, said goodbye, and walked out the door.

Nearing his Jeep, Nick saw three men walk out of the woods next to the station. Two of the men had small healing cuts on their faces along with the yellowing remnants of black eyes and bruises. It was Shannon's brother, George, the other man who had attacked him, and a third man Nick had never seen before.

"Hey, faggot!" George yelled at Nick.

"I thought you assholes were in jail," Nick loudly answered. He kept walking to his Jeep.

"We got bailed out, queer," the other man answered. "Now, you sissy-ass faggot, you're gonna fucking die."

"Come on," Nick said as he backed towards his Jeep. "Which one of you fucking bitches wants to be the first to get his ass kicked by a queer?"

"Goddamn fucking cocksucker!" the third man yelled.

The three men lunged at Nick before he could jump into his Jeep. The third man smashed his fist into the side of Nick's face. Nick stumbled back and caught himself against his Jeep. Before he could stand to face them, the three men started beating him with their fists and kicking him with their booted feet.

Nick tried to block the incoming punches and kicks, but there were far too many. He was knocked down and immediately took two kicks to the face. He felt more kicks coming to his chest and his back. In the mass of feet and fists, he grabbed a foot and twisted it violently. George screamed and fell hard on his ass. Nick took another kick to the back of his neck. Desperately, he tried to use his arms to shield his face and head. The kicks kept coming.

WHEN Tommy walked out of the restroom, he heard the woman behind the counter on the telephone frantically asking for help. He looked out the large front windows and saw Nick trying to block and dodge the fists of the three men. He saw Nick fall to the ground next to his Jeep and cover his head with his arms.

"Fuck!" Tommy yelled.

He quickly looked around the convenience store and saw a shelf of anti-freeze. With each hand, he grabbed a plastic gallon jug. Heading towards the door, he saw the woman hurry from behind the counter with a fire extinguisher in her hands.

Tommy pushed the door open with his shoulder and ran to Nick.

The men kicking Nick did not see Tommy coming. With his right arm, he swung the jug of anti-freeze and smashed the third attacker in the back of his head before the man saw him. The plastic jug burst apart, spewing its sticky green cargo into the air. The man was knocked forward onto the ground. He did not move again.

George spun around to answer the assault on his friend. He was stopped by a blast to his face from the fire extinguisher wielded by the woman. The spray hit him directly in the eyes. He screamed in shock

and pain and frantically clawed at his eyes with his terrified fingers.

With only one man attacking him, Nick was able to get up off the pavement. He dove at his remaining attacker and pounded him square in the face with three quick, hard punches. The man stumbled back and received a crashing blow from Tommy's second jug of anti-freeze. Like his friend, he fell forward onto the pavement.

BLEEDING but standing tall, Nick looked down on the two quiet bodies on the dirty pavement. He painfully turned his head when he heard the coming siren. A patrol car shot into the station's lot. Its tires screeched as it stopped only feet from Nick. The deputy jumped from his car and pulled his gun from its holster.

"Everyone freeze!" the deputy loudly ordered.

Nick staggered several steps back and caught himself on his Jeep. Tommy hurried to him and put an arm around his shoulders.

"I said don't move," the deputy repeated. "Now, what happened?"

"I work here," the woman said. "I called 911 when I saw these three punks attack this young man." As she spoke, she pointed to the different players.

"This man," she pointed at Tommy, "and me helped him. I used an extinguisher and he used some plastic bottles of anti-freeze."

Tommy helped steady a shaky Nick. Wiping blood from his mouth and face with the back of his hand, Nick told the deputy about the attack a week earlier in the park. While he was talking, two more deputies pulled into the station. One of these newly arrived officers had been among the three that had come to Nick's aid during the first attack.

Nick saw the two men lying on the pavement begin to move and regain consciousness. They were helped to their feet and placed under arrest. While their injuries were being checked by the deputies, a bright red Dodge Ram pulled into the station. It was Marco, Nick's oldest

brother.

Nick knew Marco monitored police calls when he was off duty. He lived only three miles from the crossroads. He must have heard the call and hurried to the scene to see if his assistance was needed.

“Nikos!” Marco cried. He ran to his brother and grabbed him by the shoulders. “Are you all right?” he asked breathlessly.

Nick spat blood onto the ground. “I don’t know, man,” he answered, “but I’m fucking tired of getting punched and kicked in the face.”

“Christ almighty, Nikos, you’re a mess,” Marco said.

“I feel like a mess,” Nick said before he spat more blood onto the ground.

“Are these the same bastards from the park?” Marco asked. He helped Nick lean against the Jeep.

“Yeah. They are,” Nick answered.

“They could have killed you, Nikos,” Marco said.

“That’s what they said they were going to do,” Nick answered.

Marco looked at Tommy. “What about you? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Tommy answered.

“Tommy and this brave lady here saved my ass,” Nick said.

Marco looked at the woman. “Thank you. Thank you both,” he said. He looked back at his brother. “We’ve got to get you to a hospital,” he said.

“I’ll call for the paramedics,” the first deputy offered.

“No, please, don’t call an ambulance,” Nick asked.

“You need medical attention, and so do the guys who attacked you,” the deputy said.

“I want to go home first,” Nick said.

“Jesus Christ, Nikos, you have to get to the hospital. Your face is a bloody mess!” Marco said.

“I’m okay, Marco,” Nick said. “I have to go home before I go to the hospital.”

“Why, Nikos?”

“Because Eric already blames himself for what happened at the park. He’s going to blame himself for this shit too. I don’t want him to have to come to the hospital to see me. I’m going to go home. I promise I’ll go to the hospital after I see Eric at home. I promise. Please, Marco, please.”

“I don’t know, Nikos,” Marco said.

“These deputies are your friends,” Nick said. “Please.”

Marco stared at Nick for a moment. Then he turned to the deputy standing beside him. “Hey, Doug, what do you think?” Marco asked.

“It’s his right to refuse medical aid,” Doug answered, “but he really does need to be checked out.”

“I’ll see that happens, but I’ll drive him home,” Marco said.

As he spoke to his friend, Marco took out his handkerchief and gently wiped Nick’s eyes.

“He can’t drive,” Doug said. “Some of those kicks and punches he took to the head may be more serious than he realizes. And before he leaves, I want to take some photographs of his injuries as evidence.”

While Doug was getting the camera, Nick thanked the woman for her courage in coming to his aid.

“I owe you my life,” he told her.

“I was raised with four brothers,” she answered. “I learned early how to deal with men when they start acting like assholes.”

After the pictures had been taken, Marco asked, “Tommy, you’re sure you’re all right?”

“I’m fine,” Tommy answered. “I only swung some jugs of anti-freeze. No one touched me.”

“Okay. Now, do you know how to drive a stick?”

“Yeah. Don’t you remember that old Subaru I had?”

“That’s right,” Marco said. “I’ll drive Nikos to his house in my truck. You follow us in his Jeep.”

“Okay, Marco,” Tommy agreed.



Marco helped Nick into the pickup. Once they were on the road, Marco called his wife, Ann, and then his parents. Nick telephoned Eric, who was still at Don's house.

"I'm alright, Eric," Nick said after he told his mate all that had happened. "I'm a little bruised, but I'm okay."

"That bitch!" Eric said.

Nick heard hatred in Eric's voice.

"I knew she was going to do something. I'm going to kill that bitch!" Eric said.

"No, you wouldn't," Nick told him. "I want you home in our bed at night, not in some damn jail cell."

"Baby, I'm so sorry," Eric said.

Nick now heard pain and anger in Eric's voice. "Hey, you don't have to apologize."

"This wouldn't have happened if it weren't for me."

"Don't go there, Eric," Nick said. "You're not responsible for any of this."

"I love you, Nicky," Eric answered. "I'm going jump on my bike and get home fast as I can"

"I love you too, Eric, but calm yourself and be careful. I don't want you to have an accident. Marco will get me home in just a little bit. Now be careful."

"I'll be careful," Eric assured him.

"Promise?" Nick asked.

"I promise, Nicky. I promise."

After Nick ended his call with Eric, Marco handed him his cell phone. Candy, their mother, was on the telephone.

"I'm fine, Mom," Nick lied. "I've got a few bruises, but I'm okay. Marco will have me home in ten or fifteen minutes."

WHEN Eric arrived home, he saw Nick's parents standing in the front

yard. He pulled into the driveway and climbed off his bike. Don and Beth had followed him in their car. They parked along the curb. Kirk, Diane, and their little daughter Lucy pulled up behind them.

Within minutes, Marco and Nick pulled into the driveway. Tommy parked Nick's Jeep behind the Ram. Everyone rushed to the truck and crowded at the passenger door.

Sal opened the door and helped his son out of the pick-up.

"Nikos!" Candy cried.

"Eric," Nick called out.

Cruel reality slapped Eric when he saw the bruises, the dried blood, and the scratches on Nick's battered face, the face of his beloved, his heart, his life. He reached for Nick and carefully took him in his arms. He felt sick and was near to being overwhelmed by his fear, his anger, and his guilt. He knew these attacks on Nick were Shannon's way of punishing him, of trying to hurt him.

He took Nick's upper arms and carefully pushed him away so he could examine the injuries on his beautiful, wounded face.

Candy wrapped her arms around her son's chest and started to cry.

"Are you all right, Nikos?" Sal asked.

"I'm okay, Pop," Nick said. "I'm sore as hell, but I'm okay."

Sal quickly hugged his son around the shoulders and kissed his temple. He released him and asked again. "You're sure nothing's broken?"

"I don't think anything's broken," Nick answered.

"Nicky, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Eric kept repeating as he searched the injuries on Nick's face.

"It's not your fault," Nick said softly.

He took Eric face in his hands and looked into his eyes. "I'm okay, Eric. I'm okay."

Candy took hold of Eric's forearm.

"Bring Nikos into the house so we can clean him and check him

closer,” she said.

“Oh, my God,” Eric answered. “I’m sorry. Come on, Nicky.”

Marco’s wife Ann and their little son Gianni arrived as Eric was helping Nick up the steps and into their house. They hurried in behind the others.

“Diane,” Eric called out, “bring me a washcloth, a bowl of warm water, and some soap, please.”

Together, Eric and Candy helped Nick onto the sofa. They sat on either side of him and searched the wounds on his face, neck, and forearms.

“The left side of your face is starting to swell,” Eric said softly. “And I think both your eyes are going to end up black.”

He looked at Nick’s hands and arms. They were covered with small cuts, scratches, and bruises. Fearfully, he looked at the bloodstains on Nick’s T-shirt.

“Nicky,” he said, “I want to take your shirt off so I can check out your chest and back. I’ll be as careful as I can.”

“Okay,” Nick answered.

Carefully, Eric removed the shirt and revealed more bruises and skinned areas. “Oh, man,” Eric said. “I’m so sorry, Baby, I’m sorry. Fuck! Nicky, did I hurt you when I hugged you and grabbed your arms?”

“No, man. You didn’t hurt me,” Nick answered.

Eric knew Nick was lying.

“Are you in a lot of pain, Honey?” Candy asked her son.

“I’m a little sore, Mom,” he answered. “My cheeks are throbbing and I can feel them starting to swell. It hurts when I talk, but it’s nothing I can’t deal with.”

Eric knew Nick was in a great deal of pain. He knew it was in Nick’s nature to try and spare his parents and family as much worry as possible.

“But I’m getting damn tired of people kicking my face,” Nick

added.

“Candy, Sal,” Eric said in a dry, hoarse voice, “I’m so sorry about all this. It’s my fault. It’s all my fault.”

“Don’t blame yourself, Eric,” Candy said. “We don’t.”

Sal was kneeling in front of Nick. He put his hand on Eric’s knee. “Don’t punish yourself, Eric. You’re not responsible.” Sal looked at Nick and searched his face and chest with his fingers. “I don’t see any cuts on your face or chest that would need stitches,” he said. “You’re sure nothing feels broken?”

“I’m sure, Pop,” Nick answered. He tried a small smile. “But now I know what a football feels like.”

“Nick, were these the same guys who jumped you in the park?” Kirk asked.

“Yeah,” Nick answered, “and there was another man with them. I’ve never seen him before.”

Diane brought the cloth, the warm water, and the soap. She set them on the coffee table and then knelt on the floor in front of Eric. Lucy came and sat on her lap. She looked very sad and frightened. There were tears on her young, sweet cheeks.

“I’m okay, Tumbleweed. Just a few bruises,” Nick told the little girl. He reached to her and gently brushed her soft blonde hair with his hand. “I’m not hurt bad. I’m tougher than I look.”

“Eric,” Kirk said, “before you clean Nick, let’s get some pictures. Just for the record.”

“Good idea,” Sal said.

“The deputies already took photos of Nikos at the scene,” Marco said.

“Still, let’s get some of our own,” Kirk repeated.

“Nick, where’s your camera?” Eric asked.

“There’s one on the coffee table in the TV room,” Nick answered.

“I’ll get it,” Tommy offered. He hurried downstairs to the media room and grabbed the camera. Breathless, he rushed back and began

taking shots of Nick's face, chest, back, and arms from various angles.

"I've had a lot of pictures taken this week—all of them bad," Nick joked.

"These pictures will help put those scumbags away," Kirk said.

When Tommy finished taking the photographs, Eric grabbed his wrist. "Thank you, Tommy. Thank you for helping Nick when I couldn't."

"Hey, man, he'd do the same for me," Tommy answered.

Sal stood and put an arm around Tommy's shoulders and kissed his forehead. "Yes, thank you, Tommy. Thank you for helping my Nikos."

"Thank you, Thomas," Candy added from her seat on the sofa.

Eric carefully began to clean dried blood and other grime from Nick's face. With extreme care and loving thoroughness, he washed his mate. He was as gentle as a mother with a beloved child. Big, strong, powerful Eric tenderly cleaned his beloved while his heart was breaking.

"Tommy, would you please get another cloth?" Candy asked. "I can clean his back and arms while Eric does his chest."

"I'll get some fresh water," Ann offered.

Tommy hurried to get a cloth. Ann brought another bowl of warm water and took the other away. That water was now pink with bits of stuff floating in it. Together, Eric and Candy cleaned Nick's face, neck, chest, back, and arms.

Even though Nick sat quietly and stoically, Eric knew he was pain.

"It's not your fault, Eric," Nick said. "It's not your fault. And I'm okay. I promise you, Eric, I'm alright."

He leaned forward and, as they so often did when they wanted to be close, they touched their foreheads together.

"Everything will be all right, Eric," Nick whispered.

"I love you, Nicky," Eric whispered back to his mate.

The pair separated from their tender closeness.

“Am I presentable?” Nick asked.

Eric smiled at his precious Nick and told him, “You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.” He looked at Nick’s mother and asked, “Isn’t he beautiful?”

“Yes, he is,” she answered. “You’re both beautiful.”

Eric looked into Nick’s brown eyes. “Now let’s get you to the hospital and make sure everything is really alright,” he said. He looked at his oldest brother. “Will you go get Nick a clean shirt from the closet in our room?”

Kirk hurried up the stairs. Eric and Candy helped Nick stand. Eric saw he was having a difficult time trying to hide his pain. When Kirk returned, Eric and Candy helped him put on the clean shirt.

“Come on, Nicky,” Eric said as he finished buttoning the shirt. “We’ve got to get you checked out.”

“Wait,” Nick said. He knelt beside Lucy. Eric saw tears were still running down her face. He knew Nick had seen those same tears. He also knew Nick was ignoring his pain in order to ease Lucy’s. “I’ll be fine, Tumbleweed,” Nick said.

“Why do they always want to hurt you, Uncle Nick?” Lucy asked. Her young face was red and wet. Eric felt his heart break as he watched his niece and his mate.

“I don’t know, Tumbleweed,” Nick answered. “Sometimes jealousy and hate makes people do stupid and bad things.”

“Come on, Lucy,” Diane said to her daughter. “Let’s let Uncle Eric take him to the hospital.”

Nick kissed Lucy’s forehead and stood slowly. His movements were stiff. Eric helped him out the door and into his car. Tommy climbed into the backseat. Maggie and Paul arrived just as Eric was closing the passenger door. They ran to the car.

“Nikos!” Maggie cried.

She started to reach through the window for Nick. Her mother grabbed her arms and stopped her. “Margarita, don’t touch his face,”

she said.

“I’m okay,” Nick told his sister.

“They’re on their way to the hospital,” Candy said.

## Chapter 20

### Night Terror

WHEN they arrived at the hospital, Nick was immediately admitted. Eric went in with him and stayed throughout the entire painful examination and treatment.

The doctor gave Nick a pain reliever before he began checking, cleaning, and dressing his many cuts and scrapes. X-rays and a CAT-scan showed there was no serious or permanent damage. When he was finished tending to Nick, the doctor wrote prescriptions for antibiotics and medication for both the pain and the swelling. The doctor gave the prescriptions to Eric.

After three and a half tedious hours, Eric pushed Nick into the waiting room in a wheelchair. Family and friends stood and crowded around them. Eric's parents and Allan had arrived during the long wait.

"The doctor says Nicky's all right," Eric reported. "There's nothing broken, and he didn't need any stitches, but he's going to be real sore for a couple of days."

"Why's he in a wheelchair?" Candy asked.

"The stuff they gave him for pain is really strong," Eric answered. "He's having trouble keeping his balance."

"Mom, I'm okay," Nick said in a tired voice. "But I need you guys to call everybody and let them know I'm okay, please. I just want to get home, take a hot bath, and get into bed."

Candy knelt at Nick's side. "Are you sure you're all right?" she



asked.

“Yeah, I am,” he answered.

She kissed his temple and stood. “We’ll let everybody know how you’re doing,” she said.

Sal kissed Nick on the top of his head.

“Before we leave,” Eric said. He turned and looked at Tommy. “Come here, motherfucker.” He grabbed Tommy’s forearm, pulled him to his chest, and swallowed him in his arms. “Thank you again, Tommy. Thank you. Thank you,” Eric repeated as he squeezed Tommy tight to his strong chest. “Thank you for being there. Thank you for saving Nicky.”

“Hey, man,” Tommy answered. “I love him too.”

Eric kissed Tommy on the temple before he released him.

Candy put her hand on Eric’s wrist and told him, “Please, watch after my baby.”

“I swear,” Eric answered.

She put her hand behind Eric’s neck, pulled him close, and kissed his scar.

After the kiss, Eric asked her, “Do you think you can get these prescriptions filled? I want to get him home right away.”

“Give them here,” Candy answered. “We’ll have them filled at that all-night pharmacy on Cherry Street and then drop them off at your house.”

Nick gave his mother his insurance card before Eric pushed him to their car.

WHEN the two returned home, night had fallen. Eric filled their large tub with hot water. Nick was unsteady and groggy from the pain medication. When the tub was full, Eric helped him undress and climb into the water.

The cuts and scrapes on his chest, back, and arms exploded into a

new description of stinging pain as, with Eric's aid, he lowered himself into the hot water. Slowly and carefully, he waited until his wounds had adjusted to the soapy water.

Finally, he was able to settle back and relax. Eric stripped and climbed into the tub next to him. He carefully placed his right arm around his lover's shoulders and rested his left hand on Nick's stomach. Tenderly, he kissed Nick's eyebrow and leaned his forehead against his temple. He spoke softly. His deep, rich, masculine voice warmed Nick as much as the hot water in the tub.

"Baby," Eric said, "if I could take your pain, I would."

"I know you would, Eric," Nick answered. He was medicated and tired and beginning to relax. His words were low and slow. "I'm going to be fine," he said. "But don't stop holding me."

"I'm sorry, Nick. This all happened because Shannon is trying to get back at me."

"It's all behind us now," Nick said. "Let's leave everything in the past and be right here, right now. It's just you and me together in this tub of hot water. We love each other. This is all there is."

"I do love you, Nick," Eric answered. "I love you, and I need you."

"I need you too, Eric. I need you in my life. I know you're angry, but I want you to promise me you won't think about those men who attacked me. I want you to promise me you won't go looking for them to take revenge."

"What?"

"Eric, I don't want you to go to prison over those bastards. You belong in our bed, not in some fucking dirty jail cell." He paused and readjusted his body's position in the tub. "I wish I could tell you I want this promise for your own good," he continued slowly. "But I can't. I want this promise 'cause I'm selfish. I don't want to be without you. I don't want you to go to jail and leave me out here alone. I don't want to sleep alone. Don't go to jail, Eric. Please. I need you, baby. I need you here in my life."

“Even if I wanted to do something, I couldn’t,” Eric said. “Those assholes are in jail. I don’t think they’re going to let them post bail again. I’m sure at least two of them have some serious prison time in their future.”

“Yeah,” Nick said, smiling. “I forgot. They’re locked up.”

“Damn right, they are. I don’t know about Shannon, but George and his friend aren’t going to be free for a long time.”

“But they’ll all be out someday,” Nick said.

“Unless they die in prison,” Eric said.

“Well?” Nick asked.

“Well, what?” Eric asked in return.

“Are you going to give me that promise? Please, Eric.”

“Nicky,” Eric said slowly, “I see all these goddamned ugly cuts and scratches on your face and neck and shoulders. Then I look at your beautiful brown eyes. I remember the day we met and all the nights we’ve spent together. Oh, God, Nicky, our love. The life we’re building together.” He kissed Nick’s temple again. “Yes, Nicky, I promise, I won’t do anything to those punks.”

“Ever?” Nick asked.

“Ever,” Eric answered.

“Thank you, Baby.”

Eric looked at Nick thoughtfully for a moment. Quietly, he said, “Shannon still might have some other people she could send after you. Maybe we should break up for your safety.”

Nick quickly sat up in the bathtub, causing a great slosh and splash. He looked hard into Eric’s eyes. “If you ever say anything like that again, I’ll break both your fucking legs.” His voice was now strong and loud.

Eric smiled. Carefully, he placed a hand on the back of Nick’s neck. Gently, he pulled Nick’s face close to his face. Right before he kissed him, he said, “Thank you, Nicky. Thank you for loving me. Thank you for wanting to break my legs.” Gently, Eric touched his mouth to Nick’s mouth.

Nick backed away and looked at Eric. “I want a kiss, Eric. A real kiss. A man’s kiss.”

“When you’re healed,” Eric promised.

“Fuck that. I want it now.” He put his hand behind Eric’s head and tried to pull him close.

Eric held himself back. “When you’re healed,” he repeated.

“You’re a damn hard-ass,” Nick complained.

“Yes, I am,” Eric agreed. “And now I’m going to put you to bed.”

“Good,” Nick said with a wicked, sleepy smile.

“So you can sleep,” Eric corrected him.

ERIC knew the medication and the hot water were helping to make Nick groggy. He helped Nick out of the tub and sat him on the toilet. Carefully, he dried him and helped him put on the old running shorts and T-shirt he wore as pajamas.

He was putting Nick into bed when the doorbell rang. He covered him and went down the stairs. It was Sal and Candy with Nick’s prescriptions. Eric saw the mother’s concern in Candy face.

“I just got him out of the tub and into bed,” he said as Candy led the way up to the bedroom.

She walked into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed. Nick’s eyes were closed. He was near to sleep. Gently, Candy brushed his hair with her fingers.

“Nikos, I have your prescriptions.”

“Efkaristo,” Nick answered quietly.

Candy looked at Eric. “He’s speaking Greek,” she said.

“Everything’s catching up with him,” Eric said. He handed her a glass of water. Carefully, she assisted her son in taking the first of his pills.

“He’ll probably sleep soundly all night,” Sal said.

“Yeah, he will,” Eric said. “It’s late. His body knows it needs to

heal. And the doctor said the pain medication is strong.”

Father and mother kissed their son, told him they loved him, and said goodnight.

At the door, Candy again gave Eric the charge, “Please keep a close eye on him. Any sign of trouble, you get him back to the hospital and call us. See that he takes all of his pills on time.”

“I will, Candy, I promise,” Eric said. “I’ll call you in the morning and let you know how things are going.”

Candy kissed Eric.

Sal caressed the back of his head. “Take care of my son,” he said.

“I promise I will, Sir,” Eric answered.

“Goodnight,” they said.

“Night,” Eric answered as he closed the door behind them.

After Nick’s parents had left, Eric returned to their bedroom. For a while, he sat in a chair next to his sleeping Nick. Stray tears occasionally ran down his cheeks as he looked at the battered face of his beautiful love. Eric had never felt so much pain in all his young life. Through Nick, he had discovered the joys and happiness love could bring to a life. Now he was learning love could also bring heartbreak, sadness, worry, and pain.

Eric stood, stripped to his underwear, and got into bed beside his sleeping lover. Gently, the big, redheaded man placed an arm across the top of Nick’s pillow and watched his mate sleep. He kissed Nick’s brow softly. In the dim light, he looked at the ugly wounds on Nick’s face. Anger, sorrow, and fear fought for dominance in his young heart.

He remembered his promise to Nick, the promise to never seek revenge. He would be faithful to that promise, but the hatred and the anger remained. Slowly, he, too, fell asleep.

ERIC was awakened early the next morning by a gentle kiss on his mouth. He opened his eyes. Nick’s swollen face was a riot of blues and

yellows. His lower lip was fat and lazy. Saliva dripped from the lip. Eric felt his heart breaking again.

“Good morning,” Nick said. His voice was slurred because of the distended lip.

“Morning,” Eric replied. He sat up. “How do you feel?” he asked.

“Sore. Stiff. Beat up,” Nick answered.

Eric kissed Nick’s cheek and told him to stay still. He got up and gave Nick his morning medication. Then he dressed and went downstairs. A short time later, he returned with a breakfast of hot cream of wheat with soy milk, fresh-squeezed grapefruit juice, and hot tea. He served Nick in bed.

“When I was making your breakfast, I called your parents and told them you’re doing all right,” Eric said.

“Thanks, Babe,” Nick answered. “And thanks for breakfast. You always say you don’t know your way around a kitchen. I think this is the first time you’ve ever made a meal, even a simple one like this.”

“It was for you,” Eric answered. “The hardest thing was figuring out how to make the cream of wheat. I’ve never done that before, but like I said, it was for you, and for you I can do anything.”

“Good God, Eric, it’s not rocket science.”

“When you’ve never done something, the first time can be a little daunting,” Eric confessed as sat on the bed. “Eat now. You have to heal.”

Nick took a few spoons of his cereal. He looked at Eric. “When you were downstairs I went and took a piss. I looked in the mirror.”

“Yeah,” Eric said.

“I’m sorry, Eric.” Tears began running down his face.

Eric took the tray from his lap and put it in the chair. He wrapped his arms around Nick and held him close. “Baby, why are you sorry?”

“My face. I didn’t know it looked so bad.”

“You’re still the most beautiful man in the world,” Eric said.

“It’s not that, Eric. I didn’t realize. I didn’t know. I didn’t know.”

Holding Nick very close with his mouth against his temple, Eric asked, "What didn't you know, Nicky? What?"

"I didn't know what you had to see. What it must do to you."

"What are you talking about?" Eric asked.

"What they did to me, Eric. Please don't let it fill you with hate."

"Nick. My precious Nick," Eric whispered.

"Eric, I know how strong your emotions are right now. I know you're fighting those emotions inside you. You're so good, Eric. I don't want those bastards to change you. They'll win if all this fills you with hate."

"I won't hate. I promise you, Nicky, I won't hate." He kissed Nick again on his temple and held him in his arms. Gently, he wiped the tears from Nick's face with his fingers.

"Thank you, Eric," Nick said. "I know it's not right for me to tell you how to be, but I don't want those fuckers to touch you inside."

Eric kissed Nick once more on the top of his silky-smooth black hair before he got off the bed and returned the tray to Nick's lap.

After Nick had finished his breakfast, Eric took the tray down to the kitchen. When he returned, Nick was sitting on the edge of the bed holding a bottle of sandalwood body cream.

"Take off your shirt and lay on the bed," Nick said. "I want to give you a massage to help you relax after all the crap from yesterday."

"I will not!" Eric refused with absolute finality.

Nick calmly repeated his request. "Take your shirt off and lay down."

"No fucking way," Eric repeated.

"You know you're going to give in, so you might as well do it now and save us both the arguing," Nick said.

Eric stared at Nick. He knew Nick was right. A surrendering breath left his lungs. He removed his shirt and stretched out on their bed.

Nick knelt on the bed beside Eric. He warmed some cream

between his hands. "I love massaging you," he said.

"I know," Eric answered in a deep, relaxed voice.

"I like feeling your strong back and silky skin."

"I know."

Nick leaned forward and kissed Eric's ear. "I know how much it relaxes you," he whispered into that ear. He sat back up and gave himself to serving his mate.

After forty-five minutes of massage, Nick said, "I want to go downstairs."

Eric rolled over. "Why?"

"I don't want to spend all day in bed," Nick answered. "I'm starting to feel like an invalid. I'm banged up, not crippled."

He climbed off the bed and put on a robe. Eric followed him downstairs. The men spent the morning sitting on the sofa with Eric's arm around Nick's shoulders. The two spoke about the life they had already shared together and the future they wanted to create. They spoke about Nick's future as a photographer and his search for a studio. At noon, Nick went into the kitchen to make lunch. Eric objected.

"I'm not crippled, Eric."

The big redhead insisted, "Goddamn it, Nick. I give in to you all the time, but not now. Not about this. You're not doing any work today. I'm going to call Tommy and Allan and ask them to pick up some food and bring it over."

"Okay," Nick said, surrendering with a smile.

"I'll ask Tommy to pick up something from Mother Earth's Kitchen," Eric said. "Anything special you want?"

"He can't go to Mother Earth's. You forget, today's Sunday. They're closed."

"Oh, yeah," Eric said. "I'll ask him to stop at that Lebanese restaurant you like. How does falafel and pita bread sound?"

"Great. Tell them to grab a cucumber salad."

Eric called Tommy and asked him and Allan to bring food from



the Lebanese restaurant Nick liked so much. An hour later, Tommy and Allan arrived at the door with lunch. They stayed the rest of the day.

Late in the afternoon, Nick telephoned Tony and Carol and told them how he was doing. He invited them over for the evening. He asked Eric to call Scott and Karen. He then telephoned Kirk and asked Eric's oldest brother to bring Lucy over for a visit.

"I don't want to freak her out," Nick told Kirk over the telephone. "Warn her my face is purple and black with a little yellow."

ERIC and Nick also called their parents. Soon, family and friends were invited to their house. After the telephone calls, Nick again went into the kitchen to plan what he was going to serve their guests.

"Damn him!" Eric said to Allan and Tommy. "I told him I didn't want him doing anything today. I want him to rest." He went into the kitchen. "Damn it, Nick. What did I say earlier? I always give in to you, but not now. You've got to take it easy. You've got to relax and let your body heal."

"Eric, I just can't lay around and be lazy. Making some snacks isn't going to kill me."

"Allan!" Eric shouted into the living room.

"Yeah, man," Allan said as he walked into the kitchen.

"Will you make some snacks for tonight? Please."

"Sure," Allan answered.

"There," Eric said to Nick. "Allan will make some food. Now you get your ass back into the living room and relax. I'll call people and ask everyone to bring something. With what Alan makes, we'll have more than enough."

Nick smiled. "Yes, sir!" he said. He kissed Eric, took his hand, and led him onto the front porch, out of the hearing of their friends.

"Hey, man," Nick said, "I'm sorry if I make you feel you have to give in all the time."

“Nick, you dumb fuck,” Eric answered. “I give in because I want to. Because I love you. Because I like to please you. I’m not sorry. Everything I do for you, I do because I want to. I just want you to take it easy today. Okay?”

“Okay,” Nick answered.

“Now get your sweet ass back into the living room and onto the sofa,” Eric ordered.

“Yes, sir!” a smiling Nick again answered.

Once more, Nick led Eric by the hand. This time, he led him to the sofa in the living room.

In the kitchen, Allan busied himself preparing food for the evening. Like Nick, he was a very good cook. Tommy left Eric and Nick alone on the sofa and assisted his partner.

Soon, family and friends began to arrive. Shock, tears, and anger—each guest shared one or more of these emotions when they saw Nick’s battered, multicolored face. His swollen and lazy lower lip hung and dribbled. Eric, with the care of an overly attentive mother, constantly wiped away the drool.

Gathered in the living room before a warm, homey fire, Kirk told everyone what the deputies had learned from the men who had attacked Nick.

“They followed Nick and Tommy from this house,” Kirk said. “When you guys were at Maggie and Paul’s, they waited down the road. Then they followed you to the gas station and pulled into the trees to hide their car.”

AS THE night grew late, Lucy fell asleep in the arms of her Uncle Nick. Kirk took Lucy from Nick’s arms and he and Diane said goodnight. The others, following Kirk and Diane’s lead, said goodnight and left Eric and Nick alone.

At the door, Eric hugged Tommy and Allan and thanked them for all their help.

“Let us know if there’s anything else you need,” Tommy said.

“I will, guys,” Eric said, “and thanks again for everything.”

After everyone had left, Eric sat on the sofa next to Nick. “How are you feeling?”

Nick looked long at Eric’s face. “God, I love your green eyes,” he finally said.

“I know,” Eric said. “You’ve told me.”

Nick kissed Eric. “Let’s go to bed and make love,” he whispered with his lips brushing Eric’s lips.

“Don’t be stupid. You’re in no condition for sex.”

Nick sat back. “Eric, I’m not a goddamn porcelain doll. Now, you’re going to fuck me!”

Once more, Eric surrendered to Nick’s desire.

ERIC sat on the ground holding Nick’s head in his lap. Nick’s eyes were closed and his breathing was shallow. Eric was terrified and confused. What could have happened? Why was Nick so still? Why was he unable to move? Why was he...?

Nick opened his eyes and looked into Eric’s. Those warm, brown eyes that had always thrilled Eric were now strangely quiescent. “Eric,” Nick whispered in a voice that was almost inaudible.

“Shh,” Eric answered. “Be still, Baby. Help’s coming.” Eric was so confused. What was happening to his Nick?

“Eric,” Nick whispered again.

Eric leaned his ear close to Nick’s mouth.

“Thank you,” Nick told the terrified redhead.

Eric raised his head and looked at Nick. “For what?” he asked.

Nick looked deep into Eric’s eyes. “For loving me.”

“Nicky,” Eric breathed. Tears streamed down his face and fell onto Nick’s shoulders.

Slowly, peacefully, Nick closed his eyes. His breathing stopped. His body went limp. A stone shattering a glass window. That was Eric's heart. That was Eric's life. That was Eric's world. Disbelief, anger, horror—these were all Eric knew.

“Nicky! Nicky!” he screamed.

His face fell onto the lifeless body of the most important thing in his world.

“Nicky,” he sobbed onto Nick's now-quiet chest. “You promised you'd never leave me. You promised you'd never leave me.”

The tall, powerful redhead wept as he clung desperately to the body of his mate. He sat in lonely nothingness and wept. He wept into eternity. He wept beyond reason. There was nothing but tears and pain and cold emptiness.

Eric's body jerked with a sudden painful jolt. He sat up. He was in bed. His body was covered with sweat. He was shaking. He looked at Nick's pillow. It was empty. The space where Nick always slept was bare, cold, and desolate.

Confused and bewildered, Eric looked around the room. It was dim morning. The shadows of night were slowly retreating and giving way to the light of the creeping dawn. The emptiness, the coldness, and the loneliness of the room were crushing him as he sat in the joyless bed.

“Nicky!” he shouted. “Nicky!”

NICK rushed in through their bedroom door. He was wearing a pair of white briefs and using a white towel to dry water from his wounded face.

Eric exploded from their bed and crashed into Nick, almost knocking him off his feet. He engulfed his satin-skinned lover in his arms and crushed him to his chest. His knees collapsed, but he held on to his Nick. Together, the two men sank to the floor.

Nick did not know what was happening, but he held tight to his

pale-skinned lover. He held him and held him and held him. Eric's body was wet, cold, and trembling. He blindly began kissing Nick's injured face. Urgently, greedily, he kissed Nick again and again. Nick ignored the pain and allowed Eric to kiss him.

"Oh, my God!" Eric sobbed. "Oh, my God!"

"Eric, what's wrong, baby? What's wrong?"

"Oh, my fucking God, Nicky!" He held Nick tight and burrowed his face into his neck. Slowly, he calmed. Nick waited, as he always did, while Eric searched for his words. They sat silently on the floor, holding each other tightly in their strong arms while the day was gently born around them.

Slowly, Eric started to speak. "I had a dream, Nicky. I had a dream. I had a motherfucking godawful dream."

Nick kissed Eric's strong white throat. He did not say anything. He gave Eric the space and the time he needed to express the horror he had just walked through.

With his white cheek pressed against Nick's bruised one, Eric whispered into his ear. His whisper was filled with fear. He held Nick tight as he faintly spoke the words. "You died, Nicky. You died and I was left all alone." Hot tears flowed from Eric's eyes and ran down their joined cheeks.

"Shh, my love, it was a dream. I'm here," Nick assured him. "I'm with you. I'm not going to leave you."

"Promise me, Nicky. Promise me you'll never leave me," Eric pleaded with the fear of a small, frightened child begging a parent not to go without him.

"I promise you, Eric. I promise."

He spoke directly to Eric's heart.

## Chapter 21

### Eric's Pique

SLOWLY, Nick's face healed. The swelling went down. His lip stopped hanging and returned to its place. The purple and blue hues grew yellower. Two weeks after the attack, Eric and his brother Kirk sat in a small Eastown restaurant having lunch. They were arranging a camping trip into the forests south of the Straits of Mackinac.

"You think Nick's up for a camping trip?" Kirk asked.

"This'll be real good for him," Eric answered. "It's been a couple of weeks since the attack. His cuts and bruises are healing fast. You know how much he loves to camp. He's at home in the woods. His finds peace and strength there. Trees renew him."

Friday after work, Tony, Carol, Tommy, Allan, Scott, and Karen joined Eric, Nick, Kirk, and Diane on the south bank of the Pigeon River. The leaves were changing, and the forest was a vibrant mix of greens, reds, yellows, and gold. Although it was September, the air was surprisingly warm and comfortable.

Friday evening, after all the tents had been set up and everyone had settled in, Nick cooked an impressive meal. There were vegetarian hot dogs with all the fixings. Sautéed mushrooms with caramelized onions, roasted corn on the cob, and rustic biscuits served with gobs of butter and honey rounded out the dinner. The meal was washed down with a good Greek wine Nick had brought and a dark, hearty stout provided by Tony and Carol. Apples, pears, and Snicker bars, brought

by Diane, made their dessert.

After supper, everyone relaxed around the campfire. Darkness had quietly taken its place under the great trees. With the coming of night, the air slowly cooled. Crickets and nighthawks joined together to create a familiar and peaceful symphony for the campers. There was an atmosphere of hominess around the fire, a hominess that seemed to always follow Eric and Nick.

AS THE darkness deepened, the campers, full from their large supper, settled into their seats around the fire. Nick sat with his back against an old log and his feet stretched out towards the fire. Eric lay with his head on Nick's lap, his favorite pillow. Nick casually stroked Eric's buzz-cut red hair with his left hand. His right hand rested on Eric's stomach. Eric felt so comfortable; he knew if he were a cat, he would have been purring.

"Before I fall asleep," Eric said, "I want to tell you guys a story about what happened one time with my hairstylist."

"You go to a hairstylist for a buzz-cut?" Scott interrupted.

"Shut up, man," Eric told his friend as he flipped him the bird.

Scott threw an empty beer can at Eric. The tall redhead smacked the can out of the air.

"Yeah, asshole, I do," Eric answered. "He's the same guy I've been going to since high school. One day Andy, the guy who cuts my hair, asked me if someone had recently shaved the back of my neck. Without thinking, I said, 'Yeah, my boyfriend shaves it. He doesn't like hair growing back there'."

Eric glanced up at Nick.

"The guy cutting hair in the next chair dropped his scissors and said, 'What did he say?' Andy walked around my chair and looked at me and asked, 'What did you say?' The girl cutting hair on the other side asked the same thing."

The group around the campfire laughed at Eric's description of

the hairstylists' surprise.

"They don't know you're gay?" Tony asked.

"They didn't," Eric answered. "I don't talk about my private life when I'm getting my hair cut. I'd been with Nick about six months by then. He'd become part of my life. I just never thought about it."

"I don't want to sound stereotypical, Eric," Scott said, "but you just don't look like what a lot of people think of as a gay man."

"What did you tell them?" Kirk asked.

"I realized what I'd said," Eric answered, "so I just repeated myself. 'My boyfriend shaves it. He doesn't like hair on the back of my neck'."

"What'd they do?" Scott asked.

"Andy asked me, 'You're gay?' I answered with a simple yes. 'You're not gay,' he said. I told him, 'The guy I sleep with thinks I am'."

Eric laughed hard when he remembered the look on Andy's face. The campers laughed with him. "I had to show them that picture of Nick and me sitting on the log in the Rogue River—the one you took, Tommy. You remember, I've got my arm around Nick's shoulders and he has a hand on my thigh."

"I remember when Eric first told me this story," Nick said. "I wanted to go with him the next time he had his hair cut, but he wouldn't let me."

Good wine, a fine stout, and a couple of spicy joints brought more laughter to the campsite. Late in the night, quiet settled around the fire. It had been a long and full day. As the night grew older, they let the fire die down, and people slowly went to their tents and crawled into their sleeping bags.

SATURDAY morning came early with mist and singing birds. For breakfast, Nick cooked pancakes and eggs over the campfire. Tony toasted bagels on the fire and served them with cream cheese and her



grandmother's homemade strawberry preserves. Water was boiled for tea.

After breakfast, the campers hung a Tarzan swing on the limb of a sturdy old maple that stretched from a high bank over the river. Eric was the first to swing out over the river and drop into the cold water.

"My fucking God!" he shouted when he popped up out of the water. "It's like ice."

"I told you fools it was too cold for a Tarzan swing," Tony laughed.

Tommy and Scott both took a turn on the swing before the rest of the group decided Tony was right about the water being too cold. The three brave, wet, shivering men dried off and changed their clothes. The rest of the morning the campers spent playing touch football in a small forest meadow not far from their campsite.

A little before noon, Nick settled in at the campfire and started making lunch. He was sautéing onions and potatoes for a large frittata when Eric walked up with two backpacks.

"Come on, Nick," he said. "The rest of you guys will have to finish making lunch."

"What's going on, man?" Scott asked.

Eric looked at his friend. "Nick and I are going for a hike," he answered.

He handed one of the packs to his lover. Nick took the pack, stood, and followed Eric into the trees. The others remained at the camp looking mildly surprised.

"Eric looked kind of upset, didn't he?" Diane said.

"Yeah, he did," Scott answered.

ERIC silently led Nick through the forest. The overhead limbs and branches crowded with leaves hid the blue sky. The air under the trees was still and comfortably cool. Fat white puffballs grew scattered

among the leaf-litter.

After they had hiked in silence for half a mile, Nick asked, “Eric, are you mad at me?”

Without turning around or slowing his steps, Eric answered in a firm voice, “I’m a little pissed.”

He heard Nick stop behind him. “Why? What’d I do?”

He stopped and turned to face his partner. “We’re here for a vacation,” he answered brusquely. “I brought you so you could rest and finish healing. I want you relax, not cook every fucking meal.”

“I’m sorry, Eric,” Nick said, “but you know I like to cook. I relax when I cook. Cooking is a lot of fun for me.”

“Well fuck, man, what about me? I want to spend some time with you. I don’t want you stuck at that damn campfire all weekend.”

He saw a shadow of sudden surprised hurt in Nick’s face. Immediately, his heart melted. “I’m sorry, Nicky,” he said. He stepped closer and wrapped his arms around Nick’s shoulders. “I’m not really mad at you. I know I’m being stupid and jealous and selfish, but I want to spend time alone with you. I don’t want you stuck at that goddamn fire all weekend. Fuck, man, I want you all to myself—at least some of the damn time.”

Nick looked into Eric’s eyes. There was a wide smile on his face. “I’m here, baby,” he said. “I’m all yours. I’ve always been yours, and I always will be yours.” He hugged Eric in a tight, powerful embrace and kissed his ear. He moved his mouth to Eric’s mouth.

With his healing lips brushing Eric’s, he whispered, “Anything you want. Anytime you want it. Any place you want it.”

With a lusty, playful look in his eyes, he took Eric’s hand and led him to an ancient, giant red oak tree. In the quiet cool under the thick roof of limbs and leaves of the old tree, they lay in each other’s arms. The couple made love with a hunger and a strength that could only be achieved by two young men. Much later, exhausted by the power of their passion, they fell asleep in one another’s arms.

Eric was awakened by Nick gently shaking his shoulder. “Hey,

Eric,” Nick said. “I think we slept all day.”

“Ah,” Eric groaned as he struggled to wake. He looked around. The sun had started to set.

“Wow,” he said. “What time is it?”

“I don’t know, but we better get back. It’ll be dark real fast.”

“I guess we missed exploring the forest,” Eric said.

“We have the rest of our lives for exploring,” Nick answered.

“Yeah, we do,” Eric agreed.

While they were dressing, Nick asked, “Hey, man, Kirk and Scott and the others tease us and say we act like we’re always on a honeymoon. You think they’re right?”

“Probably, but I don’t care,” Eric answered. “I like it. I like things the way they are.”

“Yeah?” Nick asked.

“Nicky, all that matters is what you and I feel. How we are and how we act is our business. It doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks.”

“Yeah,” Nick agreed.

“You don’t want to stop, do you?” Eric asked.

“Stop what?”

“Our so-called honeymoon,” Eric answered.

“No! Fuck, no,” Nick answered.

“Me either. Now hurry up.”

They quickly finished dressing, collected their backpacks, and headed back to the camp. Scott looked up from his seat near the fire when they walked into the circle of tents.

“Hey, guys,” he said. “You’ve been gone all day. I tried to call you, but our phones can’t get a connection up here.”

“We spent a great day together in the forest,” Nick answered.

“Eric, is anything wrong?” Scott asked. “You looked like you were kind of upset when you guys left.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry, Scott,” Eric answered. He looked at the rest of

the campers as he squatted near the fire. “Hey, guys, I’m sorry about my attitude today. I was just being selfish. I wanted Nicky all to myself. I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t bother us. We just wondered if anything was wrong,” Tony said.

“No, it was me,” Eric said. “I was feeling jealous and selfish.”

“Don’t worry about it, Eric,” Diane said. “After the last couple of weeks, you have every right to be selfish about Nick.”

The two lovers settled down and ate what was left of supper. Tommy had set plenty aside for the pair. Tommy was a very good friend indeed. Eric and Nick had missed lunch and supper and were ravenous. After they devoured their supper, Nick opened an emergency stash of vegetable wraps he had brought. They each ate two of them and shared the rest.

The party around the fire lasted late into the night. Wine, beer, pot, singing, good conversation, and good company made for a happy time. Because of their nap during the day, Eric and Nick were wide awake. They sat talking quietly together by the fire long after everyone else had crawled into their tents and fallen asleep.

When Eric and Nick were alone around the fire, when the quiet darkness beyond the fire’s light held secret, unseen things, Nick kissed Eric’s mouth. He kissed Eric’s eyes. He kissed Eric’s left hand. After he had kissed that strong, large hand, he carefully slipped a ring onto a finger. The ring was gold set with black onyx.

“My engagement ring to you,” Nick whispered.

A COOL Sunday morning sun climbed over the trees. Kirk crawled out of his tent. He saw Eric and Nick sleeping by the now-cold fire pit. Shaking his head and smiling, he walked to the pair and stood looking down at them. Nick was on his left side with his face towards the pit. Eric was spooned up against him. An old quilted blanket was pulled up to their shoulders. Eric’s nose was snuggled deep in Nick’s thick, soft

black hair.

Diane climbed out of their tent and joined Kirk. Together, they looked down at the young lovers as they lay in peaceful sleep. The two lay together, beautiful, gentle, and strong. Kirk looked at his wife.

“They really do belong together,” he whispered.

Diane smiled and nodded.

SEVERAL days after their return to the city, Eric came home from work downcast and quiet. He grunted a halfhearted hello to Nick, stepped into his small home office, and closed the door. Nick did not know what was bothering his mate. He waited, but Eric did not come out. Finally, Nick walked to the office door and gently tapped with his knuckle.

“Yeah,” Eric answered in a jagged voice.

“Eric, are you all right?” Nick asked.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” the unconvincing answer came back through the door.

“May I come in?” Nick asked hesitantly.

There was a slight pause before Eric answered. “Yeah, I don’t care.”

Nick walked into the office and stood at Eric’s right hand. “What’s going on?” Nick asked. “You’ve been in here for almost two hours.”

Eric was silent for a few minutes. Finally, in a tired and frustrated voice, he answered, “I’ve been shot down by a dull-ass client who has absolutely no understanding of business.”

Nick put his hand on the top of Eric’s head and slowly slid it down to his left ear. Gently, he caressed and pulled on the ear.

With quick irritation, Eric pushed Nick’s hand away. “Quit pawing me!” he snapped.

The words and the push were a cold surprise to Nick. “Excuse

me,” he said. He turned and walked to the door.

At the door, he stopped, and, without looking back, said, “Sorry, man.”

He walked to their recently completed back deck. He sat on the couch and looked at the backyard. Eric had never before pushed him away.

Nick heard the door that led from the kitchen onto the deck open. He sat still. He did not turn around, just watched the darkening yard, yet he knew Eric was standing only inches behind him. He was as sure of Eric’s presence as a blind man would be of the direction of the sun.

“Man, I’m sorry.” Eric’s rich, masculine voice was soft and worried. He stepped around the couch and sat next to Nick. “Nicky, I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry.”

“No, man. I’m sorry. I won’t paw you anymore.”

“No, Nicky. Don’t change anything. I was wrong. I brought home my frustration and anger and dumped it all on you. I’m sorry. Please, Baby, please forgive me.”

“Oh, man, Eric, I forgive you. Of course I forgive you. I love you.” He leaned over and kissed Eric’s mouth. “I’m sorry,” Nick said. “I saw something was bothering you. I should have respected your privacy.”

Eric leaned his forehead against Nick’s. “No, Baby,” he whispered. “You don’t need to apologize. You didn’t do anything wrong.” He took Nick’s face in his hands and kissed his mouth. “Nicky, every time you smile at me, it thrills me. You brought healing and freedom to me the first time we spoke together. I don’t deserve you.”

“Man, stop talking that shit,” Nick said. “You were tired and pissed off, that’s all. I know you didn’t mean it. I know you love me. I shouldn’t have acted like a little kid and run away just because you’re tired and irritated and growled a little. I have to grow up.”

“Come on, Baby,” Eric said. “Let’s get dressed and I’ll take you out somewhere special.”

“No Eric,” Nick whispered. “You don’t need to do anything like that to apologize. All I want, all I need, is you.”

“Man,” Eric whispered, “you have me.”

“Sometimes I think I’m just a little boy,” Nick said.

“Maybe in a lot of ways, we’re both little boys,” Eric said. “We’re little boys in men’s bodies. We have to grow up emotionally.”

“What do you mean?” Nick asked.

“You dated creeps who used you for your looks. I dated women to hide behind,” Eric answered. “Neither one of us have had many chances to learn about real relationships.”

“I love you, Eric,” Nick said. “I know we have a real relationship. And I want to learn.”

“I do too,” Eric said. “And you have learned. You are learning. I’m learning too. I just made a mistake. I had no right to piss on you because some asshole client can’t see what’s good for him.”

“Let’s be men and not boys,” Nick said.

“From your evil smile, I see you have an idea about how we can do that,” Eric said.

“Let’s leave our little boy emotions down here and take our men’s bodies upstairs and fuck like men.”

## **Chapter 22**

### **Pissing Off the Religious Right**

THIRTY days had come and gone. Nick's last day at the nursery was marked with a small party among the garden center staff. The sadness he felt at leaving the friends he had worked with for the past three years was almost drowned by another upcoming event. In two weeks, he would share life partner vows with Eric. That day was now foremost in his thoughts and plans.

THE first Saturday in October, Eric and Nick took their vows as life partners. It was a simple ceremony held under the trees at Nick's parents' cottage. Family and close friends joined them as they bound their love and lives together.

After the vows, round tables were carried from where they were waiting at the side of the cottage. They were covered in white cloths. A centerpiece of white camellias with two white candles in crystal holders was placed on each one. Food was brought out of the cottage, and a vegetarian buffet was laid out under the trees. At the center table, Eric and Nick sat with their parents and grandparents. During the long and leisurely meal, many toasts were offered to the two young men.

After the toasts, Eric stood and clinked a knife on his glass.



People quieted and looked at him. Nick watched him curiously.

“Listen, everybody. I don’t know if it’s proper protocol or not, but I want to say something.”

“Eric, this is your day,” his father said. “You can say anything you want.”

Several of the guests shouted their agreement.

Eric looked down at Nick sitting beside him. “Nicky, now it’s my turn. You’re the one who’s always open and able to find the right words. You don’t have trouble telling people what you feel. I know what I feel, but I don’t always know the words. It’s time I tried. It’s my turn to tell everyone how much you mean to me.”

He turned and looked at the guests sitting around him. Tall and strong, Eric stood under that towering old tree in the midst of family and friends. His heart was beating faster than usual. His lower lip felt tight. He was nervous and unsure of what he was going to say, but he wanted to speak. He wanted to share. For the first time in his young life, he wanted, he needed, to share some very deep feelings.

“Last night, I couldn’t fall asleep,” he said with a grin. “For some reason, I just couldn’t get to sleep.”

Knowing laughter answered his smile.

“I looked at my Nick. He was sound asleep right where he belongs, in my arms. I looked at that beautiful face and watched him sleep. I wondered what good thing had I done to make me deserve the love of this wonderful man.”

He stopped and took a fast drink of wine. “I’ve done things with Nick I’ve never done before,” he continued.

*Oohs* and *aahs* came from some of the guests.

“Relax, Marco, relax,” Eric laughed. “I mean, Nick has taken me hunting for wild mushrooms, for fossils and rocks. These are things I never would have done, things I never would have thought of doing. I never hiked or canoed before I met Nick. I’d only camped a couple of times in my life, but now, Nick and I go camping and hiking all the time.

“You know, there were a lot of reasons I couldn’t face being gay. One of the reasons was I didn’t think a gay man could have a regular home life. I wanted that. I wanted that more than anything. Nick showed me I could have that home. Together, we’ve made a home, a true home. A true family.

“The toasts I’ve just heard were all great, and I’m thankful for them, but you have no idea how wonderful Nick really is. He understands me. He knows me better than anyone else. I didn’t know what love was until I met him. I didn’t know how strong love could be. I didn’t know what love could do for you. How it could change and enrich your life. But he’s shown me.”

Eric stopped and passed his fingers through Nick’s thick, silky hair. Then he looked at his parents. “I feel honest and clean and right with Nick.”

He looked back at the guests. “Nick fills my life. Every day, I’m amazed I have his love. Sometimes I wake up early in the morning and watch him sleeping beside me.

“You guys think Nick’s beautiful. You should see him when he’s asleep, those long eyelashes resting on his smooth skin. Pardon my French, but when Nick’s asleep, good fucking God, he’s spectacular.”

Eric paused, looked down at Nick, and ran his fingers through his silky black hair again.

“He’s also a shithead,” Eric said.

Laughter and applause filled the space under the old tree. Nick smiled at Eric and shook his head.

Eric looked back at the crowd under the tree.

“He picks on me all the time,” Eric said. “Most of you know what I mean. He teases me, and he harasses me... and he loves me. He loves me, and he owns me. He knows all my secrets, and he keeps them all. When I need to be held, he holds me. When I need love, he loves me. When I need silence, he gives it to me. When I need a good kick in the ass to get me going, he kicks me. I’m the luckiest man alive.”

Once again, he turned to Nick.

“Nicky, people talk about lightning striking them. With you, it was a meteor. You’ve completely, totally turned my world upside down and inside out. I can’t think of a single moment when I’ve ever been angry with you. You make me want to be the best man I can be.”

“I love you, Nick. I love you more every day. You’ve never let me down. You’re always there for me. You spoil me. You thrill me. I can’t live without you. I love you. I need you. I’d kill for you. I’d die for you. I’d even take out the trash for you.”

A burst of laughter and applause came from the guests. Eric sat down next to Nick and kissed his beautiful mouth.

“Okay, everyone,” Tommy called out loudly as he stood. “It’s time for the dance.”

Nick stood, took off his jacket, and extended his hand. Eric took his spouse’s hand and stood slowly. He allowed Nick to lead him to the rented wooden dance floor laid out under the trees several yards from the tables.

“Let’s show everybody how to dance,” Eric whispered to Nick.

The jazz quartet hired for the reception began playing a soft, romantic song that was Eric and Nick’s favorite. The newlyweds took each other in their arms and began to move with the music. As they danced, they pressed their cheeks together and closed their eyes.

“I’m in heaven,” Nick whispered.

“I’ve been there since that first day,” Eric whispered in answer.

When the music stopped, Eric and Nick held each other while everyone around them applauded. Amidst the crowd of family and friends, Eric stood alone with Nick. All he was aware of was Nick’s heart, Nick’s breath, and Nick’s love.

They finally backed away from each other and smiled at their family and friends standing around the floor.

“Everyone, please dance,” Eric shouted to the guests.

More romantic jazz began to play. People accepted Eric’s invitation, and soon the dance floor was filled. All that fine October afternoon and into the evening, people danced under the trees.

At the edge of the dance floor, Eric and Nick stood with their arms around one another's waists. Eric's mother Katie, with Simon at her side, joined them. She took both men by their ties and gently pulled them down to her level and kissed each.

She smiled at her new son-in-law. "Nick. Nikos, you take good care of my baby," she said.

"Yes, Ma'am, I will," Nick answered. "I promise I will, but—and this is with all respect to you—now he's my baby."

Katie smiled and said, "Yes, he is."

She hugged Nick tight and Eric heard her say, "And now you're my son."

"I WAS just talking with Nick," Tommy said to Allan as he walked into their bedroom.

"How's their honeymoon going?" Allan asked.

"Great, Nick is all geeked."

"I'm sure they're having a lot of fun," Allan said as he pulled back the blankets to let Tommy into the bed.

Tommy climbed in and covered up.

"He said they went to a pub on the shore of Lake Ontario and met a lesbian couple. The women have been showing them around Toronto and introducing them all over town."

"Are they coming back Saturday?"

"No, Nick said they decided to stay three more days."

## Chapter 23

### Eric's Fall

FIVE months after their honeymoon, on a sunny afternoon in the middle of March, Eric sat at his desk, tired. The day had been long and busy. He was looking forward to getting home.

Eric looked up when he heard a knock on his open office door. Terry Farwell, the Christian Evangelical who had once tried to get him fired, was standing in the doorway. He was holding a piece of cake on a paper plate.

“Do you need something, Mr. Farwell?” he asked.

Terry held out the cake. “It’s from my wife’s birthday,” he said.

“For me?” Eric asked.

“Yes, my wife insisted,” Terry answered.

“Thank you,” Eric said to the Christian.

There was a little suspicion in Eric’s voice, but he wanted to be open and tolerant. Nick was open and tolerant. Eric slowly reached out his hand. Terry stepped into the office and handed him the cake.

“I know you still carry some hard feelings for me about the stupid way I acted toward you,” Terry said.

“You’ve already apologized,” Eric answered.

“I have, but I still think there’s some hard feelings between us.”

“There’s no hard feelings with me,” Eric said. “I realize you were raised on intolerance.”

Terry pursed his lips. “I guess I deserve that, but again, I am sorry.”

“It’s over,” Eric said. “Thanks for the cake.”

“You like chocolate?” Terry asked.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Enjoy,” Terry said as he left with a wave and a warm smile.

“Tell your wife happy birthday for me,” Eric shouted.

“I will,” the answer came back through the open door.

Eric was always hungry at the end of his workday. He quickly took several bites from the cake. He washed down these first few bites with what was left of the lukewarm cup of coffee he had been nursing for the last hour.

His secretary looked in his office door while he was putting his papers away.

“Don wants to see you before you leave,” she said.

“Thanks, Nancy.”

Eric grabbed his briefcase and walked to his employer’s office, leaving half of the cake on his desk. After a short discussion, Eric left Don’s office and walked to the elevator. The cake was forgotten. He stepped off the elevator into the parking garage and began walking to his car.

He slowed his steps. Deep in his stomach, he felt an odd burning. His chest felt tight and heavy. Each inhale hurt his ribs. His vision blurred and his head began to reverberate with every heartbeat. He stumbled against the side of his car, dropped his briefcase, and slid to the ground. Gasping for air, he laid on the rough pavement. Darkness.

RICHARD and Aaron, two of Eric’s colleagues, saw him fall. They ran to him and knelt at his side.

“My God!” Richard said in a near panic. “What’s wrong with

him?”

“I don’t know, but he’s hardly breathing,” Aaron answered.

“You loosen his tie, and I’ll call an ambulance,” Richard said.

While Aaron nervously loosened Eric’s tie and opened the collar of his shirt, Richard stood and telephoned for help.

“You better call Don too,” Aaron said when Richard closed his cell phone.

Richard used his cell phone to call Don. Quickly, he explained what had happened.

“Don’s on his way down,” Richard said. “He’s going to call Eric’s partner.”

Soon they heard the sound of the approaching ambulance. The elevator doors opened at the same time the ambulance pulled next to the small crowd of people who had gathered around Eric.

“He’s hardly breathing,” Richard told the paramedics.

The paramedics immediately administered oxygen. After a quick examination, Eric was put into the ambulance. At the garage’s exit, the ambulance again turned on its siren. The frightening wail echoed back through the garage as it pulled onto the street and screamed to the hospital.

NICK was home when Don called him. He was in his Jeep, backing down the driveway, before the call ended.

He was driving to Eric’s office when Don telephoned him the second time. Don told him Eric was on his way to Michigan Hill Medical Center. The tires of his Jeep screamed as he did a U-turn in the middle of the street. The terrified drive he made to Eric that day would forever be a blur in his mind. He knew he telephoned Eric’s parents and his own during that drive. The only other thing he truly remembered was a cold, threatening fear.

He was sitting in the ICU waiting room with his head in his hands

when Eric's parents hurried in. Don was sitting next to him.

"Nick, what's going on?" a very worried Katie asked.

"What happened?" Simon asked at the same time.

Nick stiffly stood up. His voice was low, slow, and calm.

"I don't know what happened," he answered. "Like I told you on the phone, Don called and said Eric had passed out. I haven't talked to the doctors yet. All I know is they have him on oxygen."

"Have you seen him?" Katie asked.

"Not yet."

"What happened?" Simon asked Don.

"You know everything I do, Simon," Don answered. "Eric passed out next to his car and an ambulance brought him here."

A doctor walked into the waiting room.

"Nick Bertolli?" he asked.

"I'm Nick Bertolli."

"I'm Dr. Gipson. I understand you're Mr. Folke's patient advocate."

"We're his parents," Katie interrupted. "What's wrong with him?"

"Tests have discovered a poison in his system," Dr. Gipson answered.

"Poison!" Katie exclaimed. "How did that happen?"

"I can't answer that," Dr. Gipson said. "Right now we have to address the immediate problem. We've already started administering a general antidote, but we have to start a treatment specifically designed to counteract the poison."

"Do it!" Simon said.

"Mr. Bertolli, we need your permission."

"You have it," Nick almost shouted.

"We need your signed consent."



The doctor took a folded paper from the pocket of his smock. Nick snatched the paper from the doctor.

“I need a pen.”

Dr. Gipson handed him a pen. Nick leaned onto a table and signed the form.

“Can we see him?” he asked as he signed.

“Not until after we’ve seen his response to the treatment,” the doctor answered.

A half an hour later, Dr. Gipson returned and reported that the proper antidote regimen had been started.

“Eric’s breathing is showing small signs of improvement,” Dr. Gipson said, “but even though his breathing is less labored, we’re going to keep him on the oxygen for a while.”

“May we see him now?” Simon asked.

“Yes, but he’s not conscious,” Dr. Gipson said.

Nick led Katie, Simon, and Don into Eric’s room. The vision that greeted Nick was like a punch in the chest. The head of the bed was slightly elevated. Eric lay on his back with an oxygen tube over his ears and under his nose. His eyes were closed and crusted. Nick thought how very small and helpless his giant Eric looked as he lay unmoving in the bed.

Katie caressed her son’s face and kissed his moist forehead. She gently lifted his right hand and sat in the chair at his bedside. She sat still and silent, holding his hand and watching his face. Simon placed his hand on Eric’s chest and then stood beside his wife with a hand on her shoulder. Nick walked to the other side of the bed, leaned over to Eric and kissed his forehead.

Almost in a daze, he stood and walked into the bathroom, where he soaked a cloth in cool water. He returned to Eric and gently washed his sleeping eyes. With the clean end of the cloth, he moistened Eric’s dry lips. While Nick was wiping his spouse’s face, Kirk and Diane entered the room. They hugged Katie and Simon and then walked to

Nick on the other side of the bed. Diane hugged Nick and Kirk squeezed his shoulder.

“What happened to him?” Kirk asked.

“The doctor says he’s been poisoned,” Simon answered.

“What?” Kirk asked.

“Accidentally or on purpose?” Diane asked.

“They haven’t said,” Simon answered.

Nick felt cold, empty, and frightened. He folded the cloth and set it neatly on the tray table at the foot of the bed. Still and empty, he stood and stared at Eric’s face. Slowly, he became aware of Kirk’s hand resting on his shoulder.

“Do you know how this happened, Nick?” Kirk asked.

Nick shook his head. He was unable to take his eyes off Eric. A doctor walked into the room and introduced himself as Dr. Paul, the hospital toxicologist. After his introduction, the doctor lifted each of Eric’s eyelids, felt the lymph nodes of his throat, and then looked at the family.

“How is he?” Simon asked.

“The antidote has helped,” Dr. Paul answered. “It’s stopped the progression of the the poison.”

“How did this happen?” Simon said.

“I don’t know,” Dr. Paul answered. “But this was no accident. As required by law, the police have been notified.”

“Is he going to be all right?” Nick asked.

“It’s too early to say,” Dr. Paul answered. “I’m guardedly hopeful. We’re doing everything we can, but Eric has to help too. He has to use his body’s own strength to fight what the poison’s already done. I want him to regain consciousness.”

“Can you give him something to wake him?” Katie asked.

“I could, but it would be dangerous in his weakened condition to introduce more drugs into his system.”

He looked at Nick. "Are you Nick?"

"Yes."

"I want you to try to wake him."

"Me? How do I do that?" Nick asked.

"Speak to him," Dr. Paul answered. "I've spoken with Dr. Deur, the Folke family physician. He explained your relationship with Eric. He told me Eric loves you very much. It's possible the sound of your voice will reach him and help him. We have to try everything we can."

"I'll do anything," Nick answered eagerly.

He had felt hollow, lost, and alone, but Dr. Paul's words gave him a purpose. He now had something he could do, something that might help. He knelt on the floor close to Eric's left shoulder and leaned close to his ear.

"Eric," he whispered. "Eric, it's time to get up. Come on, baby, wake up." He softly stroked his partner's goatee and wiped the corners of his eyes with his thumb. "Hey, baby," he said, louder. "It's time to get up. What do you want for breakfast?"

Eric slowly, stiffly turned his head towards Nick's voice.

"This is the first independent movement he's made," Nick heard Dr. Paul say.

Nick looked at Dr. Paul. The doctor smiled and nodded his head. "Keep trying," he instructed softly.

"Eric, Honey," Nick said again. "Wake up, Baby. Time to get up. Please, wake up."

Faintly, through his dry lips, Eric said, "Nicky."

"Baby!" Nick cried. He took Eric's hand and kissed it.

"Oh, Honey!" Katie said. She stood, kissed her son's cheek, and stroked his buzz-cut hair.

Slowly, over several hours, Eric struggled back into consciousness. Nick's parents, along with more family and friends, appeared in the waiting room.

People took turns coming into the room and speaking with Eric, encouraging him in his struggle to awaken. Only Nick and Eric's parents remained constantly at his side.

During this time, the police came and questioned Nick. He was not accused, but he was their prime suspect. He was very aware of their suspicion.

Shortly after midnight, when Nick was sitting in a chair next to the bed and Kirk and Diane were in the room, Eric opened his eyes and looked at Nick.

"What's going on?" he asked in a dry, low voice. "What happened?"

Nick leaned close to Eric. "You're in the hospital," he explained. "They say you've been poisoned."

Eric was silent for a moment. Suddenly, understanding filled his face. "That bastard Farwell!" Eric coughed.

Nick jumped to his feet. "I knew it!" he shouted. He looked at Kirk. "He's that son of a bitch Christian fundamentalist who works with Eric and tried to get him fired for being gay."

Eric agreed with Nick. In a low, slow, coarse voice, he told his family about the birthday cake. Kirk quickly left and passed everything Eric had told him to the detectives assigned to the case.

For the remainder of that first night, after everyone else had gone home, Nick, along with Eric's parents and Kirk, sat at his bedside. During the slow, dark remaining hours, Eric slept uneasily. Nick would occasionally moisten his lips or wipe his face with a damp cloth.

ERIC slowly opened his eyes to a new day.

"Good morning," he heard Nick's warm voice close to his ear.

"Morning, Baby," Eric said after he had focused on Nick's face. Slowly, he reached out and touched Nick's cheek.

"Eric, how are you?" he heard his mother ask on the other side of

the bed.

He turned his head. “Mom, Dad.”

“How do you feel?” Simon asked.

“I feel weak and almost like I have a hangover.” He turned his head. “Nicky, can I have some water?”

Nick was pouring a cup of water when Dr. Paul walked into the room, followed by Kirk and Diane.

“How are you feeling this morning?” Dr. Paul asked.

“I can’t feel my legs or move them,” Eric answered.

“Eric!” Nick interrupted. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“You can’t move your legs?” his mother said at the same time.

“Everyone, just relax,” Dr. Paul said. “I’ll have a look.” The doctor folded the blanket back from Eric’s legs and carefully examined them. “Can you feel me touching you?” Dr. Paul asked.

“Yes.”

“Sometimes, Eric, this type of poison paralyzes certain muscle groups,” Dr. Paul explained as he continued his examination. “It interferes with the signals between the nerves and the muscles. This usually happens in the extremities. In your case, it appears to have chosen your legs.”

Nick was standing on the other side of the bed from the doctor. “Is it permanent?” he asked.

“Not always,” Dr. Paul answered. “Sometimes the paralysis is short-lived; sometimes it’s permanent. There are a lot of factors involved—the amount and potency of the dosage, the overall health of the patient, how soon the antidote regime is begun. Even the emotional attitude of the patient has a bearing on the whole process.”

“So you don’t know?” Katie asked.

Dr. Paul re-covered Eric’s legs. “Not at the moment,” he answered. “Eric is young, healthy, and strong. These are all in his favor, but I don’t want to hold out any false promises. With this type of poison, there is the possibility his legs could be permanently weakened

or even paralyzed.”

“Oh, my God!” Katie said in a voice filled with fear.

“I don’t want to scare you,” Dr. Paul said, “but I can’t give you an absolute certainty of recovery. Only time will show if the paralysis is permanent or temporary.”

Looking at Eric, the doctor asked, “Do you understand everything I’ve said?”

“Yes,” Eric answered in a small voice.

“I’m going to order some additional blood tests and speak with a neurologist,” Dr. Paul said. “You rest, and I’ll see you later.”

After Dr. Paul walked out of the room, Eric lay unmoving in his bed in silent fear. He felt Nick take his hand. He looked into Nick’s eyes. There, he saw a growing concern; he also saw care and love.

Nick sat in the chair next to the bed and leaned close. Eric heard bits and pieces of the conversation his family was having as they talked among themselves about all the doctor had said. Then he heard Kirk’s voice speaking about Farwell.

“Last night,” Kirk said, “the police went to Eric’s office and found the cake still on his desk. The forensic lab said it was laced with the same poison they found in Eric’s system. This morning, Farwell was arrested as he was getting ready to leave for work. He was charged with attempted murder.”

“Good!” Katie said.

“He folded right away under questioning. He confessed he tried to kill Eric because he was jealous of his success. He started to say something about Eric being a sinner in the eyes of God, but his lawyer shut him up.”

Eric stopped listening to the voices. In his mind, he kept hearing the doctor say he could be paralyzed. The cold, hollow shock of the doctor’s words was followed by disbelief. The disbelief was slowly replaced by fear. His greatest fear was that Nick would leave him because of his handicap. He leaned towards Nick and grabbed his arm.

Through his fear, he pleaded in a hoarse whisper, “Don’t leave

me, Nicky. Please don't leave me."

Nick sat on the edge of the bed and gently took Eric's face in his hands. He leaned close. "What are you talking about?" he asked.

"I'm afraid you're going to leave me, Nicky," Eric answered in a low worried voice. "You'll leave me because I can't walk. We won't be able to go hiking anymore."

Nick engulfed him in his arms. Eric, like a lost child, snuggled into the warm familiarity of Nick's chest.

"Eric, you dumb fuck. I'm not going to leave you, not ever. No matter what, I'm not going to leave you. If I have to, I'll carry you on my back. I love you, Eric. Nothing will ever stop me from loving you. I need you. I'm too damn selfish to leave you. You're stuck with me, baby; you're stuck with me always. You're stuck with me."

"But my body," Eric said quietly. "My body might never be the same. I might not be beautiful to you anymore."

"You'll always be beautiful to me," Nick answered. He kissed Eric's forehead. "It's your love, Eric," Nick said. "That's what's beautiful and precious. Your love is the most beautiful thing in my life." He kissed both of Eric's eyebrows and held him tight. Nick softly whispered, "I love you, Eric. I love you."

Eric slowly calmed and relaxed in Nick's warm strong arms. Quietly, he asked, "Nicky, will you sing me my song?"

"What?"

"My birthday song. Will you sing it for me?"

"Now?"

"Yes. Please, Nicky. Please."

"I'll sing for you, Baby," Nick whispered. "I'll do anything you want."

Holding Eric in his arms, Nick began singing. He sang softly, almost in a whisper. The sound of Nick's voice, the warmth of his breath, and the circle of his arms became Eric's world. He rested and floated on that warm breath and on those words. Nick's arms were the security and the home he needed.

Big Eric—strong Eric—brave Eric. He needed Nick more at that moment than he had ever needed him before. He needed Nick's love, Nick's presence, Nick's promise never to leave him.

His courage and his will slowly returned. The aroma of Nick's skin had the power to reach deep into him and heal his fears. Eric breathed in that aroma. He was alive. He would live. Together, he and Nick could do anything.

When the song ended, Eric looked over Nick's shoulder and smiled at his parents. He saw Scott and Karen quietly enter the room.

"I'm going to be all right," he said. "I'm going to be all right."

"Yes, you are," Simon answered.

Katie sat on the side of the bed across from Nick and rubbed Eric's arm. Nick kissed his forehead and caressed his face. "Hey," he said as he sat back from Eric, "someone needs a shave."

He extracted himself from Eric's arms and searched in the cabinet next to the bed. He found a plastic tub. "Kirk," he asked, "will you please see if you can find a razor and some shaving cream?"

Nick took the bowl into the bathroom. He returned and placed the tub filled with hot water on the tray table. A few minutes later, Kirk came back into the room with a disposable razor and a can of shaving foam. Nick moistened Eric's face, covered it with the foam, and carefully began to shave him.

"You do that very well, Nick," Katie said.

"I get lots of practice," Nick answered. "Eric makes me do this all the time at home."

With the partial strength he had salvaged, Eric grabbed Nick's forearm. "You little liar! I really do have to kick your ass."

"You know," Nick said loudly, "I keep hearing that, but it's never happened."

"Give me a few days, and I'll have you crying 'uncle'."

"We'll see," Nick laughed.

Eric heard his family laughing with his partner.



Nick finished the shave and was wiping Eric's face dry when Dr. Paul returned. "I think it's time for Eric to get some more rest," he said.

"I'm going to stay," Nick said.

Eric saw Dr. Paul smile.

"Yes," the doctor said, "I think that's a good idea."

Everyone except Nick said goodbye to Eric. Before he left, Kirk kissed Eric's forehead. "Take it easy, little brother," he said. He put a hand on the back of Nick's neck. "You take good care of my brother," he said.

"You can count on it," Nick answered.

## Chapter 24

### The Crippled Viking

THE antidote slowly helped Eric. The afternoon of the second day, he was taken off the oxygen. He had survived the poisoning, but whether he would walk again was still a mystery.

Early on the third morning, before any visitors had yet arrived, Nick saw a deep, silent trouble on Eric's face. He sat on the side of the bed. "What's wrong, Eric?" he asked.

"What the fuck do you think is wrong? I'm afraid I'm going to be a cripple."

Nick leaned towards Eric. With his mouth almost touching Eric's ear, he whispered softly, "No, Eric. There's something else. You know I know you. Tell me, Baby. What's bothering you?"

Nick did not move his head. He waited patiently. Slowly, in a very low voice, Eric answered, "I don't have any control."

Nick did not see the tears, but he heard them. With the tears, he also heard shame. He stayed where he was, with his face next to the side of Eric's head. Again, he waited silently.

"My bowels," Eric slowly said in a low, coarse whisper. "I can't control them. I'm wearing a diaper. I shit myself. Nicky, I shit myself."

Nick raised his hand from where it was resting on Eric's chest. He gently caressed Eric's cheek and rubbed the corner of his moist eye with his thumb. "I know," Nick answered.

"You know?" Eric asked.

“Baby, I’ve been here with you.”

“Does everybody know?” Eric asked.

“Just me.”

For a moment, there was silence.

“Eric,” Nick said quietly, “I understand. I’d be embarrassed too, but it’s not your fault. Your body’s been assaulted by a hateful bigot. If it were me in this bed, you’d tell me what I’m telling you now. I love you, Eric. I’m not embarrassed or ashamed of you or this situation. I’m here for you. I’ll do whatever needs to be done. Remember when you asked me to quit my job? I said I didn’t like the idea of you taking care of me, but you said we’re a team. Remember?”

Eric slowly nodded his head yes.

“We are a team, Eric. We help each other. I’m not going to let this bother me. Please, try to not let it bother you.”

Eric put his arms around Nick. “My beautiful Nicky,” he said.

Nick felt Eric’s hand caress the back of his head.

“Thank you, Baby. Thank you,” Eric said as he kissed Nick’s throat.

Without moving, Nick answered, “When I thanked you for helping me, you said I didn’t have to. You said that’s what couples do. You said we help each other. I’m here, Baby. I’ll always be here, no matter what. Remember what Scott said in his toast at our reception?”

“What?” Eric whispered.

“He said together, you and me are unbeatable. I believe that, Eric. Together, we can do anything.”

Eric rubbed his face against Nick’s face. They rested in their embrace until the nurse returned.

ON THE fourth day, Simon and Katie walked into Eric’s room. He was asleep. Nick was sitting in a chair, holding Eric’s hand. He looked up at Eric’s parents.

“Look at all the cards and flowers and stuffed animals,” Simon said.

“Those balloons over in the corner came from the kids in our neighborhood,” Nick said.

Katie walked to Nick’s side of the bed. She kissed her son’s forehead and gently stroked his hair. She looked at Nick. His face was wet with tears. She took a tissue from the box on the night table and wiped his cheeks. Simon squeezed Nick’s forearm.

“He’s been sleeping almost three hours,” Nick said.

“How are you?” Katie asked.

“I’m all right,” Nick answered. “I just don’t like to see him like this. He’s such a strong man. It breaks my heart to see....”

“I know,” Katie said.

ON THE fifth day, after Nick had given him a backrub, Eric closed his eyes and slowly fell asleep. Nick sat in the chair next to his bed and watched him sleep. Memories, so many memories, drifted through Nick’s mind. Sounds, aromas, places, words—so many memories. In all the memories, there was a constant center. That center was Eric.

“Don’t die, Eric,” Nick whispered. “Please don’t die.”

“I promise I won’t,” Eric quietly answered.

“Eric,” Nick said, “I thought you were asleep.”

“No, I’m just resting. Please, Baby, please don’t worry. I promise I’m going to get better. I’ll use all the strength I have to fight this shit. I’m not going to leave you. I don’t want to leave you. I’ll get better.”

Nick laid his head on Eric’s chest. “Thank you, Eric.”

“Nicky, do you remember our first walk in Riverside Park?”

“Yeah. The day we met.”

“I never told you this, Nicky, but I thought you were so beautiful. It was the first time in my life I ever admitted to myself that I thought another man was beautiful.”

“And I thought you were awesome even though you were so shy about everything,” Nick answered.

EVERY day, Nick shaved Eric. He bathed him and washed his hair. He arranged for Andy, Eric’s hairstylist, to come and cut his hair. Nick put lotion on Eric’s legs and feet to keep them from drying out. He massaged his legs and rubbed his back. He brought him his favorite foods from home. He read to him. He sat with him, and he loved him.

DURING a quiet afternoon when Nick had gone home to shower and change his clothes, Eric’s mother sat visiting her son.

“Nick’s been here almost continuously,” she said.

“I know. Sometimes I wake up late at night and see him sleeping in that chair. The hospital offered him a courtesy room, but he said no. He wants to stay close to me.”

AS THE days slowly passed, Nick began to notice that whenever he massaged Eric’s feet and legs or applied lotion to them, they would twitch involuntarily. When he asked Eric to try to wiggle his toes or move his feet or legs, he couldn’t. This involuntary movement became more common and more pronounced with each day. Nick reported the twitching to the hospital neurologist. The doctor told Nick it was a muscular spasm and not to get too hopeful.

Eric did regain control of his bowels and bladder and was freed from his hidden dependence upon a diaper. All of this gave Nick great hope, but whenever he asked Eric to move his legs, he was unable.

Nick devised a plan. On a clear, cold morning when Kirk and Diane were visiting, Nick quietly put his hand under Eric’s blanket and began to caress his testicles.

Eric grabbed Nick's wrist through the blanket and jerked his leg away. "Nick! My brother's here!"

Nick jumped to his feet. "Eric!" he shouted, "you moved your leg! You moved your leg!"

"I did!" Eric cried. "I did move it!"

"That's the first step, Eric," Kirk said excitedly. "Your legs are getting better. They're getting better."

"I'll go find that neurologist," Diane said.

She quickly returned and told them, "They phoned the doctor. He's on his way."

Soon, Dr. Chillag, the neurologist arrived in the room and examined Eric's legs. "Eric, it appears the poison hasn't caused the permanent paralysis I feared," Dr. Chillag said. "Because you only ate part of the cake, you didn't get the full dosage your co-worker intended."

"He'll walk again?" Nick asked hopefully.

"Yes, I believe he will," Dr. Chillag answered. "And you, Nick, have a lot to do with his healing."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. All those multiple daily massages you've given to his legs, in addition to the ones from the staff therapist, are a major factor in his healing."

"How?" Kirk asked.

"The massaging helped keep the blood moving in and out of the muscles of his legs," Dr. Chillag explained. "That improved the circulation of blood and brought in much-needed oxygen and nutrients, along with removing the remnants of the poison and the other toxins."

Eric grabbed Nick's hand. "I'm going to walk out of here," he said.

"I'm now confident your legs will improve, and with exercise, they'll regain their normal strength," a smiling Dr. Chillag said. "But you have to exercise them regularly and be faithful to the therapy regimen we're going to put you on."

“I will, doctor, I promise,” Eric said.

“I’ll see to that!” Nick added enthusiastically.

“But you’re not going to leave until your overall body health is where I want it,” Dr. Chillag added.

“I’m getting stronger,” Eric answered.

“Keep eating that good food Nick brings you, and you’ll soon be back to saving companies from bad management,” Dr. Chillag said.

“All I want to do is go hiking and camping with Nick,” Eric answered.

KATIE and Candy stood watching Eric move slowly down the hall. He was using his walker for support. Nick and Kirk walked on either side.

“Every day his walks get a little longer,” Katie said.

“The nurse told me she sees him and Nick all over the hospital,” Candy said.

“He’s getting stronger and better all the time,” Katie said. “Nick is always walking with him. Sometimes, Eric’s father or Kirk helps. Marco and Scott are here a lot too.”

“Nick told me the new therapy routine is doing a lot of good,” Candy said.

“It really is, and so are Nick’s massages,” Katie said. “All the doctors say his massages have helped Eric more than anything else. Now Nick gives them with an almost religious zeal. He gives them more often and longer.”

Candy hugged Katie around the waist. “Eric’s going to walk out of here,” she said.

“I know,” Katie agreed. “And I truly believe Nick helped in his healing more than anything else.”

ERIC’S room was dark except for a dull light that crept under the door.

The only sounds were the occasional voices passing in the hallway. Eric looked at Nick dozing in the chair on the right side of his bed. It was late at night, but he felt restless and could not sleep. He watched Nick sleeping in the chair.

“My beautiful Nick,” Eric said to himself.

“Nicky,” he called quietly. “Nicky. Nicky.”

Nick sat up in the chair. “Yeah, Baby,” he answered sleepily. “Is something wrong?”

“Yeah, Nicky, something’s wrong.”

“You want me to get a nurse?”

“No.”

“What’s the matter?” Nick asked. His voice sounded worried.

“Come here,” Eric whispered.

Nick leaned closer. “I’m right here,” he said.

Eric put his left hand behind Nick’s neck, pulled him close, and kissed him with an urgent need. He knew Nick was very familiar with that need. Nick accepted Eric’s tongue into his sweet mouth. A glorious moan from deep in Nick’s throat answered Eric’s hunger.

“Baby, I need you,” Eric whispered. His right hand moved from Nick’s stomach to his groin. “I’m so fucking horny, Nicky,” he moaned into his mate’s mouth.

“Eric.”

“Nicky, I’m sorry, Baby, but I need you. I need you now. It’s been two weeks since we’ve been together.”

Nick moved his head back a few inches and looked into Eric’s eyes. “Eric, you want me to sit on your cock? Here? Now?”

“Yeah,” Eric answered breathlessly.

Nick looked at the door.

“Haven’t you missed me, Baby?” Eric asked.

“Oh, Daddy, you have no idea.”

“Yes, I do, love. Yes, I do.”

“Eric, I want you so bad, but a nurse might walk in. We could get



into all kinds of trouble.”

“Nicky, I’ve watched their routine. No one will be here for at least two more hours.”

Nick looked at the door again. He looked back at Eric. Slowly, a smile spread on his face. He leaned to Eric and bit his lower lip. While he gently tortured that wet, happy lip, his hand went under the blanket and under Eric’s gown. He found Eric’s growing glory. Carefully, his hand tightened and began to move up and down.

Eric moved his face and pushed Nick’s hand away.

“Nicky, I’ve got a hand. I can beat myself off. I want you, Baby. Your ass or your mouth.”

“You’re spoiled,” Nick whispered.

“Damn right,” Eric agreed. “You’ve spoiled me. Now spoil me some more.”

Smiling, Nick stood, walked to the door, and carefully locked it. He returned to the bed, pushed Eric’s blanket to his knees, and pulled the gown up to his stomach. With a wink, Nick lowered his head. Eric closed his eyes and gasped joyfully as two weeks of unwanted celibacy dissolved in Nick’s warm, wet mouth and throat.

“Lay next to me,” Eric whispered loudly.

He slid over, and Nick stretched onto the bed next to him. Nick never faltered as Eric opened his trousers and swallowed him. Hungrily, happily, and with a little fear of discovery, Eric was served, pleased, and fed by Nick.

“YOU’VE been here almost three weeks,” Nick said as he packed Eric’s things into a large travel bag.

“I’m fucking glad I’m finally going home,” Eric answered.

He was sitting in the same chair where Nick had spent his nights sleeping. He stopped putting on his socks and shoes and watched Nick.

“What?” Nick asked.

“Thank you,” Eric answered softly.

“For what?”

“For everything,” Eric answered. “For always being here. Staying with me. Caring about me.”

Nick stopped his packing. He walked the few steps to Eric and knelt in front of him. He laid his hands on Eric’s knees. “There was nothing else I could do, man,” he said.

Eric leaned forward and kissed Nick’s mouth. “You’re the best thing in my life,” Eric whispered. He saw a playful smile grow on Nick’s face. “All right, what are you thinking?” Eric asked.

Nick quickly licked Eric’s mouth.

“Bitch,” Eric whispered.

Their arms went around each other.

“I love you, Eric. I’ll always be where you are.”

“Hey, guys,” a woman’s voice interrupted them.

They looked up. It was one of Eric’s nurses. Both men stood.

“I wanted to say goodbye and wish you the best, Eric,” she said. “You’re one of the best patients I’ve ever had. I’ve truly enjoyed getting to know you and Nick.”

“Thank you for everything,” Eric said.

He and the nurse hugged each other.

“Thanks for taking such good care of my big redhead,” Nick said as he hugged her.

“I think you did just as much as any of us,” she said.

Many nurses, therapists, and others who had worked with Eric came and hugged both him and Nick goodbye. Eric had learned a long time ago that people were drawn to him and Nick because of their openness and love.

After all their goodbyes, Nick used Eric’s car to drive him home.

“Nick, why is our street blocked off?” Eric asked when they entered their neighborhood.

“You’ll see,” Nick answered.

Two of their neighbors opened the barricades and allowed them to drive in. Nick stopped the car so the smiling men could speak with Eric.

“Welcome home, Eric,” one said.

“It’s great to have you back. The neighborhood hasn’t been right without you,” the other said.

“Thanks Ben, Joe. But what’s going on?” Eric asked.

Joe looked in at Nick. “You didn’t tell him?”

“Nope,” Nick answered.

“It’s a welcome home block party,” Joe said.

“Yeah,” Ben added. “Your neighbors, family, and friends put together a little celebration to welcome you back.”

“Drive to the house. We’ll put the barricade back up and meet you there,” Joe said.

Nick drove slowly towards their home.

“Our front yard is full of people,” Eric said.

“Yeah, it is,” Nick agreed.

When Nick pulled the car into their driveway, Eric saw a large banner strung across the windows of their front porch welcoming him home. He stepped out of the car and was greeted with cheers and applause.

Standing, looking at all the faces, Eric felt his green eyes fill with tears. Nick walked around the car and stood next to him.

“See, Eric,” he whispered. “I’m not the only one who loves you.”

Together, they walked into the crowd of people under the tall old trees of their front yard. Several young neighborhood children ran to Eric and hugged his tall, strong legs.

“Eric, the kids really like you, don’t they?” his sister Sandy asked.

“He’s their hero,” Nick answered.

Eric lifted a young boy, hugged him, and looked at his sister.

“I help them fix their bikes, their skateboards, and their

rollerblades,” he said.

“He gives us rides on his motorcycle,” the young boy in his arms said to Sandy excitedly.

AFTER the party, the clean-up, and the last goodbye from the last guest, Nick took Eric upstairs, and together, they soaked in steaming hot water in their large bathtub. They held one another, kissed one another, and caressed one another. When the bath was over, Nick led Eric to their bed and massaged his back and legs.

Lying on the bed on his stomach, Eric said, “Now, Nicky, it’s time for you.”

“What do you mean?” Nick asked.

In answer, Eric rolled over and pulled Nick down to him. He took Nick’s mouth with his own mouth. His hands traveled down Nick’s silky, strong back and slipped under the waistband of his underwear and again reclaimed that hard, round, smooth butt. He pushed his brown-eyed spouse onto his back and rolled on top of him. With his right hand, he removed Nick’s underwear and, with dramatic flair, tossed it across the room.

After several hours of needed, healing passion, Nick whispered, “Hold me, Eric. Hold me and don’t let go.”

Eric felt hot tears fall onto his shoulder. “What’s wrong, Baby?” he asked. “What’s the matter?”

“I thought I was going to lose you. I thought I was going to have to live without you,” Nick answered.

“It’s over, Nicky.” Eric said. “It’s all over. We’re together in our home again.”

Nick was silent.

“Nicky.”

“You know where we go rock hunting along Deer Creek?” Nick asked.

“Yeah,” Eric answered.

“There’s that old dead birch where we always stop and rest. Even though the tree’s dead, it’s been standing there for a few years. It’ll probably be a few more years before it falls.”

“Yeah, I know the tree,” Eric answered.

“It’s still a tree,” Nick explained, “but in the spring, there aren’t any green leaves on it. It’s there, but it’s gray and colorless, bleached by the sun. That’s what I’d be if you died. I’d live and go on, but I’d be cold and empty. I’d be like that old tree with no green leaves.”

Eric kissed Nick’s eyes.

“You’re holding me now,” Nick said. “You hold me, and then we get up and go out and do the things we have to do, the things we do every day. There’s always the chance one of us won’t come back home at night. A drunk driver or a crazy-ass meteor might get one of us. We’ll die someday, Eric. One of us is going to die before the other. One of us will be left alone. No matter how much I want it, you and me being together, being in each other’s arms, is not a forever thing.”

“I know that, Nicky,” Eric said. “That’s why the time we have together is so important.”

Right before sleep claimed him, Eric whispered, “I love being loved by you.”

## Chapter 25

### The Need to Protect

LATE in the evening of a wet, rainy day, Eric relaxed in hot, steamy water in their large bathtub. Outside the bathroom windows, the world was cold and windy. The bathroom was warm, safe, and familiar.

Three days earlier, he and Nick had celebrated the second anniversary of their meeting. Four months had passed since his release from the hospital. His legs were strong. He was happy.

All seemed right, yet something was wrong. He looked at Nick sitting naked on the lid of the closed toilet. He appeared to be deep in thought.

“Come on, Nicky,” he said. “Get in.”

“I’m coming,” Nick said as he stood. Carefully, he stepped over Eric and took his place on the far side of the tub. Eric put his arm around Nick’s shoulders.

“Nicky, ever since I got home, you’ve been preoccupied. What’s up?”

“I don’t know,” Nick said. “I’ve just kind of been thinking about something.”

“Thinking about what?” Eric asked.

“You know how they say most couples break up because of finances, abuse, or unfaithfulness?”

“You think we might fit into one of those categories?” Eric asked.

“We’re doing really good financially,” Nick said. “You’re not bad

enough to abuse me.”

“And everyone knows you don’t abuse me,” Eric said as he kissed Nick’s ear.

“Well, nothing that would stand up in court,” Nick answered.

“So I guess that means you’re thinking about cheating on me?” Eric asked.

“No, man, of course I’m fucking not,” Nick said. “I was just wondering if you think you’ll ever get bored with me. Do you think you’ll ever be attracted to another man?”

Eric pulled Nick close and kissed his temple. “I’ll never be bored with you,” he said.

“What about the other?” Nick asked.

“I’m human, Nicky. I’m sure there will be times when a round ass or a muscular pair of thighs catch my eyes.”

“And?” Nick asked.

“And nothing,” Eric answered. “Just because I think a man is good-looking or even sexy doesn’t mean I’m going to do anything. I love you, Nick. I’ve vowed my life to you, my love to you.”

Nick smiled and searched Eric’s eyes.

“Nicky,” Eric said, “if I find a wallet full of money, I return it and the money to the owner. If I see a man drop a twenty dollar bill, I pick it up and give it back to him.” He rubbed the back of his fingers across Nick’s temple. “Life’s full of temptations, Nicky. It’s what we do with those temptations that shows the type of men we are, the kind of character we have.”

With his fingers, he gently stroked Nick’s lips. “Baby,” he continued, “integrity is when we do the right thing even though no one else sees it, even though no one else will ever know. That’s the true quality of a man.”

“I love you, Eric. This is why I love you. I saw this honesty in you that first day we met. You once asked me why I chose you. You’ve just answered that question.”

“Nicky, I want you to be proud of me.”

“Motherfucker, I am proud of you,” Nick said. He kissed Eric’s mouth.

After their kiss, Eric asked, “What about you? What are you going to do when you feel tempted?”

“I’ll think about how much I love you, what you mean to me,” Nick said. “I’ll think of all the love you give me, of all the love we share. I’ll think about everything you’ve just said. And I’ll say your name.” He leaned his forehead to Eric’s forehead.

“Eric, I know temptations will happen. I know I won’t be happy when either of us are tempted, but I know our love can deal with it. I think we’ve both grown enough to deal with that kind of stuff.”

“We have grown,” Eric said. “Look at the history we’ve made in the short time we’ve been together.”

“Yeah,” Nick said. “I don’t want anyone or anything to mar that. No pretty boy or handsome man, no matter how fat his cock, or how round his ass, or how sweet his lips, nothing is going to turn me from you.”

“Or me from you,” Eric said.

“I’m addicted to you, motherfucker,” Nick said as he surrendered his mouth to Eric’s kiss.

THE elevator doors atop the downtown Hyatt Hotel opened and Tommy and Allan stepped into the foyer of the Knife and Fork. When the maître d’ escorted them to their table, they passed Eric and Nick’s parents.

“Look who’s here,” Tommy said. He stopped and kissed Candy’s cheek.

“I would have thought on a hot August night like this you guys would be camping with Eric and Nikos,” Sal said, shaking Allan’s hand.

“No,” Tommy answered. “Sometimes they like to slip off by themselves and spend time in the woods alone.”



“After you guys eat, why don’t you join us for a drink in the piano lounge?” Simon said.

“Thanks, we will,” Allan answered.

SOFT piano jazz greeted Tommy and Allan when they walked into the lounge. The room was paneled in dark oak and dimly lit. It took a few moments before Allan saw Simon wave to them.

They walked into the room past tables with pewter tea light lamps covered by Tiffany shades. After they had seated themselves and ordered their drinks, they settled back and relaxed to the music and conversation.

During their visit, Candy asked, “Nikos and Eric like to go off alone, don’t they?”

“Yeah,” Tommy answered. “They always have.”

“I know, but it just seems like they’re doing it more often,” she said.

“I think a lot of things have changed since everything that’s happened to them,” Allan offered.

“You mean Eric’s poisoning and the attacks on Nick?” Simon asked.

“Yeah,” Allan answered.

“How have things changed?” Katie asked.

“They like to spend time alone away from the world,” Allan answered.

“Haven’t they always liked to do that?” Simon asked.

“Yeah, they have,” Tommy answered. “It’s just more often now.”

“You don’t think they’re afraid of more attacks?” Sal asked.

“No,” Tommy answered.

“I think they see their time together as very precious,” Allan added.

“I think everything that’s happened has brought them closer, if

that's possible," Candy said.

"It has," Allan agreed. "And it's made them a lot more protective of each other."

"What do you mean?" Sal asked.

"They've always looked out for each other," Allan said. "It's just stronger now."

"Didn't Nick tell you about that run-in with that biker last Saturday?" Tommy asked.

"No," Candy and Katie both answered.

"We haven't talked with them this week," Candy said.

"Us, either," Katie added.

"What run-in?" Simon asked.

"There's a gay motorcycle club in Kalamazoo, and one of the members was at the Hairy Lady last Saturday night," Tommy said. "He hit on Nick and Nick told him no. He was real polite about saying no. That should have been the end of it with no problem, but the guy didn't take it very good. I think he might have had a little too much to drink. I don't know. Anyway, Nick turned around and started to walk away. The guy said something to him. I'm not sure what it was; something like 'don't turn your back on me' or 'don't walk away from me'. Whatever it was, he punched Nick in the shoulder blade the same time he said it.

"Nick spun around, but before he could do or say anything, the man's back was slammed against the wall, his feet were about a foot off the ground, and Eric's hands were around his neck. Eric was so fast, it was unbelievable."

"The man's eyes were bugging out like those popeyed goldfish," Allan added.

"Oh my God!" Katie said.

"He didn't really hurt the guy," Tommy assured her. "He just held him up against the wall and told him never to touch or talk to Nick again."

"What happened?" Simon asked.

“Nick asked Eric what the hell he was doing and Eric said, ‘I’m protecting you from this asshole’,” Tommy answered. “Nick said he could take care of himself, and all of a sudden Eric and him are arguing, and the man is just hanging there against the wall almost forgotten.”

“Nick finally gave in,” Allan said. “He knows how bad Eric feels that he wasn’t there to help him when he was attacked at the gas station.”

“So Eric let go of the guy, and he fell to his knees,” Tommy said. “Eric and Nick hugged and started to walk away. The guy got up, grabbed a beer pitcher from a table, and came at them. I’m not sure who he wanted to hit, but I yelled at Eric to warn him. He spun around and put his fist in the guy’s face so fast.”

“Oh, my God!” Katie said again.

“The guy flipped over a table, and by then, the bouncer was on him. He threw him out the door and told him never to come back,” Tommy said.

“What did the bar owner do?” Sal asked.

“The owner apologized to Eric and Nick,” Allan said.

“He didn’t say anything about Eric hitting the man?” Simon asked.

“No,” Tommy answered.

“People at the bar really like Eric and Nick,” Allan explained. “They’re two great guys. You know that old saying ‘they’d give you the shirt off their back’? It’s true about them. They’ll help any way they can. I know a couple of times when they’ve helped pay people’s rent.”

“It’s true,” Tommy added. “Somebody needs help and Eric and Nick will always do what they can. They’re good guys.”

“I hope people don’t take advantage of them,” Candy said.

“They’re not stupid,” Allan explained. “They know when they’re being scammed.”

“I didn’t realize they were so violent,” Katie added.

“They’re not violent except when it comes to protecting each

other,” Tommy said.

“You have to remember what’s happened to them,” Allan added. “They’re extremely protective of one another. All the regulars at the bar know them and know about their history. Everyone knows you don’t hit on them or threaten them.”

“I didn’t realize they were so protective of each other,” Katie said.

“Well, around their families, there’s no need,” Tommy answered.

“There’s a joke in the gay community here in town that if you want to commit suicide, punch Nick,” Allan said.

“Why, because he’ll kill you?” Sal asked.

“No, because before he has a chance, Eric will,” Allan answered.

A BITTER January blizzard brought inches of snow to the city. Eric and Nick lay together on the sofa in their media room. Nick had fallen asleep. Eric turned off the television. Now all that was left was to get up and go to bed. That was not easy. He was warm and comfortable lying with Nick.

He smelled Nick’s silky hair. He kissed Nick’s satin throat. He rested his face on Nick’s head and looked back at his life before they had met—the loneliness, the emptiness, the cold, hard blankness. Those days were now dust that had been blown away by a warm breeze.

He knew the two and a half years they had spent together had been filled with good days, wonderful days. There had also been sad and frightening days. The nights had been times of magical fire and tender softness. He knew the one thing that held all the days and nights together was love.

As he listened to Nick’s gentle breathing, the cold, drifting snow outside was forgotten. The past cold emptiness was forgotten.

He gently woke Nick. “Come on, Baby. Let’s go to bed.”

He led Nick by the hand up to their room. As they lay in the still

darkness in each other's arms in their bed, Eric whispered to Nick. "You know, whenever we're out and I see people looking at you and checking you out, I smile to myself."

"Why?" Nick asked sleepily.

"Because I know at the end of the day, you're going to be here in this bed with me."

Nick kissed Eric's eyes.

"We've been through so much together, Nicky," Eric said quietly.

"I know," Nick answered softly. Nick's warm breath caressed his face. "Are you sorry for any of it?" Nick asked.

"I wish the attacks on you and that lunatic Evangelical Christian trying to kill me had never happened, but Nicky, my love, my heart, I wouldn't trade a minute I've shared with you for all of Bill Gates's money. Not one goddamn fucking minute."

They shared a kiss.

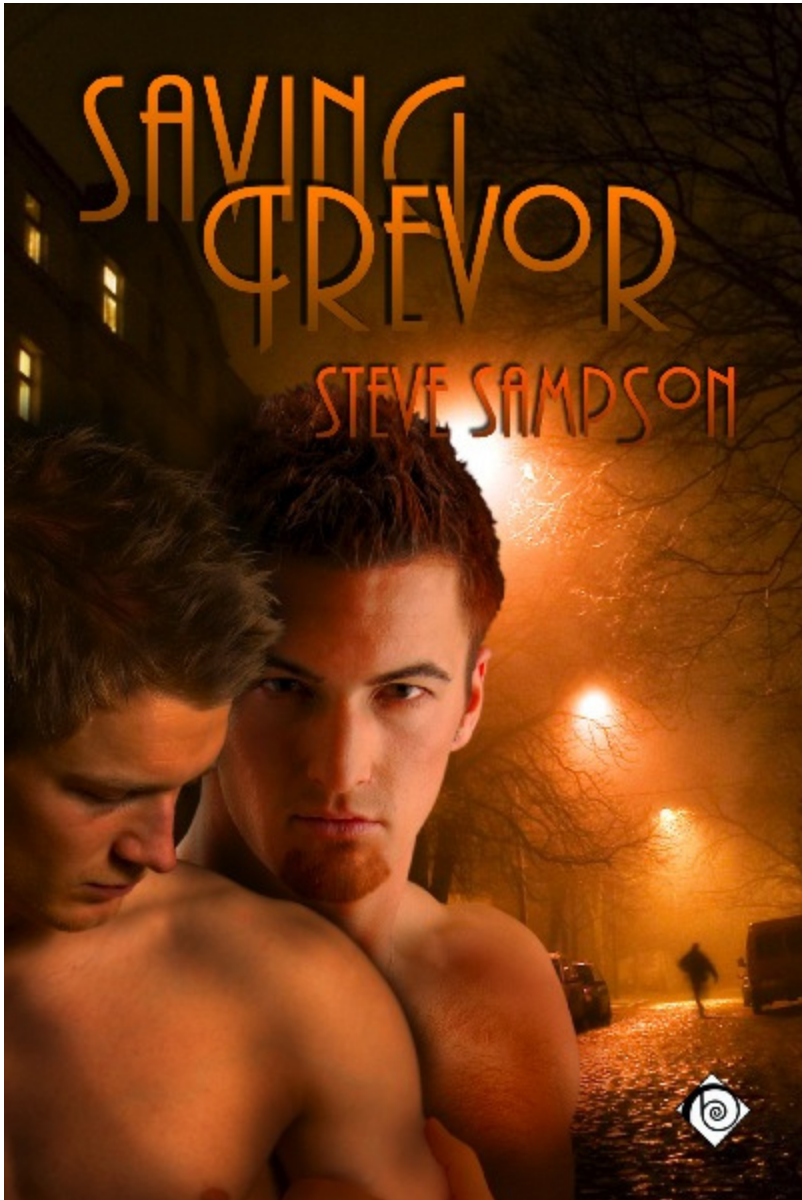
"What about you, Nicky?"

"Eric," Nick answered softly, slowly, "all I want is to share another kiss and for us to hold each other. In this room, in this dark, in our arms, I want us to fall asleep together. I only want the warmth of our bodies, the sharing of our breath, and our love."

STEVE SAMPSON was born in Michigan on an asparagus and peach farm. He's always dreamed of writing, and after years as a manager, he finally decided to follow that dream, so he quit his job and now writes full time. He is an avid camper and loves canoeing. He also teaches Buddhism and meditation.

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Read more about Nick and Eric in



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