

Noble Romance Publishing



Picture Me Perfect



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Picture Me Perfect
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Book Blurb

Troy Summers is a cop. He's recently been partnered with fellow police officer, Jamie Everson, and they get along great. He likes Jamie's brother, Nicky, even more.

When Nicky gets beaten up by his ex-boyfriend and comes to him for help, Troy can't say no, not when it brings Nicky right into his arms. Even still, Troy wants to take things slow with Nicky. He knows they have a connection but he wants to build a relationship with him, even if it means hiding it from Nicky's brother and the rest of the world.

But when Troy gets shot during a drug bust, all bets are off. Their secret relationship comes out. It not only lets everyone know that they've been living together, but brings Bruce back into the picture. Jamie and Troy have to work together to save not only

Nicky but themselves but can they save Nicky in time or will Troy lose the most intriguing man he's ever met?

Chapter One

"Hello?"

"Hey, Nicky."

Nicky Everson recognized the voice of his older brother immediately. There was no way to miss that deep baritone voice. "Hey, Jamie."

"I was wondering if you were doing anything tomorrow night."

"Uh . . . no, not really, I mean, I have some work to do but —"

"Great, can you meet me down at The Peabody Pub around seven? A few of us are getting together to welcome my new partner to the force and I wanted you to meet him."

Nicky fingered the fading bruise around his eye, wincing a little at the pain. "Oh, um . . . maybe another time. I really should get this work done."

"Come on, Nicky," Jamie said. "Troy has been my partner for nearly two months now and you've begged out on every invitation I've sent you. I really want you to meet him. He's a great guy."

"Oh, Jamie, I just don't think —"

"Please, Nicky, this is important to me."

Nicky sighed and rested his forehead on his hand. He could never say no to his older brother when he wheedled, and that was exactly what Jamie was doing, wheedling. Maybe he could go to the pub for an hour or two without getting into too much trouble.

"Look, I can meet you for a little while but then I really have to get back and finish my work," Nicky finally said. "But I'm serious. This proposal is due by Monday, so I can't stay long. Okay?"

"Thanks, Nicky, I really appreciate this. It's important to me that you meet my partner."

Nicky smiled. "I'd love to. I'm just sorry to see Sam go."

"Yeah, me too, but he put in his time and he wanted to retire, move to Florida with Susan, and enjoy those grandkids of his while he's still young enough to chase after them."

Nicky laughed. "Can't fault him for that. I'll bet Susan is thrilled."

"Yeah, she was. I don't think she thought the day would ever come when Sam fully retired. I'm just glad my new partner isn't a jackass. I could have done much worse."

"Does he know about you being gay?"

Jamie laughed. "That's the great part," he said. "Troy is gay too."

"That must make things interesting."

"No, not really," Jamie replied. "He's not my type and I'm not his so there's no tension between us but we sure have a lot of fun checking out the scenery together. Sam wasn't ever concerned with my preferences but it wasn't like I could point out a hot guy to him. He would have decked me."

Nicky smiled, wincing when the small cut on his lip broke open again. His stomach grew queasy when the coppery taste of blood rolled across his tongue. He reached for a paper towel and dabbed at the wound then squashed the napkin into a ball and laid it on his plate.

"It was great to talk to you, Jamie, but I really need to go. I have a lot of work to get done." Like finding a place to sleep for the night. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Nicky, are you okay?"

Nicky heard the concern in his brother's voice. He sighed inwardly. *Fuck no, I'm not okay!*

"Yeah, I'm fine," Nicky said instead of telling his brother the truth. Jamie would blow a gasket and probably kill someone. Big brothers did that. "I'm just a little tired. I've been working a lot trying to get this latest project done."

"Nicky, you know you can talk to me about anything, right?"

Nicky pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to hold back his tears. "I know, Jamie, and I appreciate that but I'm fine, really."

"Okay, just remember that I'm here for you if you need me, no matter what."

"Okay."

"I'll see you tomorrow night."

Nicky snapped his cell phone closed and laid it on the ugly green Formica table in front of him. He rubbed the heels of his hands over his eyes before setting them on the table and turning to look out the window.

He was so tired, more tired than he could ever remember being. Not just physically tired, but bone-weary, emotionally overload tired. Times like these, he wondered if he could take one more bad thing happening to him without breaking.

Although, as he looked around the small café with its chipped and scratched tables, ripped red vinyl bench seats, and food that was just barely edible, he thought he might have finally reached rock bottom.

The two small bags that sat on the seat next to him contained everything he owned. Well, everything he was able to shove into a bag before running for his life. The rest of his belongings were probably sitting in the garbage by now.

That's what Bruce said he'd do if Nicky ever left him. Toss everything Nicky held dear in the garbage. Nicky's heart clenched as he thought about all of the wonderful little treasures he'd collected over the years and no longer had: his collection of colorful teapots, his hand-sewn throw pillows, his carefully chosen matching dishes.

Nicky despaired of ever seeing them again. Bruce always did what he said he'd do and Nicky had no doubt he'd followed through with his latest threat. He'd certainly followed through with the others as the sore muscles and bruises on Nicky's back and side attested to.

"Last cup?"

Nicky jumped then looked up at the aging waitress standing beside him with a coffee pot in her hand. He took a deep breath to calm his racing heart and shook his head. "No, thank you."

"Well, we're getting ready to close up. I need to settle your bill."

"Yes, of course," Nicky said as he dug some money out of his pocket. He handed the lady a ten dollar bill and gave her a smile. "Keep the change."

It probably wasn't his smartest move. He'd need every penny he could get his hands on while he looked for a new place to live. There was no way in hell he'd ever return to the apartment he shared with Bruce, not after last night.

Nicky gathered his stuff together and stood. With a sigh, he headed for the door. He had no idea where he was headed but he couldn't stay here. Going to Jamie's wasn't an option either. His brother was a policeman but he'd still kill Bruce if he ever found out that Bruce had hit his baby brother.

He'd stayed the night before at a friend's house but after Bruce showed up and pounded on the door, waking their neighbors, they asked Nicky not to stay another night. They didn't want the attention. Nicky couldn't blame them. Bruce could cause quite the ruckus.

Nicky was just glad the police sirens had driven Bruce away before he broke the door down. He had no doubt that if Bruce had gotten in, he'd be in the hospital right now. Bruce was raging mad at him, all because he refused to join in to the little orgy party Bruce threw for his friends, with Nicky as the door prize.

When Bruce came home, with three of his friends in tow, and announced to Nicky that they were going to have a little fun and he would be passed around from friend to friend, Nicky knew their relationship was over.

It really should have been over months ago . . . like right after their first date. Nicky knew then that Bruce wasn't the love of his life but he'd been so lonely. He just wanted someone to love him, even if it was just for a little while. Bruce seemed to be the only one showing interest.

Before he knew it they were living together. In the first few weeks things seemed okay, even idealistic, but little by little, Nicky began to notice things about Bruce, the way Bruce belittled him, the careless way Bruce handled Nicky's prized possessions, the yelling.

Luckily, the physical abuse didn't start until last night. Nicky wasn't stupid, just a little slow on the uptake sometimes. One smack across the face from Bruce and Nicky knew he wanted out.

Unfortunately, Bruce didn't stop there. He and his friends beat the crap out of Nicky before he passed out. He woke up to find them all naked and sleeping out in the living room. The only reason he didn't call the cops was because he still wore his own clothes. He hadn't been violated.

He'd snuck through the living room to his bedroom and packed a bag as fast as he could. He grabbed his laptop out of the office and left before any of them woke up. He didn't plan on going back, not even for his stuff. He could get more stuff.

Nicky paused in the doorway of the small café and pulled the collar of his jacket up. A cold breeze blew in from the north. The weather forecast called for temperatures near freezing. He slung his duffle bag and the matching laptop bag over his shoulder and began walking down the street, shoving his hands deep into his pockets.

He needed to find a place to crash for the night. Tomorrow he could go to the bank and withdraw enough money to get a new place to live. He should have gone today but he'd been too busy dodging Bruce and his friends.

They were looking for Nicky. He'd seen Bruce's car several times going up and down the streets. Except for the fact that Bruce probably wanted to beat the shit of him again, Nicky couldn't figure out why Bruce was looking for him.

As Nicky wracked his brain and tried to figure out where he could stay the night, he thought back to his conversation with Jamie. He remembered Sam, Jamie's work partner for the last ten years. Maybe he could stay the night there. Sam and Susan liked him.

Flipping open his phone, Nicky searched through his phone numbers until he found Sam and Susan's home number. He'd never called them at home but had the number in case of emergencies. This, Nicky thought, definitely qualified.

He pushed connect then put the phone to his ear, waiting for someone to pick up. He knew from talking to Jamie that the couple planned to move to Florida. He just hoped they hadn't left yet.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Sam, this Nicky, Jamie's brother."

"Hello, Nicky, how are you?" Sam asked. "Is everything alright? Is Jamie alright?"

"Oh no, everything is fine. I just talked to Jamie a few minutes ago. He invited me to that little shindig he's having tomorrow for Troy."

"Oh, well, that's good. So, what can I do for you?"

"Well, I really hate to ask but—" Nicky took a deep breath. "I was wondering if I could crash on your couch for the night. My boyfriend and I had a little argument and I kind of left and I don't want Jamie to know because you know how he gets so I was wondering—"

"Whoa, slow down, Nicky." Sam chuckled. "You're talking so fast I can barely understand you. Now, what's this about you and your boyfriend?"

"We had an argument and I left. I can't really go home at the moment and I wanted to know if I could crash on your couch." Nicky grimaced. "I don't want Jamie to know. You know how he gets."

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I just need a place to sleep tonight until I can get to the bank in the morning. I have some money saved up." Nicky laughed. "My rainy day fund, so to speak. Guess I never thought I'd need it this soon. I was kind of saving up for a car."

"You know you're welcome here, son, anytime, for as long as you need," Sam said. "Do you need me to come get you?"

"No, I'll catch a bus or get a cab. I'm not too far from your house now." Nicky's heart rate settled a little more as he realized he'd have a safe, warm place to sleep tonight, a place Bruce would never think to look. "I really appreciate this, Sam."

"Are you sure you don't want to call Jamie?"

Nicky smiled. "I'm sure. He'd just get all upset and go beat the crap out of Bruce and then we'd all be in big shit. It's just easier this way. Besides, I'm not in the mood to hear *I told you so* from Jamie. He never liked Bruce."

Sam chuckled. "I hear you. Your brother is one of the best men I know but he can be a real asshole sometimes, especially when it comes to you."

"Believe me, I know."

Nicky said goodbye to Sam, flipped his phone closed, and shoved it into his pocket. He glanced around, looking for the nearest bus stop. He was actually a little farther away from Sam's house than he'd admitted, like across town. It would take him at least an hour to get there. Maybe a cab would be better?

Nicky dug into his pocket and pulled out what cash he had on him. He counted it and frowned. \$22.36 and several bits of lent. Maybe enough to get him there but he doubted it. The bus was probably a better bet.

Nicky put the money back into his pocket and resumed his search for the nearest bus stop. It was then that he noticed the red Audi Roadster convertible coming down the road. With a moan of distress, he turned and ran as fast as he could in the opposite direction.

If Bruce caught him, he was done for and he knew it. Bruce could be pretty intimidating when he was angry. Until last night, Nicky didn't know he could be brutal as well. Nicky still had a hard time believing Bruce had actually *hit* him, even though he now had the bruises to prove it.

Bruce seemed so wonderful when they first met. At first, Nicky wouldn't agree to go out with him, but Bruce was persistent, bringing Nicky flowers, chocolates, romancing him. He charmed Nicky until he finally gave in and agreed to a date.

He should have trusted his gut and told Bruce to take a flying leap. On the outside, Bruce seemed wonderful, handsome, and romantic. He seemed to want everything in life that Nicky did.

But the beautiful exterior of golden blond hair and deep blue eyes hid a monster that wanted to control Nicky's every move. Nicky didn't mind being the submissive partner in a relationship. In fact, he preferred it. He just refused to be someone's slave.

And that's exactly what Bruce seemed to want—a slave. Someone he could peddle to his friends in exchange for whatever he wanted. Nicky wasn't stupid. He knew Bruce did drugs here and there. Bruce offered him drugs on more than one occasion. Nicky always turned him down and made Bruce promise never to bring it home. Now, Nicky wondered if Bruce might be more involved than he thought.

Nicky's breath huffed from his chest as he ran past several darkened buildings. He'd come to this side of town figuring Bruce would never look for him here. After all, he was miles away from Bruce's upscale neighborhood. But apparently he'd guessed wrong.

His heart pounded when he spotted light spilling out of an open door half way down the block. Nicky sprinted toward it. At this point, he didn't care if it was a café, a bar, or a hole in the wall. It represented safety.

He glanced over his shoulder as he reached the door, just in time to see Bruce's car turn the corner and drive onto the street Nicky was on. He rushed into the lit doorway, skidding to a halt when he realized he stood in the middle of a drag club.

A small bark of laughter escaped his mouth as he looked around at all the colorful people. Some stood, some sat, and some danced in the middle of the room. Every single one of them was dressed to the nines in evening wear.

Nicky glanced over his shoulder again then rushed toward the opposite side of the bar. He quickly sat on barstool and ducked his head, trying to look inconspicuous. Not easy in a room full of people dressed in drag.

"What can I get you, honey?"

Nicky glanced up to find a man with bright pink hair and long painted nails standing in front of him. He wore a white dress shirt, black silk vest, and black bowtie. Except for the hair and nails, he looked very butler-ish.

"Can I have a coke, please?"

"A coke?" The man's pink eyebrows rose nearly to his hairline. "A real coke as in a soda pop?"

Nicky chuckled. "Yes, please."

"Honey, do you know where you are?"

Nicky glanced around the bar for a moment before looking back at the bartender. "A drag club?"

The man snorted. "And you want a coke?"

Nicky nodded, smiling. "Yes, please."

The bartender shook his head and moved away, grabbing a glass. Nicky glanced around the room again, amused by the other patrons' colorful outfits. He felt as if he'd stepped into a fancy ball, with everyone dressed in their finest. The room practically sparkled with rhinestone jewelry.

A sudden cold wind made Nicky look toward the door. His breath caught in his throat as he clutched the bar. Bruce and one of his friends from the previous night were walking in. They must have seen him enter the place.

Nicky scrunched down and quickly glanced around. There had to be a back door to this place or a back room, someplace he could hide until Bruce left.

"Honey, are you alright?"

Nicky glanced at the bartender and shook his head. "My ex-boyfriend just walked in. I can't let him see me. Is there a back door?"

"How much of an ex?"

Nicky felt his face flush. "Last night."

"Did he give you that pretty shiner?"

Nicky nodded.

"Oh, the brute!" the bartender exclaimed as his hands fluttered at his neck.

"Well, honey, you just come with me."

Nicky blinked.

"Come now, don't be afraid." The bartender grabbed Nicky's hand and started to pull him toward a doorway on the back wall. He stopped for a moment and leaned over to whisper in the ear of the tallest Marilyn Monroe look-alike Nicky ever saw.

Marilyn smiled and gestured to several other people dressed as movie starlets.

"Come on, girls, we have some party crashers to play with."

Nicky's mouth dropped open in shock as he watched the group walk across the room, right toward Bruce and his friend. They blocked Bruce's view of him, circling the man, rubbing against him. Nicky smirked when Bruce began fighting them off, pushing them away.

"Come on, honey, let's get you somewhere safe while the girls keep him occupied."

Nicky turned and followed the bartender into the back of the club. He couldn't help but cast one last glance back at Bruce. What he saw made him laugh. Bruce's face was red with rage, as was his friend's. The group of drag queens surrounding him was growing larger by the minute.

But the best part for Nicky was the many rhinestone-encrusted evening bags beating Bruce and his friend over their heads. Maybe there was justice in the world after all. Bruce hated drag queens or anyone that seemed less than masculine.

Just one more reason Nicky wondered why Bruce went after him. Besides being a virtual lightweight at five-foot-six and one-hundred-twenty pounds, Nicky was slender and almost dainty. By no means could he be described as a *man's man*.

"Carmine, honey, I need your help."

Nicky stopped, stunned by the largest man he ever saw. The bartender stepped right up to him, his hand stroking the larger man's chest. Carmine practically purred under the bartender's caress.

"This young man is having a bit of trouble, love," the bartender said. "I was hoping you might be able to help him."

"Nicky, my name is Nicky." Nicky held his hand out, shaking with both the bartender and Carmine.

"Oh, Nicky, how cute," the bartender said. "I'm Leon and this is my beautiful Carmine. He's one of the bouncers here."

"It's very nice to meet you," Nicky said.

"Likewise," Carmine said, his voice low and rich. He looked down at Leon, his gaze tender and filled with so much love Nicky felt a pang of envy. He wanted someone to look at him like that.

"How can I help, pretty?" Carmine asked.

Nicky thought he saw Leon's body shudder at Carmine's words but he couldn't be sure, since he was having a hard time taking his eyes off Carmine. The man was simply massive. Not overweight, just huge. The width of his arm was probably bigger than Nicky's leg and his head was higher than the door frame.

"Nicky's ex-boyfriend came looking for him." Leon gestured to Nicky's face. "He's the one that left that little bruise on Nicky's poor face."

Nicky jumped back a step when Carmine growled. But Carmine's touch was gentle when he reached over and stroked the side of Nicky's face.

"He did this to you?" Carmine asked.

Nicky nodded.

"What happened, little bit?"

Nicky was too afraid to not answer truthfully. "Bruce and his friends beat me up when I refused to participate in an orgy Bruce set up."

Carmine's black eyebrows drew together, his face darkened. "He hurt you because you wouldn't have sex with his friends?"

Nicky's face grew warm. He nodded again, dropping his eyes.

"Carmine doesn't like people that are mean to other people," Leon explained.

Nicky couldn't agree more but he was surprised a man of Carmine's size felt the same way. In Nicky's experience, larger men used their strength to get what they wanted. Carmine looked like he could have whatever he wanted without breaking a sweat.

"After they beat me up I guess I lost consciousness. When I woke up, they were all passed out. I packed a bag and ran. That was last night. I've been avoiding Bruce ever since. He's been out looking for me all day; I've seen his car on the street several times." Nicky grimaced and shrugged. "I've been able to avoid him up until now but I guess he saw me come in here."

Carmine watched Nicky with an intense gaze that made Nicky feel as if Carmine could see inside of him and read all his hidden secrets. Nicky fidgeted with the frayed hem of his t-shirt and wondered what the big man saw when he looked down at him.

"You and this guy live together?" Carmine finally asked.

"Well, we did until last night," Nicky replied. "Once he hit me, whatever we had together was over. I just wish I had more time to get my stuff." Nicky pulled his two bags up off the floor. "This was all I was able to get before I left."

"So, you don't plan to go back to him?" Carmine asked.

"Are you serious?" Nicky pulled his shirt up and turned slightly, showing Leon and Carmine the bruises on his side. "Does it look like I want to go back to that asshole?" Nicky shoved his shirt down and grabbed the handles of his bags. He felt a little resentful that Carmine thought he'd ever give Bruce the time of day after what he did. "If you can just show me a back door, I'll leave and you won't have to worry about it."

"Now, hold on, little bit," Carmine said, holding his hand up. "I didn't mean anything by that but I had to ask. If I'm going to let my Leon help you out I have to know that you won't go running back to your ex-boyfriend when he swears it will never happen again."

"It's not going happen again." Nicky stroked the bruise on the side of his face. "I put up with a lot for Bruce but I won't be hit by anyone."

"Well, love, can we help him?" Leon asked.

Carmine chuckled. "You and your lost souls." He leaned down and planted a small kiss on Leon's head. "Okay, pretty, we'll help Nicky out. Why don't you take him out to the car? I'll go let Loti know we're headed home early."

"Thank you, love." Leon stood on his tiptoes to kiss Carmine.

Nicky arched a brow in surprise when Carmine lifted the smaller man up in his arms and kissed him back.

Leon wrapped his legs around Carmine's waist. "I'll make it worth your while."

Carmine set Leon back down on the floor, patting his ass as he started to walk by. "You always do, pretty."

Leon sighed. Nicky glanced over at him to see his gaze following Carmine out of the room, a sweet sparkle in their blue depths. Nicky marveled at the love so plainly visible between the two men. It was almost tangible.

"Carmine seems like a nice guy," Nicky said. "How long have you two been together?"

"Almost three wonderful years," Leon replied. "And he *is* nice. I know he doesn't look it but my Carmine is actually a big teddy bear. He couldn't hurt a soul. And he loves me, which is the absolute best part."

"If I could only be so lucky."

Leon made a tscking noise with his tongue. "Oh honey, you'll meet your guy, just you wait. I know about these things," Leon said as he led Nicky out the back door. "I knew Carmine was meant for me the minute I saw him. I just walked right up to him and told him he was mine."

"Seriously?" Nicky asked, shocked. "What did he say?"

"He said okay and that was that. He went home with me that night and we've been together ever since. We've never even spent a night apart."

Nicky wanted to pout. He could even feel his lower lip threatening to slide out. He was so tired of being alone. He just wanted one person to love him the way Leon and Carmine seemed to love each other, just one. Was that asking too much?

"Sounds like heaven," he murmured.

"There's someone out there for all of us, you know," Leon said as he opened the door to a large truck. Nicky assumed it was Carmine's because Leon had to climb up into it. "You'll know when you meet your guy that he's the one for you."

"Yeah, but how long until I meet him?"

Chapter Two

Troy took another sip of his beer and watched Graham shoot the white cue ball across the green felt top table. He chuckled when Graham missed the ball he aimed at entirely, the cue ball bouncing off the side of the table then rolling to the middle.

Troy liked pool as much as the next guy but he never understood Graham's fascination with the game. Graham *loved* it. He probably slept with a pool cue in his bed. From his grouching, Graham wasn't sleeping with anything else in his bed.

Now that, Troy understood. He'd been going through a pretty long dry spell himself. He hadn't been out on a date in months let alone had anyone in his bed. He tried to chalk it up to the new job and all but he knew he was lying to himself.

Troy was tired of the constant rat race. Cruise the bars and find a guy, take him home and see if he's the one. After he leaves, try again. Troy could count the number of second dates he'd been on in the last year on one hand.

He just wanted to find a nice guy, settle down, and have a family. Unfortunately, most of the gay men he'd met lately just wanted to get laid. And while sex was nice — great, even — it didn't hold him in the middle of the night and make him feel loved.

No, Troy wanted something more. He wanted to build something with someone, have that special person to come home to after a hard day at work. He wanted a partner. And he wanted the great sex that went along with being with someone he loved.

"Is Sammy going to make it tonight?" Jamie asked. "Do I finally get to meet him?"

Troy chuckled and shook his head. "I invited him but knowing my brother he's forgotten by now. The man's lost without a keeper. Don't get me wrong, I love Sammy to death but he would forget to eat unless I called him regularly."

"Sounds tough." Jamie chuckled. "I have to warn you, I'm not sure Nicky is much better. Granted, he can cook like a dream but he has a way of getting himself into fixes that defy belief."

"He can cook?" Troy stood up straighter. "You didn't say he could cook."

Jamie chuckled. "Did I forget to mention that?"

"Uh, yeah," Troy replied. He was a lousy cook but he loved food. The two did not mix. Granted, he cooked well enough to get by, but it wasn't gourmet. Sometimes what came out of the oven—or in most cases, the microwave—wasn't even very edible.

"I'm going to go use the john," Jamie said. "Order me another beer."

Troy rolled his eyes and got up from his seat. He started toward the bar, paused and looked over at Graham. "You want another beer too?"

"Naw, I'm good," Graham replied, holding up a half-empty beer bottle. "Two beers and I'm pretty much done for." He wiggled the beer bottle in his hand. "This is beer two."

Troy chuckled and walked over to the bar. He held up two of his fingers to the bartender then turned and leaned back against the bar, scoping out the people in the room. Peabody's Pub was actually a nice place for a gay bar.

The lights were not too bright but they lit up the place enough so there weren't any guys in back corners getting it on. The place was tastefully decorated, with pool tables at one end, tables and chairs at the other, and the bar counter in the middle against the wall.

Troy glanced toward the front entrance when the door opened and the most stunning man he ever laid eyes on walked in. Troy felt the air rush from his lungs as his groin tightened almost painfully.

The man was smaller than Troy. *Much* smaller, which made this instant attraction all the more stunning. Troy usually preferred men closer to his own size.

The light brown hair curling around the man's high cheekbones and the pert little face, the sparkling blue eyes with the longest eyelashes Troy ever saw, and the most kissable lush lips in the world sent Troy's lust into overdrive.

He gripped the bar behind him to keep from reaching for the man when he walked by. Troy's hands ached, not from the firm grip he had on the wooden countertop, but from the need to feel the man's glowing skin under his fingers.

The man looked ethereal, unreal in the dim light. Troy never considered men to be pretty but this man's beauty was exquisite, fragile. He literally took Troy's breath away. Something intense flared through his entrancement as deep blue eyes turned to him and widened.

Troy couldn't help but feel pride in his appearance as the little man's nostrils flared. The man started in his direction, a kind of dazed look on his face, as if he were drawn by some unseen force. Troy's heart pounded as the man drew closer, finally stopping right in front of him.

He couldn't miss the obvious examination and approval in the man's glance but the smoldering flame in his eyes startled Troy. The man looked up at him, and their eyes locked together as their breathing came in unison.

A quiver surged through Troy as the man reached out to him, his delicate hand gripping Troy's. Troy watched the man turn his hand over then he grabbed Troy's other hand, turning this one over as well. He was confused by the man's movements but refused to break the sensuous spell that grew between them.

"No ring." The man's voice held a gentle softness that wrapped around Troy and gave him a sense of peace he couldn't remember ever feeling. "Boyfriend? Significant other? Lover?"

Troy shook his head, afraid to put sound to his response in case it stopped the sexy little man from doing whatever he wanted to do. No, he most definitely did not have a boyfriend, significant other, or lover. But he was willing to entertain the possibility.

"Looking?"

Troy nodded, unable to tear his hungry gaze away from the gorgeous face in front of him. The man's hand rested on his chest at the opening of his button down shirt. His fingers twined in the soft smattering of brown hair visible there.

"This is very sexy. Is there more?" The man shuddered when Troy nodded. "I'd really like to find out where it leads."

This time, Troy shuddered. The mere idea of this man discovering where the trail of hair down his chest and abdomen led to made Troy's cock so hard he hurt. "I'd love to show you," he murmured.

"My name is Nicky but you can call me anything you want."

Troy smiled and reached for the man. "My name's Troy. I'd like to call you swe—" The smile suddenly fell from Troy's face as the man's name sank into his foggy brain. "Did you say your name was Nicky? As in Nicky Everson?"

The man's head tilted to one side, a frown making his dark brown eyebrows draw together. "Yes, my name is Nicky Everson. How did you know?"

"Well shit!" Troy exclaimed as took a step back until he'd put a respectful distance between them. "I'm Troy, Troy Summers, Jamie's partner."

Nicky looked confused for a moment then his mouth suddenly dropped open and his face grew pale. He took his own step back from Troy. The distance between them seemed as wide as the Grand Canyon. "You're Jamie's partner?"

Troy nodded.

The sensuous light that sparkled in Nicky's eyes since he walked in dimmed, leaving behind a dull blue that tore at Troy's heart.

"I'm sorry," Nicky whispered, his head dipping down toward his chest. "I didn't know who you were. Please forgive me."

Troy reached for Nicky, stopping when the man jerked back. "It's no problem."

"Where's Jamie?"

"He went to the bathroom. He should be out any second."

Nicky's delicate hands fluttered at his neck as his gaze darted around the room. "I guess I'll just go wait for him over here." Nicky took a few steps away then paused, glancing over his shoulder at Troy. "It was nice meeting you."

Troy nodded, at a loss for words. He felt Nicky's departure like an open wound in his chest. He wanted to cry out in frustration as he watched Nicky cross the room, leaving Troy standing more alone than he ever felt before.

Troy knew instinctively that something was wrong, something more than just him being Jamie's partner. Nicky looked like a dejected man, as if he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Every possessive impulse Troy had screamed for him to wrap the little man up in his arms and never let him go, to protect him from the evils of the world. He never felt such an overwhelming need in his life.

"Oh hey, Nicky's here."

Troy's heart sank as he turned to see Jamie standing next to him. Now he'd never get the chance to spend more one-on-one time with the beautiful vision sitting across the room from him. He would have to pretend he wasn't interested when everything inside of him screamed out that he was.

"Yeah, he showed up a couple of minutes ago," Troy said.

"Well, come on over." Jamie gestured toward Nicky's table. "I'll introduce the two of you."

"We've already introduced ourselves."

"Oh good," Jamie said, giving Troy a peculiar look. "Is everything okay, Troy? Did my brother say something?"

"No, nothing. I was just thinking of some stuff, nothing important." Troy waved his hand dismissively at Jamie. "Don't worry about it." Troy grabbed the two beers that the bartender set on the bar and handed one to Jamie.

"Your drink, sir." Troy bowed at the waist.

Jamie chuckled. "Why thank you, Jeeves."

"Think nothing of it, sir." Troy laughed, his mood lightened as he followed Jamie across the room. He felt lighthearted until he sat down and found Nicky gazing at him again. He could feel Nicky's hungry eyes on him like a caress. It took his breath away again.

"Hey Nicky," Jamie said. "How are you doing, bro?"

"I'm okay," Nicky replied quietly, almost too quietly for Troy's liking.

Jamie suddenly reached across the table and grabbed Nicky's chin, tilting his face. "What the hell is that on your face?" Jamie snapped.

Nicky jerked his face away from Jamie and dipped his head, his light brown hair falling down over his cheek. "It's nothing."

"Don't give me that shit," Jamie growled. "Did Bruce hit you?"

Bruce? Troy instantly snapped to attention. Who in the hell was Bruce?

"No," Nicky replied. "I ran into a cupboard door. You know, the one over the top of the stove where I keep all of my spices. It was open and I just walked right into it."

Troy knew Nicky lied. He didn't know how he knew but he did. Someone had hit Nicky and given him the yellowing bruise around his eyes. Troy gritted his teeth and clenched his hands in his lap. He felt an uncontrollable urge to rip something apart, or *someone*.

"Besides, Bruce and I are over with. I moved out a couple of days ago."

"Because he hit you?" Jamie asked.

"Look, I told you Bruce didn't hit me," Nicky snapped. "I moved out because Bruce was an asshole."

"And it took you three damn months to figure that out?" Jamie snapped right back. "I knew he was jerk when I met him."

"Well, not all of us know everything like you do, Jamie." Nicky stood and planted his hands on the table as he glared over at his brother. "Sorry I'm such a fucking disappointment to you. I'll remember to ask your permission the next time I feel the need to have someone's dick up my ass."

Troy's eyes widened as he watched Nicky storm out of the bar. Apparently, the little man had a temper that was bigger than he was. It made Troy even more intrigued than when he merely thought the man gorgeous.

"Fuck!" Jamie exclaimed.

Troy turned to see him running a hand over the top of his short hair.

"I'm sorry, Troy. I guess that wasn't the best introduction to my family. Nicky can just be so —"

"How old is Nicky?" Troy asked.

Jamie looked confused. "Twenty-eight, why?"

"Do you think he might be old enough to make his own decisions? His own mistakes?"

Troy knew he was going out on a limb with Jamie. He didn't really know the guy that well. Still, if Nicky was twenty-eight he should be able to live his own life, no matter how badly he fucked it up.

"Look, you don't get it," Jamie said. "Nicky is always fucking things up. I can't count the number of scrapes I've gotten him out of."

"Anything illegal?" That could be a real stickler point. Troy was a cop. He couldn't get involved with someone who did something illegal. Hell, he still couldn't get involved. Really.

"No, no," Jamie waved his hand at Troy. "Jamie would never break the law, not on purpose, but he just seems to get himself into these messes and I have to come in and save his ass. I've been doing it since we were kids."

That right there told Troy all he needed to know. Jamie started saving Nicky when they were kids. He never learned not to. Nicky might get himself into mixes but Jamie didn't help by always coming to Nicky's rescue. He never gave Nicky a chance to grow up.

"Do you really think this Bruce guy hit him?"

"There is no doubt in my mind Bruce hit Nicky. It's just the sort of thing that asshole would do." Jamie shook his head. "I just don't understand why Nicky is lying to me about it."

Troy could answer that question for Jamie. Nicky wouldn't admit that Bruce hit him because he didn't want to listen to Jamie say *I told you so*, and Troy knew Jamie would say it. He was the older brother. He couldn't help it.

Troy wondered if Sammy ever felt that way with him. True, Sammy was the older of the two of them but Troy had always looked out for him, not the other way around. Maybe he needed to make a little visit and tell his older brother how proud he was of him, how much he loved the little squirt.

"Hey, look, Jamie, I need to get going," Troy said as he got to his feet. He pulled some money out of his pocket and tossed it down on the table. "I have a few things I need to go do. I'll see you at work on Monday, yeah?"

"Yeah, okay," Jamie said. "Hey, it wasn't anything Nicky said, was it?"

"No, I just need to get a few things done before work on Monday."

"Is it still okay if I give Nicky your phone number?" Jamie asked. "Sam and I always felt that it was better for our closest kin to have the phone numbers in case something happened."

"Yeah, that would be fine." Troy actually liked the idea of Nicky having his phone number but he'd never admit that to Jamie. "I don't mind Nicky having my phone number in the least. In fact, tell him he can call me if he needs anything. That's what partners are for."

Jamie's face lit up with a bright smile. "Thanks, man, I appreciate it. I'll make sure Nicky doesn't call too often. He can get a little nerve-racking at times."

"I understand and it's no problem." Troy smiled. "I have a little brother too."

"I thought Sammy was older than you."

"He is but I've always taken care of him. He's a tad absent-minded."

Jamie chuckled. "It sounds like we have a lot more in common than I thought, Troy."

Troy nodded but he couldn't help but wonder how much they would have in common if things progressed into the fantasies he was having about Jamie's brother. Maybe Jamie would even be interested in Sammy. Wouldn't that be interesting?

"Okay, look, I have to head out. Make sure you give Nicky my home phone number and my cell number. I'm never quite sure which one I can be reached at."

"Yeah, okay, and thanks again, Troy." Jamie gestured toward the front door of the bar. "After what you just saw with Nicky, it means a lot to me that you don't mind me giving him your number."

"It's not a problem, believe me."

* * * * *

Troy's voice was groggy with sleep when he answered the phone. "Hello?"

"Troy?"

Troy frowned at the fear and hesitation he could hear in the caller's voice. He sat up and flipped on the light on his nightstand. He rubbed his hand down his face and tried to wake up. "Yes, this is Troy," he replied. "Who's this?"

"Nicky, Jamie's brother."

"Oh, hey, Nicky." Troy glanced at the clock on his nightstand, surprised to see that it was nearly 3:00 in the morning. "Nicky, do you know what time it is?"

"Yeah, and I'm real sorry to call but I need some help."

Troy's heart sped up as he thought about Nicky's boyfriend, Bruce, and the bruises on Nicky's face. "Run into another cupboard door?"

Nicky chuckled. "More like the entire kitchen."

Troy groaned. He could just imagine the damage done to the smaller man. "You know your brother is going to shit bricks, right?"

"And that is exactly why I called you instead of Jamie. I'm not in the mood to listen to Jamie read me the riot act right now. I'm tired, filthy, and hungry. I just need a

place to crash for the night, take a shower, and re-group. I swear I'll be out of your hair in the morning. You won't even know I'm there."

"I doubt that's possible, Nicky." Troy groaned. His head dropped back against the headboard. "I'd know you were here even if you didn't make a peep."

"Does that mean you –?"

Troy heard a small resigned sigh.

"Okay, I'm sorry to have bothered you."

"No, Nicky, wait," Troy shouted before Nicky could hang up the phone. "I didn't mean that I didn't want you to come over, just that – oh hell, Nicky, you know what I meant."

Nicky *had* to know. There was no way he could miss the instant, explosive chemistry between the two of them.

"Yeah, I guess I do," Nicky said. "Look, maybe I should just find somewhere else to go. It would probably be better for both of us. If Jamie ever found out, he'd –"

"Nicky, I have to be honest with you; I could care less what your brother thinks when it comes to you and me. This has nothing to do with him. We're both over the legal age, and we're both single. What happens between us is none of his business."

"You're serious."

"Yes, Nicky, I am." Nicky was so quiet for so long that Troy began to wonder if the man had hung up on him. "Nicky? Are you still there?"

"Yes, I was just thinking."

"About what?" Troy hoped it was about him.

"Are you sure you know what you're saying? I can be a lot of trouble. You really have no idea."

Troy chuckled. "Nicky, I think you're a lot less trouble than you think. You've just never found anyone that understood you." Troy had no idea where these words were coming from but he hadn't been able to stop thinking about Nicky since the sexy little man stormed out of the bar two weeks ago.

"And you think you do?" Nicky snorted.

"I'd like to try."

Silence. Troy held his breath as he waited for Nicky's reply. He didn't want to say anything to influence Nicky's decision. Well, that wasn't true. He wanted to say whatever he *needed* to say to get Nicky to come over, but he kept quiet. This had to be Nicky's choice.

"I'm really tired, Troy," Nicky finally said.

Troy could hear the exhaustion in his voice. Troy's heart ached with the need to hold the man in his arms and comfort him. "Then come over, Nicky. I'll keep you safe."

"I'm not sure there is any place that is safe for me." Nicky made a small sniffling sound. "He keeps finding me no matter how far I run."

"You'll be safe here, Nicky, even from me. I promise."

"Okay."

Troy wanted to jump up and dance with elation. Nicky agreed to come to him. Still . . . "Nicky, you do know that I want you, right?"

"Yes, I want you too, but—"

"I know, Nicky, you're not in any condition to start something with me right now. I get that. But I want you to understand that when this is over I want a chance with you. I'll give you the time you need but after that . . ." Troy's voice trailed off. He was pretty sure he'd gotten his point across to Nicky when he heard the man pant into the phone.

"Oh, Troy, I just—"

Troy interrupted Nicky as gently as he could. "Just come over, baby," he said. "I'll take care of you. No pressure, I promise."

"Yeah, okay," Nicky replied. "I'll be there soon."

Troy eagerly climbed from his bed and pulled a pair of jogging pants on. He reached for his t-shirt, putting the phone back to his ear the moment the blue cotton shirt was over his head.

"Troy?"

"Yeah, baby?"

"We can't—Jamie, he can't—he wouldn't understand."

Troy's heart sank. He knew what Nicky was saying and everything inside of him rebelled at hiding his relationship from anyone. He wanted to shout it to the world, even if he needed to wait awhile before Nicky was ready to start anything with him. He wanted the world to know that the sexy man was off the market and claimed by him.

"I know, Nicky. I won't say a word until you tell me it's okay."

"Won't that be kind of hard what with you working with Jamie every day?"

"It won't be easy, I won't lie about that, but I'll do whatever I need to do to get you to give me a chance."

"Why?"

"Nicky, you felt the connection at the bar as much as I did. You can't tell me you didn't."

"I did," Nicky murmured.

"I've never felt a connection like that before in my life. I can't let it pass me by without trying to find out why."

"But, what if—"

Troy walked into kitchen and filled the teapot with water. He turned on the burner and set the kettle on the stove to heat. "No 'buts', Nicky. If there is something between us, then there is. If not, we'll know soon enough and chalk it up to a blind date."

Nicky chuckled. "You don't really think this is just a blind date type of thing, do you?"

"No, I don't, I really don't. I don't know what this is but I do know I haven't been able to think about anything else except you since you walked out of the bar. I go to sleep thinking about you and I wake up thinking about you. That has to mean something."

"Troy, we just met that once." Nicky's voice sounded so anxious. "What if it was a fluke?"

"We'll find out when you get here, won't we?"

Troy heard the quiver in Nicky's breath as he inhaled. "Then I guess you'd better answer the front door."

Troy froze for a moment when he realized Nicky stood just on the other side of a thin piece of wood. He turned the burner off on the stove and raced across the floor to the front door, yanking it open to stare down at the prettiest set of blue eyes in the world.

"Hey, Troy."

"Hey, Nicky."

Nicky's smile wobbled and tears glimmered in the corner of his eyes.

Troy reached out and took Nicky's hand, pulling the smaller man into his arms. "Come here, baby."

The audible sigh Nicky let out when he laid his head on Troy shirt filled the room and Troy's heart. He knew the intense connection they both felt at the bar wasn't a fluke. It was very real.

Troy reached down and lifted Nicky into his arms. He kicked the door closed with his foot then carried Nicky to the couch, sitting down and cradling the man in his lap. Nicky cuddled right in. He laid his head on Troy's shoulder, his hands tucked against his chest.

"It's okay, baby, I have you."

Nicky suddenly sat up and tugged at Troy's shirt. "Off," he demanded.

Troy knew what Nicky wanted. He knew it wasn't sexual. He still felt thrilled by Nicky's command. He grabbed the edge of his t-shirt and yanked it over his head, tossing the shirt over the back of the couch.

Nicky snuggled back into Troy's chest and sighed. Troy wrapped his arms around Nicky and just held him. Nicky didn't make any sound but Troy could feel the wetness of the man's tears fall on his naked skin.

At some point, Troy grabbed the blanket off the back of the couch and covered Nicky up with it. He wasn't sure how long Nicky cried or how long he held him. He didn't care. He had Nicky in his arms. That's all that mattered to him.

After awhile, Nicky lifted his head and wiped his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not, baby."

"I'm sure this wasn't what you were expecting when you said I could come over."

"I wasn't expecting anything, Nicky; I told you that. I know you're going through something right now and I'm hoping you'll let me help you through it. In the meantime, if you need to cry or be held, I'm your man."

Nicky looked hesitant, his gaze darting from Troy's eyes to his lips then down to his chest and back up again. His hand gently stroked through the hair on Troy's chest. Troy wasn't even sure Nicky was aware he was doing it.

"I think you'd be my man even if I wasn't falling apart," he whispered.

"I would."

Chapter Three

Nicky stared at Troy's generously curved mouth and licked his lips. "Can I kiss you?"

"I'd like that very much." Troy's voice sounded so husky that it sent a chill of excitement down Nicky's spine. He looked down at Troy's lips again. He hesitated, afraid of screwing up. The first kiss was always so important.

Finally, unable to stop himself any longer, Nicky leaned in and pressed his lips against Troy's. The light contact immediately sent the pit of his stomach into a swirl. Nicky felt like he just kissed a light socket. Every nerve ending in his body was firing off at the same time.

He used his tongue to trace the soft fullness of Troy's lips before delving inside to explore. A strong, heady flavor blasted across Nicky's tongue, a taste unique to Troy and one that Nicky knew he'd crave for the rest of his life.

"I could live on your kisses," Nicky moaned. He knew kissing Troy was one thing he would want a lot of if they were going to try a relationship together. Nicky loved kissing.

Nicky groaned, pressing himself against Troy's solid body but it wasn't enough. He needed more. He needed skin. Nicky reluctantly pulled his lips away from Troy's and sat up, swinging his leg over Troy's lap until he straddled the man.

"I need to feel you," he said as he grabbed the edge of his shirt and pulled it over the top of his head. He tossed it over the back of the couch then settled his hands on Troy's massive shoulders. "I think I might die if I don't feel your hands on me."

Troy solved that problem by instantly wrapping his hands around Nicky's torso. Nicky sighed at the gentle touch, arching into Troy. "Oh my God, Troy, your hands," he cried out. "Your hands are wonderful."

Nicky wanted to experience more of Troy's touch but the man suddenly tilted him backward. Nicky looked to find Troy studying the bruises on his sides. Nicky groaned. "Please, we'll talk about them later."

Troy arched an eyebrow. "*We will* talk about this later, Nicky, and I'll want the complete truth."

"Yes, anything, just please, touch me," Nicky begged, crying out when Troy began to stroke his naked skin. He shuddered when he felt Troy's lips kiss his shoulder, his collar bone, down his chest.

Nicky concentrated on touching Troy back, stroking his luscious skin, and there was so damn much of it. He could explore Troy's body for hours, especially the smattering of hair across his chest that narrowed to a small trail leading down under the waistline of his jogging pants. Nicky wanted to follow it with his tongue.

When he leaned forward to lick at the small pulse beating in Troy's throat, Troy's hands slipped around to his back. Troy stroked up Nicky's spine then back down again to grab his ass through his jeans.

Nicky snapped his hips forward in surprise then pushed back against Troy's hands. When Troy's hand pushed under the waistline of his jeans and skimmed the crevice at the top of his ass, Nicky lost whatever was left of his mind.

He rose on his knees, reached to unbutton his jeans then pushed them down. His hard cock sprang free and slapped against Troy's stomach. Troy's hands instantly slipped farther down the crack of Nicky's ass.

Troy suddenly lifted Nicky in the air and he yelped. Before he knew it, Troy stripped Nicky's jeans off and spun him around to sit back down on Troy's lap, his back resting against Troy's chest.

Troy's hands were immediately back on his body, trailing down his chest, caressing his nipples, stroking his cock. Nicky arched into Troy's touch, overwhelmed by the sensations burning through him.

Nicky laid his head against Troy's shoulder, turning slightly to kiss and lick at the man's throat. He wrapped his arms around Troy's neck and pulled his head down into a kiss, his hands clenching in Troy's hair.

"Spread your legs, baby," Troy whispered against his lips.

Nicky spread his legs. His breath hitched in his throat when he felt the massive shaft moving between his thighs. He broke away from Troy's lips and looked down, stunned by the size of the cock rubbing against him.

"It'll never fit."

Troy chuckled. "It will fit, baby, don't you worry."

Nicky shook his head in disbelief. Troy's cock was huge. Even with Nicky sitting on Troy's lap the thick shaft was almost equal in length to Nicky's cock. He watched in stunned amazement as Troy wrapped his hands around both of their cocks and began stroking them together. It looked so exotic. It felt even better.

Nicky fell back against Troy's chest as chills raced up Nicky's spine and his balls tightened. He turned his head and panted against the side of Troy's throat, his eyes drifting close. His hips began moving against Troy's tight grip.

His hands clenched in Troy's hair as he groaned. "Troy, I can't—I'm gonna—"

“Open your eyes, baby,” Troy growled. “I want to see your eyes when you come for me.”

Nicky opened his eyes and tilted his head back so he could look up into Troy’s hazel brown eyes. He could feel the sensual light that passed between them like a caress. The fire built higher. Nicky could see it in the darkening of Troy’s eyes, hear it in the harshness of his breath.

“Troy,” he whispered, caressing the side of Troy’s face as the fire inside of him exploded into an eruption of pure, white hot heat. Nicky stiffened. His breath caught in his throat for just a moment before he screamed out the ecstasy he felt coursing through him.

Troy’s face flushed. His jaw clenched. He growled deeply, his lower body snapping up as wetness covered them both, and he joined Nicky in release. Troy fisted his hand in his Nicky’s and turned his head up to claim his lips in the most possessive kiss Nicky ever remembered receiving. It rocked him down to his toes.

Troy finally lifted his head, panting heavily. His eyes looked dazed, slightly confused. “You’re fucking amazing, Nicky. I’ve never come so hard in my life and I haven’t even gotten inside of you yet. You just might kill me.”

Nicky chuckled and tucked his head into the hollow of Troy’s neck. “I would never hurt you,” he murmured as he planted several small kisses on Troy’s musky skin.

Troy kissed the top of Nicky’s head. “We need to get cleaned up, baby. We’re covered in goo.”

Nicky reached past Troy’s head and grabbed his t-shirt, handing it to Troy. “I’m not moving. I like it right where I am. Besides, my legs would never hold me.”

Troy laughed. Nicky groaned when Troy began cleaning them both up, his hand brushing over Nicky’s sensitive flesh. Troy tossed the shirt to the floor and grabbed the blanket, covering them both.

“So, time to tell me about the bruises, Nicky.”

Nicky sighed. He knew this time would come ever since Troy mentioned it. “That kitchen cupboard found me again.”

"Uh uh, and is this kitchen cupboard named Bruce?"

"Yeah."

Troy lifted him up and turned him around until Nicky straddled him again. "I want to hear everything from the very beginning. You can start with telling me who Bruce is."

Nicky groaned and dropped his head forward. "You really don't want to hear this, I swear. I just made some really bad choices and —"

Troy tilted Nicky's head back and looked him in the eyes. "Please?"

"I met Bruce a few months ago," Nicky began. "I knew before our first date was over that he wasn't the one for me but I was just so lonely and he was so nice. I thought, why not give it a shot. I could do worse, you know?"

Troy snorted. "I think you did do worse."

"I didn't know that at the time. Bruce was always very charming, well, in the beginning anyway. Before I knew it, we were living together. One day I had my own place, the next day Bruce was living with me. I'm not even sure I remember agreeing to it. It just sort of happened."

"Is that when the abuse started?"

Nicky shook his head. He drew little trails in the hair on Troy's chest, refusing to meet his eyes. "No. Well, I think that's probably when he started nit picking. It just seemed like everything I did pissed him off."

"Like what?"

Nicky shrugged. "He hated my teapot collection, felt it was too girly and Bruce hates anything that's even remotely feminine. He didn't like the way I'd decorated my apartment; he tried to replace everything with stuff that had no color."

"You have a teapot collection?"

Nicky peered up at Troy through the fall of his hair. "Yes."

"What kind?" Troy asked. "I have a couple of Bone China tea sets and one Chintz Floral tea set that I got from my grandmother. I keep that one on the sideboard in the dining room."

"You have tea sets?"

"Yeah, doesn't everyone? How else are you supposed to make tea?"

Nicky felt tears prick the corner of his eyes. "How do you feel about hand-sewn throw pillows on the couch?"

Troy frowned and Nicky's heart sank. "Nicky, I have to admit I wouldn't know my way around thread and a needle if you paid me a million dollars. I can't even sew a patch on my jeans."

"But how would you feel about decorating with a few handmade items?"

"I'm not sure I have an opinion. I've never had throw pillows on my couch."

"But if you did?" Nicky asked. He held his breath as he waited for Troy's answer. "Would it bother you?"

"Are we talking about comfortable pillows that can be used or those ones that are just there to look good?"

"Both?"

"I suppose it wouldn't be a problem. But I have to tell you, I'm kind of a simple guy. I like being able to stretch out on my couch and watch the game, put my feet up on the coffee table. Stuff like that. I'm not into that real fancy stuff."

"No, no, that's fine," Nicky said quickly, his excitement rising. "You don't think it's too girly to have throw pillows on your couch even if you can use them to lie on? It wouldn't make you upset?"

"No," Troy replied, shaking his head. "Why should it?"

Nicky leaned his forehead against Troy's chin and took a deep breath. "I think I love you."

"Whoa, baby, slow down," Troy said quickly. "I know we have a deep connection but I don't think we know each other that well yet. Let's give it some time, okay?"

Nicky chuckled at the panic in Troy's voice. He raised his head and looked at him. "That's not exactly what I meant but I understand that we need time to get to know each other. And I wasn't trying to scare you off. It's just that—that—"

"Just what?" Troy asked.

"I like teapots and cuddling, phone calls for no reason, snuggling on the couch on a rainy day. I like cooking and shopping and candlelit dinners." Nicky dropped his eyes and watched his fingers move through the hair on Troy's chest. "Bruce always hated that stuff. He said I acted like a girl."

"Nicky," Troy said, tilting Nicky's face back. "Those are all nice things and it has nothing to do with being girly. You have to know that Bruce was out of his mind."

Nicky pulled away and mumbled under his breath.

"I'm sorry; I didn't catch that, baby. What did you say?"

Nicky heaved a sigh, raised his head and looked Troy straight in the face. He might as well come totally out to Troy now before he was in too deep. If their relationship continued, Troy would find out anyway.

"And I like to embroider things on the edges of my pillow cases."

"And?"

Nicky frowned. "I like to cook. A lot."

"And?"

Nicky started to smile. "I like leaving little notes for my lover."

"And?"

Nicky finally laughed. "Okay, I get it. You don't mind all my crazy habits."

"No, Nicky, I don't," Troy replied. "But I have to warn you, I have a few idiosyncrasies myself. I like to lounge around the house on my days off and watch football. I eat in bed in the middle of the night when I can't sleep. I don't own an iron and even if I did, I wouldn't know how to use it."

"Those don't sound so bad."

"I like having my buddies over for poker once a month. We eat, drink, and generally make slobes of ourselves."

Nicky smirked. "And?" he asked, tossing Troy's words back at him.

"I prefer renting movies and watching them at home rather than in the theaters. And I like to watch them in the nude."

Nicky arched an eyebrow. "And?"

"And I wouldn't know how to embroider if my life depended on it." Troy chuckled.

"That works out rather well for us then because I do." Nicky stroked his finger down the side of Troy's face. "And I can promise you that at your next poker night, I can whip up enough food to give you and your friends stomach aches."

"You don't have to do that, Nicky. I wasn't fishing."

"I'd like to. I love hosting parties and I'm very good at it. You just let me know how many people are coming, if anyone is allergic to anything, or absolutely can't stand certain foods, and I'll throw together something that will keep you all happy."

"You only have to keep *me* happy. I could care less about the rest of my friends. Let them get their own sexy lovers."

Nicky preened. "You think I'm sexy?"

"You're gorgeous, baby, and you know it."

Nicky fingered the hair at the side of his face. "You don't think my hair is too long?"

"No, I don't. I love your hair just the way it is." Troy leaned his forehead against Nicky's. "But I'll bet Bruce didn't like it, did he?"

Nicky shook his head. "He was always yelling at me to get it cut."

"Is that why he hit you?"

"No." Nicky moved his face away from Troy and laid it against his shoulder. He didn't want to be looking at Troy when he confessed to what Bruce did to him. "A couple of weeks ago he brought a few of his friends home for an orgy party with me as the party prize."

"And you said no, I'm assuming?"

Nicky frowned. He looked up to glare at Troy. "Of course I said no. I wasn't about to sleep with his friends. And I don't know why in the hell he thought I would. I didn't even sleep with *him*."

Troy's eyebrows shot up nearly to his hairline. "You and Bruce weren't sleeping together but you lived together?"

"Well, yeah, but —"

"Baby, I'm not complaining, believe me. I'm thrilled that you weren't sleeping with that asshole. I'm just a little confused. How could you be living together as a couple and not sleeping together?"

"I'm not sure Bruce was totally out of the closet, to tell you the truth. We made out a couple of times but after he moved in it just sort of stopped. We were more like roommates. Hell, we didn't even share a room together."

"You had separate bedrooms?"

Nicky nodded. "So, when he came home and wanted us all to have sex, I refused. That's when they all started hitting me. I must have passed out because when I woke up a little while later they were all unconscious in the living room and it was more than obvious that they'd been having sex. I grabbed what I could and took off. I haven't been back."

"Nicky, according to you that was two weeks ago." Troy's hand brushed Nicky's side. "These bruises are a lot fresher than that."

Nicky nodded. "Yeah, Bruce and his buddies have been looking for me. I've been staying with friends but Bruce caught me the other day and hit me a few times before I could get away. That's why I called you. I didn't think I was safe at Carmine and Leon's place anymore."

"Who are Carmine and Leon?"

"You know that drag club down on 5th Street, the one by the old Marquee Theater?"

Troy nodded.

"Carmine is the bouncer there. Leon, his partner, is the bartender. I met them the night I left Bruce. I saw Bruce driving down the street and ducked inside the club but I guess Bruce saw me. When he came in, Leon and Carmine snuck me out the back and gave me a place to stay."

"It sounds like they are good people," Troy mused. "We'll have to have them over for dinner and thank them for keeping you safe."

Nicky grinned. "I'd like that. Leon is the reason I walked up to you in the bar. The minute he saw Carmine, he walked right up to him and said *you're mine*. Carmine said *okay* and they've been together ever since, almost three years."

"Well, now I'm positive we need to have them over."

Nicky yelped and grabbed onto Troy when the man lifted him up in his arms and got to his feet. Troy fiddled with something and Nicky chuckled when he realized he was pulling his pants up.

"I have a lot to thank them for," Troy said.

"Where are we going?" Nicky asked as Troy carried him out of the living room.

"To bed. We both need a good night's rest. I have to work in the morning and you need to figure out when we're going to have your friends, Carmine and Leon, over for dinner."

"I can stay?" Nicky whispered, holding his breath when Troy stopped walking to look down at him.

"Of course you can stay. What have we been talking about?"

"We've been talking about getting to know each other. You didn't say anything about me staying here permanently."

"I'm sorry, baby," Troy said. He leaned over and kissed the top of Nicky's head. "You can stay as long as you feel comfortable. And remember, I don't expect anything from you. I have a spare bedroom you can sleep in, if you'd prefer."

"I'd prefer sleeping with you."

"I still don't think we should make love until we're both ready but I'd prefer you to sleep with me too. I like having you in my arms." As if to impress that fact upon Nicky, Troy tightened his arms around him.

"Can I sleep on you?"

"On me?" Troy asked. "As in, on top of me?"

"Yeah," Nicky whispered. He buried his face in Troy's neck when he felt it heat up. But he had to ask. The thought of sleeping on top of Troy's massive body, all that wonderful chest hair brushing against him every time he moved, sent a shudder through Nicky's entire body.

Troy chuckled. "Well, I guess that would be okay. Not sure how you're going to stay up there all night but I'm willing to give it a go if you are. Now hop down, baby and get under the covers."

Nicky simply released his arms, falling backward onto the bed, bouncing several times as Troy laughed. "Good thing I had you over the bed or you'd have one hell of a headache right now."

Nicky chuckled and climbed up to the top of the bed. He pulled the blankets down and slipped under them then turned to watch Troy get undressed. He had to swallow hard when he felt his cock trying to come back to life.

Nicky had never really been into the type of guys that had bulging muscles and hairy chests but he knew he just changed his type. Troy looked so damn powerful, with his broad, muscular chest and yard-wide, sun-bronzed shoulders.

"Damn, Troy, you're magnificent."

"Glad you think so, baby," Troy said as he pushed his jogging pants down.

Nicky gasped as he got his first good look at the cock hanging between Troy's legs. He'd felt it back in the living room but to actually see how big it was took Nicky's breath away. Troy was huge.

Nicky shook his head, unable to take his eyes off Troy's cock. "It'll never fit."

Troy chuckled and scooted into the bed. "You said that before, but you're wrong. It will fit, baby, we just need to work you up to it, get you ready. That will give us plenty of time to get to know each other."

"How are you going ready me for *that*?" Nicky exclaimed. "Stick a baseball bat up my ass?"

Troy laughed as he lifted Nicky onto his chest, Nicky's legs falling between his. Troy's hands slid down Nicky's back and gripped his ass. "First, we just play around a

little then we move on to dildos of different sizes. After awhile, you'll be able to take me with no problem."

Nicky settled against Troy's body. He folded his hands together and rested his chin on them so he could look into Troy's eyes. "I think you're out of your mind but I'm willing to try anything once. Nicky wiggled his eyebrows. "Twice if I like it."

Chapter Four

The delicious smells from inside the house hit Troy the moment he stepped in the house. He shut the front door, paused in the entryway and just stood there, taking in all the ways his life had changed over the last couple of weeks.

Soft music played in the background, nearly drowned out by Nicky's voice humming along in the kitchen. The strong smell of homemade bread baking filled the house. And the place was clean and had a homey, welcoming feeling.

Troy wasn't sure how it happened but Nicky had taken over running the household. Dinner was ready every evening by the time Troy arrived home. Nicky even began adding his own special touches to the place.

Just a few days ago, Troy arrived home to find hand-embroidered throw pillows on the couch. He wasn't sure what to do with them until Nicky stacked them in one corner of the couch and made Troy lean back against them, then planted himself against Troy. From then on, they spent every evening curled on the couch watching movies or talking. Troy loved the pillows.

Troy noticed other changes brought about by Nicky as well. His clothes were always cleaned and pressed, ready for him to put on and go to work the next day. And true to his word, Nicky hid little love notes all over the house. Troy never knew exactly where he'd find them, but he found himself anticipating them, hunting for them.

Troy hung his jacket on the coat rack and set his bag on the floor next to it. He braced himself and called out. "Honey, I'm home." Three simple little words and they had the ability to change Troy's entire life.

Troy smiled when he heard the patter of Nicky's feet as he ran through the house. Nicky came barreling out of the kitchen and launched himself into Troy's waiting arms. His legs wrapped around Troy's waist, his arms around Troy's neck. His lips landed against Troy's mouth for a long kiss that curled his toes.

"I missed you, baby," Troy murmured against Nicky's mouth.

"Not as much as I missed you," Nicky said back to him. "I know you have to work but I wish you could just stay home with me all day long."

Troy chuckled as he repositioned his hands under Nicky's ass and carried him into the kitchen. "One of us has to bring home the bacon, baby, keep you in embroidery thread."

"I think we should just win the lottery and then you could stay home and be my naked pool boy."

Troy set Nicky down on the kitchen counter and pulled his shirt over his head, tossing it down next to the man. He grinned when he heard the slight catch in Nicky's breathing. It felt good knowing the man he was quickly coming to care about was aroused by the mere sight of him.

Keeping a close eye on Nicky, Troy began flexing his muscles, posing for him. "You think I'd make a good pool boy?"

"Naked pool boy," Nicky rasped.

Troy arched an eyebrow but kicked his shoes off then got rid of his pants. A moment later, he stood naked in front of Nicky. He flexed again, posing this way and that, and generally acting a fool. "Is this better?"

"Oh my God, I have so got to win the lottery," Nicky groaned.

"You've got to play the lottery before you can win it, baby."

"Buy me a lottery ticket and I'll give you a blow job."

Troy went from silly to aroused in the blink of an eye. Heat rolled through his body as he imagined Nicky's lips wrapped around his cock. They'd fooled around a bit, jerked each other off, but hadn't gotten into anything else. They were getting to know each other first.

“Done.” The thought of Nicky giving him a blow job nearly brought Troy to his knees. His eyes widened as Nicky hopped off the counter and dropped to the floor. “Nicky, I was kidding. You don’t have to give me a blow job to get a lottery ticket. I’ll buy you one anyway.”

Nicky grinned up at him. “I know.”

Troy grabbed Nicky’s hands and pressed them against his thighs. He needed to keep Nicky from grabbing his cock. “Nicky, I don’t want our relationship to be about money. I’ll give you whatever you need because I want to. I don’t expect sex in return.”

“I know.” Nicky leaned forward until his warm breath brushed over the head of Troy’s cock. “I’m doing this because I want to, not because I have to.”

Troy’s knees shook as Nicky’s tongue stroked across the small slit on the head of his cock. He opened his mouth to ask Nicky if he were sure about what he was doing but at that precise moment, Nicky swallowed him down to the root.

The only sound that came out of Troy’s mouth was a long, drawn out groan. No one ever took him all the way. He was just too damn big, but Nicky did it. He could feel Nicky’s nose bury in his pubic hair.

He staggered forward a step and gripped the edge of the counter with his hands to keep himself from falling to the floor. The feel of Nicky’s lips and tongue on his aching shaft was more erotic than anything he ever remembered feeling.

“Fuck, Nicky, your mouth . . .” Troy spread his legs and locked his knees in place, afraid he might collapse on top of the smaller man.

Nicky’s head started bobbing, his mouth locked tightly around Troy’s cock. His hands caressed Troy’s thighs, his balls, the soft skin between his balls and ass.

Troy grew lightheaded. He wanted to thrust into Nicky’s mouth. He wanted to wrap his hands in Nicky’s hair and *fuck* his mouth. Troy gripped the counter harder to keep from doing just that, but he couldn’t keep his hips from snapping forward as Nicky swallowed him again.

The ball of fire burning inside of him grew hotter as it settled in his groin. Troy could feel it lick up his skin, burning him alive. The feeling of Nicky's finger stroking between his ass cheeks was all Troy needed to explode.

"Nicky!" He thrust forward, his back arched, his head thrown back as he filled Nicky's mouth with his release. The light touch of Nicky's tongue against his sensitive shaft as the man cleaned him up finally did bring Troy to his knees.

He pulled away from Nicky and collapsed on the floor but not before he pulled Nicky into his arms. He could hear Nicky's heavy breathing. It matched his own. Troy nuzzled his face against Nicky's neck.

"Thank you, baby," he whispered. "No one has ever — God, Nicky, your mouth is like heaven on earth. You —"

"I need, Troy."

Troy glanced down quickly. His eyes widened when he spotted the large wet spot on the front of Nicky's jeans. He knew immediately what Nicky referred to. It took less than a few seconds to unzip Nicky's pants.

He was grateful Nicky went barefoot around the house when he was able to easily push the man's pants down and off his legs, leaving Nicky naked except for his shirt, which Troy pulled up to his armpits.

He lifted Nicky and turned him to sit between his thighs, Nicky's back pressed against his stomach. Troy reached down and grabbed Nicky's cock with one hand. His other hand brushed over Nicky's chest.

Nicky's head fell back against Troy. His hips thrust up into the tight grip Troy had on the man's shaft. Troy felt Nicky's fingers dig into the skin of his thighs.

"Troy!" Nicky cried out. "I need, Troy."

"I've got you, baby," Troy whispered as he began stroking Nicky's cock quickly. The man's silky hard flesh glided easily through his fingers. Nicky's whimpers and flushed skin made Troy's cock take interest. Each soft moan made him harder until he his cocked press against Nicky's back.

Troy got to his knees behind Nicky then lifted him onto his lap, Nicky's legs falling down on either side of him. Troy trailed his hand down Nicky's chest, pulling gently on his nipples until they hardened into little, marble-like nubs.

He continued to stroke Nicky's cock with one hand while he slowly moved the other hand down Nicky's body, over his abdomen and on down past his cock to gently cup his balls. Nicky's breathing hitched, coming faster and faster as Troy massaged him.

"One of these days I'm going to sink my cock into this tight little hole, Nicky," Troy said as he trailed his fingers down between Nicky's ass cheeks to the quivering pucker that waited beneath his balls. "I'm going to fuck you here until you scream, baby."

"Oh God, yes, please yes!" Nicky wailed.

Troy lifted his hand and pressed his fingers into Nicky's wet mouth. Nicky's eyes snapped up to meet his. "Get them nice and wet for me, baby."

Nicky's eyes rolled a little but he generously lubed up Troy's fingers. The brush of Nicky's tongue across his fingers reminded Troy of how that same tongue felt against his cock. He almost came right there and then.

Pulling his fingers from Nicky's mouth, Troy reached down and pressed them against the tight hole between his butt cheeks, sliding one finger deep inside of Nicky. The man in his arms went wild, his cries growing louder until his screams of pleasure filled the room.

"Troy, Troy, more," Nicky begged. "Please, I need more."

Troy's head spun. He'd never been so aroused in all his life. He thrust a second finger into Nicky's tight grasp. His hand tightened around Nicky's cock and he stroked him as he wished he could do himself at the moment.

Nicky screamed. His body bowed as white cream shot out of his cock. Troy stroked him a few more times then pulled his fingers free. He pushed Nicky forward to lie on the floor in front of him and grabbed his own cock, pumping his hand rapidly.

As aroused as he was, it didn't take more than a few strokes of his hand before Troy came again, covering Nicky's back and sexy little ass with his seed. Finally spent, all energy seemed to seep from Troy's body and he fell down on the floor next to Nicky.

He couldn't help but chuckle at the dazed look on Nicky's face. His eyes were huge in his flushed face. His mouth hung open as quick little pants passed his lips. Troy reached over and brushed the hair back from Nicky's face.

"Are you okay, baby?"

"That was fucking intense," Nicky whispered.

"Was it worth a lottery ticket?"

Nicky rolled until he could reach over and run his fingers through Troy's chest hair. "That might have been worth the whole damn lottery."

* * * * *

Troy woke slowly, feeling warm and content. He reached over and slapped at the alarm clock until it shut off. A soft movement and whimper startled him. His eyes snapped open and then his mouth did as he realized the man in his dreams slept peacefully on his chest.

"Nicky?"

Nicky's eyes fluttered open and he smiled up at Troy. "Morning," he whispered before he snuggled into Troy's body again.

Troy's heart pounded. "Damn, baby, I thought you were a dream."

"Nope," Nicky said. Nicky caressed him, his small hands drawing circles in the hair on his chest. "I'm real."

Troy leaned up and kissed the top of Nicky's head then stroked his fingers through his light brown hair. "I'm glad. I'm just surprised you managed to stay on top of me all night long. I've found you snuggled next to me every morning for the last three weeks."

Nicky snickered. "I didn't. I just climbed back up here a little while ago. It's warmer here."

"Well, I'm afraid you're going to lose your heating pad," Troy said as he slapped Nicky on the ass. "I have to get up for work."

Nicky groaned and rolled off Troy, plopping down on the mattresses on his back. Troy chuckled and rolled to the side of the bed. He made a quick trip to the bathroom, brushed his teeth and combed his hair.

Nicky was watching him when he came back into the bedroom and headed for the clothes that hung on the back of the closet door. He could feel Nicky still watching him as he got dressed.

"Has my brother said anything?"

"No, why?"

Nicky shrugged. "I haven't talked to him in a week. I just wondered."

"We've been pretty busy tracking this drug ring. I'm not sure he's had time to do much else. You know your brother. Once he has his teeth into something he's not going to let it go. Besides, if he's not investigating the case he's probably off getting laid."

Nicky laughed. "My brother is a horn dog."

Troy shook his head. "No, I don't think that's it. I think he's looking for the same thing as the rest of us. I just don't think he knows he's looking."

Troy could see Nicky's confusion by the frown on his face. He finished buttoning up his shirt then reached for the tie as he tried to explain. "You're brother doesn't know what he wants, Nicky. Or maybe I should say *who* he wants."

"Who?" Nicky echoed. "He's not into you, is he?" The horror lacing Nicky's voice was almost comical.

"No."

"Then—"

"It's hard to explain but I'll try." Troy sat down on the side of the bed and patted Nicky's leg. "Since you've been here you've kind of taken over the house. Have you

noticed that? You do the laundry, the cooking, the grocery shopping. You even have dinner on the table for me when I get home from work."

"I like doing those things for you," Nicky protested but his face still flushed red. "It makes me feel goo—"

Troy patted Nicky's leg again, several times. "I know, and I love that about you. I love coming home because now it feels like a home instead of just a place to sleep. It's all I can do not to cut out of work early because I know you're at home waiting for me."

Nicky dipped his head, his face flushing all over again. "So, what does this have to do with my bonehead brother?"

"You like cooking and making the house nice, right? Making things special for the two of us? I've even noticed you clipping coupons and looking at grocery ads. You like being in charge of the home and all that it entails."

"I don't—" Nicky pulled away and curled up near the headboard. He looked uncertain, even a little frightened.

Troy couldn't have that. He reached over and grabbed Nicky, lifting the smaller man onto his lap and wrapping his arms around him.

"You like being my house husband, don't you, Nicky," he said quietly. It wasn't a question because he already knew the answer. It showed in the way Nicky took such good care of him and what he now considered *their* home.

Nicky's fingers curled into the hairs on Troy's chest, something Troy had come to see as a comfort mechanism for Nicky. He always played with the hair on Troy's chest when he needed to feel safe, whether emotionally or physically.

"I'm not a girl."

"Did I say anything about you being a girl?" Troy grabbed Nicky's chin and tilted his head up. "Well, did I?"

"No, but—"

Troy moved his hand farther down Nicky's body to grab his groin. "This thing right here says you are very much a man."

"Yeah, but—"

"But nothing, Nicky. These things that you do are part of who you are and I like those things about you. I like coming home to you every night and cuddling on the couch. I like the time we spend together grocery shopping." Troy chuckled and waved his hand toward the bathroom. "Hell, I like the way you fold the towels. I like every little damn thing that you do. And I don't think you're a girl."

"But everyone else does." Nicky started stroking his fingers through Troy's chest hair again. "Jamie even teases me about it. He's constantly telling me to get an apron or calling me the little woman. If my own brother thinks I'm a girl then—"

"You're not a girl, Nicky!" Troy exclaimed, exasperated. He was so tired of the labels people put on other people. It even happened in the gay community. Just because Nicky liked certain things he was considered a sissy and not a man.

"Look, Nicky, it's not fair. It's a label that other people put on you. But, I'll tell you this, in our home, you can be anything you want. If you want to be my house husband then do it. If you don't, then don't. I want you to be who you want to be and I'll never look down on you for whichever choice you make."

"It doesn't bother you, these things that I do?"

"Nope, I love them. I especially love that you allow me to take care of you." Troy tightened his arms around Nicky and pressed their cheeks together. "You make me feel wanted, needed. That's special, Nicky, and that's what your brother is looking for, someone who makes him feel wanted and needed."

Nicky was silent for so long that Troy grew curious. He leaned back to look into Nicky's face. "Nicky?"

"Do you think he'll ever find someone?"

"I don't know. We can hope."

"I worry about him," Nicky said. "He's always going from guy to guy but he seems so unhappy."

Troy caressed the side of Nicky's face. "I think he *is* unhappy and while it doesn't excuse his behavior, it might explain it. People who are deeply miserable have a hard time being around people who aren't. Sometimes they get so miserable that they

say mean things to others. Truthfully, I don't think your brother even knows he's hurting your feelings."

"How can he not know?" Nicky asked.

"Have you tried talking to him about it?"

"Yeah, but he always just laughs me off."

"Then you need to either try harder or ignore him." Troy grabbed his arm a moment later when Nicky punched him.

"Oh, you're a lot of help."

Troy laughed and rolled Nicky onto the bed, settling his body between Nicky's legs. He leaned down and claimed Nicky's lips in a kiss, the silence in the room broken only by sounds of their moaning.

When Troy finally raised his head, Nicky looked just as he wanted him to, dazed and happy. Troy smoothed the hair back from Nicky's face, smiling at him. "I need to get going, baby, but I'll see you soon. I'll be home right after work, okay?"

"You'd better be." Nicky grinned. "I'm making meatloaf tonight and it's my grandmother's recipe. You won't want to miss it."

"Wouldn't think of it," Troy said as he rolled off the bed and stood. He grabbed his stuff for work and his jacket and headed out. He paused at the door to blow Nicky a kiss then left for work.

He couldn't wait to get home.

Chapter Five

Nicky bounced from foot to foot as he put the meatloaf into a glass bread pan then washed his hands. If he timed things just right, Troy would arrive home from work just as he pulled it out of the oven.

The rest of the foods he'd chosen to go with dinner were ready to be washed, mixed, or cooked, depending on their individual needs. He hit the preheat button on the oven and went to set the table when he heard his cell phone ring.

Nicky hurried to answer, hoping it was Troy. While it didn't happen often because he worked so closely with Jamie, Troy did try to call when he could sneak away for a few minutes here and there.

"Hello?"

"You're going to die, you little freak," growled a rough voice over the phone, "and your two little cop buddies with you!"

Nicky snapped the phone closed and tossed it down on the table, staring at it like it was a snake. His heart pounded and a feeling of dread spread throughout his body. He rubbed his hands up and down his arms as he tried to ward off a sudden chill.

Bruce found him. Nicky didn't know how, but Bruce had found him or at least his new cell phone number. That meant it wouldn't be long before Bruce found his address and showed up at the door. Bruce was good at things like that.

When the phone started to ring again, Nicky jumped. He stared at it for several moments until it stopped ringing. Before Nicky could even take a relieved breath it started ringing again. Nicky picked it up, flipping it open and gripping it tightly in his hand.

"Go away!" Nicky shouted. "Leave me alone!"

"Nicholas!"

"Jamie?" Relief flooded Nicky when he heard his brother's voice on the phone. They hadn't talked in ages because Nicky wanted to avoid the confrontation he knew would come when Jamie found out about him and Troy. But the relief he felt at hearing his brother's voice overrode everything.

"What in the hell is going on, Nicky?" Jamie asked.

"Nothing," Nicky replied, "just a crank call. It freaked me out a little."

"Christ!" Jamie said. "A prank phone call. Yeah, that's just what we need."

"Jamie, is something wrong?" There was something off in Jamie's voice, something that sent a bigger sense of dread down his spine than the thought of Bruce calling.

“Look, I didn’t want you to hear this on the news,” Jamie said. “Troy and I were on a drug bust and it went bad. I’m okay, just a little flesh wound but—”

Nicky’s hand fluttered to his throat. “And Troy?”

“Fuck, Nicky, I don’t know,” Jamie said. “I went after one of the perps. By the time I got back they already had him and another officer in an ambulance. I’m on my way up to the hospital now. All they told me was that they got shot.”

“Shot?” Nicky whispered.

“I’ll call you as soon as I hear something. I just didn’t want you to worry in case you heard it on the news.”

Worry? Why should he worry? Because the love of his life could be in some hospital all by himself dying? Nicky barely held back his sob at the thought. “What hospital?”

“Sacred Heart but it’s going to be too crazy down there for you, Nicky,” Troy said. “Just stay home and I’ll call as soon as I can.”

“Not happening, Jamie, so you can just forget it.” Nicky snapped his phone closed before Jamie could argue with him. He raced into the kitchen and turned off the oven, then put the meatloaf in the fridge.

Nicky stopped at the counter to take a deep breath and calm his nerves before grabbing his phone, wallet, laptop, and the keys to Troy’s car and running for the door. He was on the road to the hospital within moments.

He gripped the steering wheel tightly as he wove in and out of traffic, driving as fast as he thought he could get away with. His heart beat rapidly the entire way. Ten minutes later he whipped into the hospital parking lot, found a place to park, and ran for the hospital doors.

“Officer Troy Summers was brought in recently,” Nicky said quickly to the nurse in the emergency room. “He was shot.”

The nurse flipped through some paperwork in front of her. It seemed like forever before she looked up at Nicky. “I’m afraid I can’t give out that information.”

"Please, his partner, Officer James Everson, is my brother," Nicky said quickly. "He called and said they were both hurt and on their way here."

"Can I see some identification?"

Nicky pulled his wallet out and grabbed his license, handing it over to the nurse. She looked it over and handed it back then picked up the phone. Nicky didn't know who she spoke to but a moment later she hung up the phone and smiled at him.

"Someone will be down in just a moment to speak to you." She indicated the chairs in the waiting room. "Why don't you have a seat?"

Nicky nodded and walked over to sit down in one of the chairs by the door. He wanted to be able to see whoever was coming to talk to him. His fingers drummed on the wooden arm of his chair as he waited.

All sorts of horrible scenarios flew through Nicky's head, the worst of them being a life without Troy. Nicky didn't know if he could stand that, not after finding him. Troy was everything Nicky always wanted and then some. Troy seemed to really understand his idiosyncrasies and love him despite them.

Nicky jumped to his feet when Jamie walked through the double doors leading to the emergency room restricted area. He ran over, taking in the bandage wrapped around his brother's upper arm and the dried blood on his shirt.

"Jamie, God, are you okay?" Nicky asked as he ran his hands over Jamie's arms and chest, carefully avoiding the bandaged area.

"I'm fine, Nicky, you really didn't have to come down here," Jamie said. "I told you to stay home."

"I couldn't, Jamie, surely you know that." Nicky leaned into Jamie's arms when the man gave him a hug. "I just had to check, make sure you were okay," Nicky said. He looked up into Jamie's face.

Jamie chuckled and patted Nicky on the back. "Okay, you've seen me and you've seen that I'm just fine. Now, things are kind of hairy upstairs so I need you to go home. I'll call you as soon as I know something."

"No," Nicky said. Panic filled him as Jamie tried to lead him toward the front doors. "I need to see Troy."

"Nicky, you need to go home."

"Jamie, you're not listening to me," Nicky shouted as he pulled away. "I need to see Troy."

"Nicky, now is not the time for one of your little temper tantrums," Jamie said as he tried to grab for Nicky's arm again. "I'm needed upstairs. I don't have time for this."

"This is not one of my little temper tantrums, damn it!" Nicky clenched his hands into fists, trying not to give in to the urge to hit Jamie with them. "I need to see Troy. Why can't you understand that?"

"Go home, Nicky!" Jamie snapped as he pushed Nicky toward the door. "Now!"

"You do not get to tell me what to do." Nicky fumed as anger and resentment flooded through him. He pointed his finger at Jamie. "I am a grown man and I can do whatever I want and if that means seeing Troy then that's what I'll do. You can't stop me."

"Damn it, Nicky, you —"

Nicky ignored Jamie and walked right past him to the nurse's desk. He smiled at the woman who helped him before. "I'd like to see Troy Summers. I'm his partner."

"I thought you said your brother was his partner."

"My brother, Jamie, is his work partner. I'm his life partner. We live together."

"Oh." The nurse smiled back at Nicky. "Hold on just a moment and let me check."

Nicky yelped when he was whipped around. Jamie's angry face stared down at him. "What the hell are you talking about, Nicky? You don't live with Troy. You live with Bruce, remember? Your asshole boyfriend?"

"Jamie, you —"

"Gentlemen, please," the nurse said, "this is a hospital. You need to either quiet down or take it outside."

"That's it!" Jamie shouted. "I am not going to get thrown out of this hospital because you won't calm down while my partner is lying upstairs bleeding to death." Jamie grabbed Nicky by the arm and dragged him across the room to where two uniformed police officers stood. "Officers, this is my brother, Nicky. He's been a little traumatized by the shooting today. Can you escort him home? I don't think he should be driving."

"Jamie, no!" Nicky tried to pull his arm away from Jamie but lacked the strength. "Please, you don't understand."

"I understand perfectly, Nicky."

Nicky tried to avoid the officers' hands but Jamie just pushed him into them. He struggled, fought, whimpered. None of it did any good. The officers dragged him outside to a squad car and placed him in the back.

He stared helplessly out the window as Jamie gave his address to the policemen and directions for them to make sure Nicky got inside. Nicky pressed his hands against the window glass, willing Jamie to look at him.

Nicky's heart and hopes fell when Jamie just shook his head and walked back into the hospital. Nicky loved his brother, he really did, but there were times when he wanted to beat the crap out of him.

Nicky understood that Jamie was doing what he thought was right. Jamie always did what he thought was right, no matter what other people thought, especially when it came to Nicky. He had a huge case of the big brother syndrome.

On most occasions, Nicky appreciated that aspect of Jamie's personality, but not today. Nicky needed to get to Troy and Jamie wasn't listening to him. He didn't know how to make Jamie listen to him either. His big brother was a stubborn son-of-a-bitch.

Nicky cringed when the squad car pulled over and he realized that the officers took him back to his old address, not Troy's. He'd been so caught up in his thoughts that he hadn't even paid attention to where they headed.

As the officers got out of the car and opened his door, Nicky scooted back in the seat and started shaking his head in denial. Fear raced through him when he saw a curtain move in the window of his old apartment.

"No, this isn't where I live," Nicky said. "Please, take me back to the hospital."

"Sorry, son, no can do," one of the officers said. "Your brother asked us to take you home and that's exactly what we're doing."

"But I don't live here," Nicky replied. He could barely speak past the dull ache of foreboding. These officers needed to listen to him before it was too late. "Please, you don't understand. I can't be here."

The officers wouldn't listen. They hauled Nicky from the squad car and up the steps to his apartment. Nicky swallowed the despair in his throat as the door was opened from the inside and a dark figure stood before him.

"Hello, Nicky boy."

Chapter Six

Troy's head felt groggy. His body ached. His legs and arms felt like lead weights, as did his eyelids. It was all he could do to open his eyes. The room was almost too bright, the walls an ugly mint green.

"Hey, you're awake."

Troy turned his head to find Jamie sitting next to him, a bandage around his arm. Troy nodded toward it. "How bad?"

"Just a nick, really," Jamie replied. "Doc didn't have to give me more than a few stitches."

"And Carson?" Troy asked, referring to the other officer that went with them to the drug bust.

"He's still in surgery. It looks pretty bad but the doc thinks he'll make it." Jamie pointed to the bandage around Troy's arm. "You, on the other hand, got off easy."

Troy glanced down at his white wrapped wound. "Did I? Then why the hell does it hurt?"

"It wasn't pretty, Troy. It's a through and through, so on that level you were lucky. Doc said there weren't any bullet fragments. You'll be trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey for a few weeks then it's off to physical therapy for you."

"This is going to so totally suck," Troy said as he laid his head back on the pillows behind him.

"Well, it hasn't exactly been a picnic for me, you know," Jamie said. "We go out on a simple drug bust and all hell breaks loose. I got back to the scene and you were already loaded in the ambulance and on your way here. I didn't even know until I got here if you were alive or dead."

Jamie jumped up and started pacing the room. "If that wasn't bad enough, Nicky showed up downstairs and threw a temper tantrum wanting to see you. I swear I don't know what that man is thinking sometimes."

"Nicky?" That caught Troy's attention. He quickly looked over at Jamie. "Where is he?"

Jamie stopped pacing and stared over at Troy. "I sent him home. Why?"

"Home?" For some reason, the word brought dread to Troy's heart.

Jamie frowned. "Yeah, I had two officers escort him back to his apartment. He was practically hysterical. I had to do something. They wanted to toss us both out of the hospital."

"How could you be so fucking stupid?" Troy shouted as he swung his legs over the side of the bed and started pulling the IV out of his arm.

"What?" Jamie shouted back. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

"You just handed Nicky back to Bruce on a silver platter," Troy said as he jumped off the bed and grabbed for his clothes.

"Bruce?" Jamie sounded really confused. "But I thought Bruce was Nicky's boyfriend. Hell, they've lived together for months."

"Nicky lives with me and has for nearly a month."

"With you? What the —! Why the hell didn't you say something to me?" Jamie asked. "Why didn't Nicky?"

Troy clenched his fists. "Because you never listen, Jamie. You get an idea stuck in your head and you refuse to listen to anything else. Nicky should have told you weeks ago what Bruce was doing to him but he was too afraid that you would just say *I told you so*."

"What is Bruce doing to him?"

Jamie's voice was so quiet and controlled that Troy paused on his way to the door to turn and stare at him. "Nicky didn't run into a cupboard door, Jamie. You know that as well as I do. He lied because that's what you wanted to hear and he knew it."

"That's not tru —"

"It is, Jamie. He knows how you will react. You'll do the *I told you so* thing and tell him it's another one of his messes that you have to get him out of. You never listen to him."

"You don't know what the fuck you're talking about." Jamie's face turned red.

"Bullshit," Troy snapped. "When he tried to see me, did you listen to him or did you ignore what he wanted just like always and do what you thought was best for him?"

"He was hysterical, Troy," Jamie said. "What else was I supposed to do?"

"You were supposed to listen to him, damn it," Troy shouted. "You should have let him come up and see me."

Jamie stalked across the room to stand directly in front of Troy. His face was flushed, his nostrils flaring. "And how in the hell was I suppose to know he wasn't living with Bruce anymore, that he'd moved in with you. Neither of you said anything to me."

"And why do you think that is, Jamie?" Troy asked as he stabbed his finger into Jamie's chest. "You've never made any bones about the fact that you think Nicky is trouble. You tease him constantly about him being *the little woman*. You belittle him, demean him, and you never take him seriously. Why should he tell you anything?"

Jamie looked stunned, his mouth dropping open and his face paling. Troy immediately felt sorry, not that he'd said something but that he'd said it in anger. He was upset at Jamie and wanted to hurt him. Telling him that he'd been a monster to his brother was the sure way to do it.

Troy sighed. "Look, Jamie, I know you love Nicky. He knows you love him. But he also knows you don't ever take him seriously. True, he can get himself into some pretty big fixes but that doesn't make him a fuck up. It makes him human."

Jamie stepped back to lean on the end of the hospital bed. He rubbed his hand down his face before looking over at Troy, sadness in his eyes. "So what am I supposed to do?"

"Well, right now we need to go rescue Nicky before Bruce beats him up for a third time."

"A third time," Jamie thundered as he stood up straight. "Bruce beat him up two times already?"

Troy nodded as he walked out of the room. "The night Nicky left, Bruce and his buddy beat the crap out of him. That bruise you saw on his face was part of that. Nicky was on the run for awhile until Bruce found him again. He got away and came to me."

"And he didn't come to me because —"

"He didn't come to you because he didn't want to hear you say *I told you so*. He knew you hated Bruce." Troy couldn't help but grin a little. "And he came to me because we both knew from the minute we met that there was something between us, something we needed to explore."

"So, he's living with you now?"

"Has been for nearly a month."

"And you didn't tell me because?"

"Nicky asked me not to. He said he'd tell you when he felt the time was right."

"Christ! This is so fucked up."

Troy walked around to the passenger side of Jamie's car and looked over the rooftop at him. "You have no idea how fucked up it is." He pointed a finger at Jamie. "And don't go blaming this mess on Nicky. You're the one that sent him back to Bruce."

"Well, yea, but if Nicky hadn't—"

"Hadn't what, Jamie?" Troy asked. "Hadn't come to the hospital when his brother and his boyfriend were shot? Hadn't asked to see his boyfriend? Hadn't thrown a temper tantrum when his brother wouldn't listen to him? What exactly did Nicky do that made any of this his fault?"

Jamie glared across the top of the car at Troy for several moments before frowning. "Just get in the fucking car," Jamie snapped. "We need to go rescue my brother."

Troy smirked and climbed in. He quickly clipped on his seatbelt when Jamie screeched out of the parking lot and headed toward Nicky's apartment at a breakneck speed. Troy knew Jamie was worried but not as much as he was. He'd seen the damage Bruce did to Nicky. He knew how much danger Nicky was in.

"Can't you drive any faster?" Troy snapped as anxiety and anger warred inside him. They shouldn't have hidden their relationship from Jamie, even if Jamie didn't agree with it. If he'd known, he never would have sent Nicky back to Bruce.

Troy was determined this wouldn't happen again. He wasn't quite sure what to do about it but he would do something. Nicky needed to be considered his next of kin in emergency situations and have access to him at all times. Maybe they needed something legal?

"How do you want to do this?" Jamie asked, breaking into Troy's thoughts. "Sirens blaring or do I park around the corner?"

"If we come in with sirens blaring then Bruce might hurt Nicky," Troy replied. "On the other hand, if we just walk up like we're visiting, Bruce might not even let us in. I don't get the impression he likes you very much."

Jamie frowned over at him as he gripped the steering wheel tighter. "You're not leaving me many options here, Troy."

"I'm not sure we *have* many options, Jamie. Nicky's in trouble and we have to get him out of there any way we can."

"So, let's just park and go right up to the front door. If Bruce refuses to let us in, we'll kick the door down."

Troy smirked and raised an eyebrow at Jamie. "Without a warrant or probable cause? You could lose your shield that way."

"What the fuck do I care about my shield when my baby brother is in trouble?" Jamie snapped. "They can have it if it means that much to them."

"Okay then," Troy said. "We go in the front door."

Troy couldn't keep his anticipation at bay as Jamie pulled the car into a parking spot several doors down from Nicky's old apartment. His fingers clenched, his leg tapped restlessly as he waited for the car to finally stop.

He pulled his gun out and checked the ammo then stuck it in the back of his pants. He had no idea where his holster was. "Ready?" he asked Jamie as he grabbed the door handle.

Jamie nodded. Troy climbed from the car and walked with Jamie up to the landing by the apartment door.

He watched Jamie take a deep breath and took one of his own. The next few minutes could mean the difference between a safe Nicky and a Nicky in extreme danger. Try had to hope his and Jamie's skills as police officers would weigh things in their favor.

"Ready?" Jamie mouthed to him. Troy nodded and walked the few feet to the door. He paused, his heart hammering in his chest when he noticed the apartment door slightly ajar. He pointed to it and cast Jamie a questioning look.

Jamie shrugged and drew his gun, stepping to one side of the doorway. Troy did the same on the other side then slowly nudged the door open with his foot. He peeked inside but couldn't see anything except a ransacked room.

The place looked like a cyclone hit it, furniture overturned, pictures askew on the wall, broken glass on the floor. But it was eerily quiet, too quiet. A chill of foreboding faced up Troy's back.

He slowly entered the apartment, stepping carefully around broken glass and overturned furniture as he walked through the living area. He stopped at the kitchen entrance and waved Jamie on to check the rest of the rooms.

The apartment kitchen wasn't very big, but a large island and breakfast bar sat in the middle of it, barring Troy's view of the far side of the room. He stepped over broken plates and dishes and carefully made his way to the far side of the island.

Troy's heart froze when he spotted a set of feet sticking out from the far side of the island. He crouched down and inched his way forward, afraid of what he would find. Troy didn't know if he could live without Nicky in his life. The man had become too vital to him, like a second heartbeat.

"Nicky?" he whispered as he worked his way around the side of the island. His first look at the prone body on the floor, covered in blood and bruises, made Troy ache deep in his soul. He didn't know if anyone could live through the damage he saw.

"Oh God, Nicky, what did he do to you?" Troy murmured as he quickly covered the last few inches to kneel at Nicky's side. He reached down but stopped and pulled his hand back, afraid he'd hurt inadvertently hurt Nicky if he touched him.

Finally, he leaned over and gently stroked his hand down the side of Nicky's face. "Nicky? Baby?" he whispered. "Can you hear me?"

At first, Troy received no response. His hand trembled as he checked the pulse at Nicky's neck. Troy closed his eyes briefly and breathed a huge sigh of relief when he felt a sure and steady pulse. At least Nicky was alive.

"Nicky, it's Troy," he said, a little louder this time. "You need to open your eyes, baby."

Nicky's eyelids began to flutter. A small groan worked its way out of Nicky's mouth and his body arched a little before his eyes opened to look up at Troy.

"Hey, baby." Troy stroked his hand over Nicky's cheek again.

"T-Tr-Troy."

"How are you feeling?"

"Am I . . . am I dead?"

Troy chuckled through the lump in his throat. "No, baby, you're not dead." He glanced down the length of Nicky's body and grimaced. "But you might wish you were. You're in pretty bad shape, Nicky." Troy glanced back up at Nicky's battered and bruised face. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"Br-Bruce."

It was one word but it was enough. Troy nodded. "Okay, baby," he said. "I'm going to check you over. You need to tell me what hurts."

Nicky sputtered as he tried to laugh. "Everything hurts."

Troy smiled. At least Nicky still had his sense of humor. That had to be good. He carefully moved his hands down Nicky's body, starting at his neck and moving down his arms, ribs, hips, and legs. Luckily, he found nothing broken, just a lot of scrapes and scratches and a massive amount of bruising.

"I think you're going to live, Nicky," he finally said.

"Doesn't feel like it."

Troy grinned. "I'll bet." He reached for Nicky, hesitating. "Want to try and come up here?" he asked as he held his arms open to Nicky.

Nicky's gaze immediately went to the opening of Troy's shirt. Troy knew what Nicky wanted. He grabbed the neckline of his shirt and pulled, ripping it down the middle until the hair on his chest showed through, then he reached for Nicky.

"I've got you, baby," he whispered as Nicky settled against him, his fingers twining in the hair on Troy's chest. Troy knew it was a comfort thing for Nicky but he didn't realize until that moment that it was also a comfort mechanism for him too. His heart didn't start beating normally until he had Nicky wrapped safely in his arms, Nicky's fingers in his chest hair.

"Hurts, Troy," Nicky whimpered.

"I know, baby," Troy replied. "Jamie and I are going to get you to the doctor and they'll fix you right up."

Troy grew instantly concerned when Nicky suddenly started to struggle. "What's wrong, Nicky?"

"Jamie!" Nicky cried out. "He won't let me see you."

"No, no, baby," Troy said. "I explained everything to Jamie. He knows we're together. He won't keep us apart." Troy looked up to gaze at the man he knew stood a few feet away. "Isn't that right, Jamie?"

Jamie had a frown on his face, the corners of his lips turned down. "No, I won't keep you apart," he said despite the displeasure Troy could see in his face.

Troy knew Jamie wasn't happy about them being together but he couldn't figure out exactly why. He knew Jamie didn't really want Nicky involved with a cop but there seemed to be more to it than that. Still, Troy wasn't about to give Nicky up to make Jamie feel better. He'd get a new work partner first.

"We need to get Nicky to the doctor," he said when Nicky groaned.

His words seemed to galvanize Jamie into movement. He walked closer and reached for Nicky. Troy hesitated for a moment. He loathed giving up his treasure to anyone else, even Nicky's brother.

Finally, Troy relinquished the bundle in his arms, taking Nicky back the moment he stood up. He could see Jamie scowl but he could have cared less at that point. As far as he was concerned, Nicky was his responsibility.

"I just want to go home," Nicky whispered.

"I know, baby, but I'd really like you to see a doctor first."

Nicky's fingers clenched in Troy's chest hair. "Please?"

"You know," Jamie said, "we could always call my friend, Darren, and ask him to come take a look at Nicky. Darren's a nurse, not a doctor, but he'd have a pretty good idea if Nicky needs to actually go in to see a doctor."

Troy didn't have the heart to tell Nicky no, not when he wanted to take the man home more than anything in the world. If Jamie's friend could come take a look at Nicky, Troy would feel a whole lot better.

"Okay, baby, we'll go home but only if you promise to do exactly what I say and rest. We'll give Darren a call too, but if he says you need to see a doctor, you go. Okay?"

Nicky could barely smile through his cracked and swollen lips but Troy could see the relief in his eyes. "Promise."

That was good enough for Troy. He carried Nicky out of the apartment to Jamie's car. Jamie was there ahead of him, opening the door to the backseat. As he climbed in he could hear Jamie on his cell phone ordering officers to Nicky's apartment.

Despite Troy's desire to keep Nicky to himself and protect him, he knew there needed to be an investigation into what happened. Bruce needed to be brought in before Troy got his hands on the man and tore him limb from limb.

"I assume we're going to your house then?" Jamie asked from the front seat as he drove the car away from Nicky's apartment.

"Yes," Troy said simply.

Troy knew he should buckle Nicky into a seatbelt to keep him safe but he didn't want to let him go. Nicky didn't seem to mind. His head rested against Troy's shoulder; his delicate little hand drew circles in Troy's chest hair.

"Uh, Troy," Jamie said, "I think we might have a tail."

Tensing, Troy glanced through the back window to see a red Audi Roadster convertible two cars behind them. Every time Jamie changed lanes, so did the Audi. If he sped up, so did the Audi, sure signs of being followed.

"Do you recognize them?" Troy asked.

"It's Bruce," Nicky whispered without even lifting his head.

Troy stared down at him, stunned by his words. "How do you know that, Nicky?"

"He wants my laptop. I don't think he'll stop until he gets it."

"Your laptop?"

Nicky started to nod but moaned instead, his forehead crinkling.

"Why would he want your laptop, Nicky?" Troy asked once Nicky's head settled against his shoulder again.

"I don't know, but he wants it bad. He beat me up because I wouldn't tell him where it was."

"Where is it?" Jamie asked before Troy could.

Nicky laughed. "I took it with me to the hospital. I figured I could get a little work done while I waited. That's what you do at hospitals, isn't it? Wait?"

"You left it at the hospital?"

"Not exactly," Nicky replied, still laughing a little. "I left it in your car in the parking lot of the hospital. I was too worried about both of you to remember to grab it."

Jamie snorted. Troy couldn't blame him. He felt like doing the same. Nicky's reasoning was faultless, if not a tad weird.

"So, you didn't tell Bruce where your laptop was because . . . ?" Troy asked.

"Because he wanted it," Nicky said. "Besides, it's my laptop. Bruce has no right to it."

"We need that laptop, Troy," Jamie said.

Troy glanced through the back window again. The car still followed them. He turned back around and shook his head at Jamie. "First, we need to get Nicky to safety. Call Graham and Paul. Have them go by the hospital, pick up the laptop and my car, and bring them to us. We might need their help."

Jamie blinked. "That's a good idea but any plan on how to throw off our tail? We may not want them to know where we're going."

"I think they already know," Nicky whispered.

"What?" Troy exclaimed.

"Bruce called right before Jamie did."

"But I called you on your cell phone, Nicky," Jamie said. "I didn't know you were at Troy's. Maybe Bruce doesn't either."

"Did he call on your cell phone or the house phone, baby?" Troy asked.

"My cell phone."

"Then I think it's unlikely that he actually knows where you now live," Jamie said. "However, we still need lose them."

"Go through the park," Troy directed. "There's a sharp curve just past the fountain. Halfway through the curve is an access road that leads to the right and up a hill. If you can get us around the corner without him seeing us and get us to that road, we can hide there and watch him drive right on by."

"Put on your damn seatbelt, Nicky," Jamie ordered as he stepped on the gas and whipped into the park. Troy moved Nicky into the seat next to him and helped him buckle in, then did his own. Nicky's hand gripped his as soon as he was done.

"It'll be okay, baby."

Chapter Seven

Voices woke Nicky, loud voices. He opened his eyes and glanced around, immediately recognizing his surroundings. He lay on the couch at Troy's house. At *his* house. And the voices were coming from the kitchen.

Nicky rolled to his side and carefully sat up. His ribs hurt like the dickens, almost as much as his head and face did. He gingerly touched one cheek, wincing when pain shot up the side of his face and into his temple.

Bruce certainly did a number on him. Unfortunately, this time Nicky hadn't passed out. He remembered every single blow Bruce dealt him. Nicky's fingers clenched around the edge of the couch cushion as his anger at Bruce grew.

He hated the man. At first Nicky just resented Bruce and didn't like him much but he was willing to let bygones be bygones. He never wanted to see the man but Bruce just wouldn't give up. Nicky couldn't figure out why.

Bruce made no bones about the fact that he didn't like nearly anything Nicky did. Unlike Troy, who'd taught him that the things he did didn't mean he was acting

girly. They were just things he did, things he liked. And Troy seemed to appreciate each and every one of them.

The voices that woke him grew louder. Troy and Jamie . . . and they were arguing, most likely about Nicky, since he heard his name mentioned quite a few times.

Nicky stood and made his way toward the kitchen. He paused in the entry and took in the scene. Troy sat on the kitchen counter, his legs swinging side to side. Jamie straddled a chair. Both men had beers in their hands.

"I'm telling you, Jamie, you need to talk to Nicky about this shit," Troy was saying as he jerked his beer bottle in Jamie's direction. "It really does hurt his feeling when you say these things. Besides, what do you care if he likes them?"

"It's just wrong, Troy."

"Why? If it makes Nicky happy then how can it be wrong? It's not like he's asking you to do anything. He just wants you to not make fun of him when he does."

Jamie took a sip of his beer then looked down at it as he began peeling off the label. "I just don't understand why he likes that stuff," Jamie said. "Why can't he like more guy things, like lifting weights or playing pool?"

Nicky smirked. This wasn't an argument he hadn't heard a million times from his brother. Jamie never understood why Nicky liked the things he liked and he couldn't explain it to him.

"How do you know he doesn't like those things?" Troy countered. "Have you ever asked him or do you just berate him for the things you don't understand?"

Jamie's hand slammed down on the table. "You don't understand, Troy. Nicky likes to sew."

Troy chuckled. "Yes, he does. He also likes to embroider. In fact, I'm hoping to get him an embroidery machine for his birthday."

"What?" Jamie exclaimed, his face paling. "No, you can't. That will just —"

Nicky didn't wait to see what else Jamie had to say. He was too excited about the prospect of getting an actual embroidery machine. He stepped into the room, his exhilaration giving his steps a little spring.

"An embroidery machine?" he asked as he walked over to stand between Troy's legs. "Really?"

Troy grinned. "Yeah, but you weren't supposed to hear that."

"What kind?"

"Well, the lady down at Miller's Sewing Supply said that the PE 700II was the best. She said that it had the most designs available and it could —"

"The PE 700II?" Nicky said as he bounced on his feet. "That's one of the best out there."

"I know."

"Did you also know you can download pictures or jpegs onto it from your computer? I could embroider anything."

"Do you seriously like that shit?" Jamie asked.

Troy's grin turned into a frown.

Nicky moved farther into the apex of Troy's thighs and leaned his head against the man's chest. "No, of course not," Nicky whispered. "I just —"

"Nicky," Troy said as he grabbed him by the arms and gave him a little shake, "tell him the truth. You two are never going to solve your problems if you don't communicate with each other."

Nicky glared at Troy but he knew his lover was right. Taking a deep breath, he turned to face Jamie. He could feel Troy's hands settled on his shoulders and he knew they were there to give him support and courage.

"Yes, I like to sew. I've liked to sew ever since Mom showed me how. All the things that Mom did she taught me. While you were off learning to tune the car with Dad, I was in the house with Mom learning how to cook and decorate and clip coupons."

Nicky watched Jamie's mouth drop open. He could see the astonishment on his face. He'd never told Jamie any of this. Well, Jamie was in for more of a shock because Nicky wasn't done.

"And just because I like these things, it doesn't make me any less of a man. That's like saying Troy is less of a man because he likes wine instead of beer."

"Don't be ridiculous," Jamie snapped. "They're two different things."

"Exactly, and just because two people might not like the same things doesn't make one of them wrong. Every time you demean me or make some snide comment about the things I do you make me feel like there is something wrong with me. There's not."

Jamie looked stricken. "Nicky, I didn't mean to —"

Nicky walked over and sat in the chair next to Jamie. He grabbed Jamie's hands and held them in his as he looked his brother in the face. "I know you love me, James. I've always known that but the things you say sometimes make me feel like you don't like me very much, that you're not proud of me."

"I never wanted you to think that, Nicky," Jamie whispered. "I just don't understand these things that you do or why you do them."

"But that's just it, Jamie," Nicky replied. "You don't have to understand them. These are things that I choose to do. They have nothing to do with you, nothing. And to be truthful, you don't get to say what I do is wrong or girly."

Jamie's forehead crinkled. "But embroidery, Nicky?"

Troy let out a large huff and jumped off the counter. Nicky's heart sank when Troy walked out of the kitchen without saying a word. Why had Troy abandoned him? He was talking honestly with Jamie. Wasn't that what Troy wanted?

Nicky started to get up and go after Troy when he came walking back into the room, his arms full of stuff. He dropped it all down on the table. Picking up one of the couch pillows, Troy held it out to Jamie.

"I want you to look at this pillow, look at the intricate work involved," he said. "Think about how much care it took, how much patience, to make each little stitch. These weren't made by any machine. Nicky hand-stitched every last one."

Troy picked up another pillow, a stack of towels, a framed picture, handing each of them to Jamie. "Nicky hand-stitched all of these. The curtains in the living room? He

made those too. He does all of this because he likes to and it makes our home look a whole hell of a lot better."

Nicky held his breath while he watched Jamie look at each item Troy handed him. Jamie seemed confused and slightly awed. He finally looked over at him. "You made all of these?"

Nicky nodded.

"Why have you never shown me this stuff?"

Nicky snorted. He sat back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. "Why should I? You belittled everything I do. You make fun of me even if you don't really mean it. Why should I share any of this with you?"

Jamie dropped the towel in his hands to the table. He took a sip of his beer then rubbed a hand down his face. "I don't know what to say, Nicky. I really had no idea I was being this much of an asshole."

"I'm never going to be you, Jamie. I don't want to be you. I like being me. I like the things I do. I like having dinner ready when Troy gets home. I like making the house nice for him. I like folding his boxers because I know that I'm the only one doing it."

Nicky scooted closer to Jamie and reached for his hand again. He really wanted his brother to hear him this time. "I like knowing I can make Troy's life easier even if it's just washing and pressing his clothes for work the next day." Nicky waved one hand toward Troy. "Troy needs me because frankly, the man's a mess."

Troy snorted, and Nicky shot him a dirty look before continuing. "Troy can't cook. He's more likely to poison himself than anything. And he has no clue what the difference is between whites, lights, and darks. Do you know how many of his whites are dingy grey? It's disgusting."

"It's not that bad," Troy complained.

Nicky rolled his eyes. "It *is* that bad. But that's not the point."

"What is the point then, Nicky?" Jamie asked. "Doesn't it make you feel like a maid or something?"

"Not at all," Nicky replied. "It would if he didn't appreciate these things but he does. He comes home every night from work and he's happy to see me. All of his attention is centered on me. And he shows me he cares about me by going to a sewing store and researching embroidery machines. He takes an interest in the things I do."

"Troy doesn't sew," Jamie said. "Even I know that."

"Please, the man can't even sew on a button," Nicky said. "But so what? He doesn't have to like the same things that I do, just appreciate them. Same goes for you. You don't have to like the same things I do but you don't have the right to put me down because of it."

"Jamie, have you looked around our house?" Troy asked. "I mean, *really* looked. Doesn't it feel comfortable? Homey? Is it a place where you can come to after a long day at work and unwind? Have good food and good company and feel like no one is going to harass you?"

Nicky had no idea where Troy was going with his line of questioning but he sat back and let the man have his say. Apparently, Troy knew more about this communication stuff than he did.

"Yeah," Jamie finally said after looking around for a moment, "I guess it's nice."

"Now," Troy said, "think of your apartment. Where would you rather be?"

Nicky was shocked when Jamie's face paled a little and he nodded. "I see your point," Jamie said. His voice sounded low and dejected. "I'm really sorry, Nicky. I never meant to make you feel bad. I guess I have some pretty fucked up ideas about acceptable male behavior."

"You get that from Dad," Nicky said. "He always said, *men are men and women are women and never the two shall cross, remember?*"

Jamie chuckled. "Yeah, I remember. That phrase was right up there with his idea that a woman's place was in the home. I guess when you start doing all these things I just associated it with women. I never considered the possibility that a man could do them and still be a man."

Nicky felt Troy's arms wrap around him from behind. He leaned back into the strong body behind him, tickled pink that Jamie was finally seeing the light.

"I can assure you, your brother is all man," Troy said.

Jamie frowned, but it wasn't a frown of anger, more of a sneer. "I guess I have to get used to you fooling around with my brother, don't I?"

"Actually, Troy and I haven't fooled around yet," Nicky said. "Well, we have a little but not the way you're thinking. We haven't moved on to the heavier stuff."

"You're not sleeping together?"

"Well, we sleep in the same bed every night," Nicky said, "but like I said, we haven't moved on to the heavier stuff."

"I seriously don't mean any offense here but I have to know," Jamie said, "why in the hell aren't the two of you having sex if you're living together, sleeping in the same bed every night? Isn't that a little weird?"

Nicky laughed. "While I have no doubt from what I've experienced so far that the sex will be spectacular, our relationship is about more than that. We want to get to know each other first without the pressure of sex sitting over our heads." Nicky leaned forward to whisper at Jamie. "Besides, have you seen this man naked? It'll take me a month just to get ready for him. He's hung like a fucking horse."

* * * * *

"Hey, Nicky, can I talk to you for a moment?"

Nicky looked up from the laundry he folded to see Jamie standing in the bedroom doorway. He nodded. "Sure, Jamie, what's up?"

Jamie walked in and sat down on the side of the bed. He looked nervous. He kept glancing down at his hands, twisting them together in his lap. He seemed to be having a hard time meeting Nicky's eyes.

"Jamie?" Nicky set the towel in his hands down and moved over to sit next to Jamie. "Is something wrong?"

"You know, I've been walking around your house, looking at the things you've done, and I have to say I'm impressed. I saw this place a couple of months ago when Troy became my partner. It really has improved."

Nicky smiled. "Thank you."

"You've made four walls and a roof into a home, just like Mom did for us." Jamie took Nicky's hand. "She'd be damn proud of you if she saw this place. I think Dad would be, too."

"Yeah?" Nicky asked. He could only imagine his father being proud of him. It wasn't that his father didn't love him just that they never seemed to spend much time together. Nicky spent all of his time with his Mom.

"Yeah, I really think so." Jamie was silent for a moment but the way he kept squeezing Nicky's hand spoke volumes. "I really am sorry. I never meant to hurt you or make you feel less of a person for the things you did. I was only trying to protect you, I swear."

"I know, Jamie. I just hope you're able to understand that I'm doing what makes me happy. You may not understand, just like I don't understand how you could want to be a police officer. But I still want to support you in it."

"Does Troy make you happy?"

Nicky smiled. He felt pretty sure Jamie would bring that up at some point. "Yes, Troy makes me very happy. I wish I could explain the connection we have but I don't think you'll get it until it happens to you."

"Connection?"

"When I first went out with Bruce I knew after our first date that I wouldn't be spending my life with him. He was just too —"

"Then why did you move in with him?" Jamie looked at him in horror. "Why stay with him for so long?"

Nicky shrugged. "I was lonely. People do stupid stuff when they're lonely. But that's not the point, Jamie."

"Then what is?" Jamie exclaimed. "The man beat the shit out of you on two separate occasions. He —"

"Three."

"Three what?" Jamie asked in confusion.

"He beat the crap out of me three separate times. The night I left him, the night I moved in with Troy, and last night."

Jamie jumped to his feet and began pacing in front of Nicky. "He beat you up three times? Why the fuck does this man have such a hard on for you? What did you do, Nicky?"

"I didn't —"

"You must have done something to piss him off this bad," Jamie snapped. "No one goes after someone like this without a reason. Think, damn it."

Nicky reached a hand out to his brother. "Jamie, just calm do —"

Troy was suddenly in the room, positioning himself between Nicky and Jamie. He stabbed his finger into Jamie's chest. "You do not speak to Nicky like that, ever!"

"Oh, Troy, he didn't mean to sp —" Nicky started only to be interrupted by Jamie.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Jamie shouted. "I can say any damn thing I want to Nicky. He's my brother."

"Oh, now, Jamie," Nicky said as he tried to inch his way around Troy's massive body. "Troy is right. You shouldn't spe —" Nicky sighed and rolled his eyes as he was once again interrupted.

"I'm his lover, damn it," Troy said as he moved between Nicky and Jamie again, "and even if I wasn't you don't have the right to speak to him that way. He's a grown man, not a child."

Nicky slipped under the arm that Troy had cocked back. He knew it was aimed at Jamie. It matched the one Jamie was getting ready to swing. He pushed himself between the two angry men, placed a hand on each of their chests, and pushed.

"Shut the fuck up!" Nicky shouted at the top of his lungs. "I don't want to hear another word out of either of you until I'm done talking. Is that clear?"

Two stunned faces looked to Nicky. Both men nodded. Nicky pointed to the end of the bed. "Sit, listen, and learn." Nicky crossed his arms over his chest and waited while Jamie and Troy sat down on the end of the bed. Once they did, he started pacing in front of them.

"Neither of you have taken the time to listen to me when I've spoken. I didn't do anything to Bruce beyond telling him I wouldn't fuck his friends and leaving. If that made the man psychotic, well too damn bad. I won't be changing my mind any time soon."

"Nicky, you —" Jamie began. Nicky held up a finger and glared at him.

"No speaking."

Jamie's lips tightened into a thin line but he kept quiet.

"Jamie, the minute I didn't say what you wanted to hear you slipped right back into your big brother belittling mode. You started in on me like this is all somehow my fault. It isn't."

Jamie hung his head and started twisting his fingers together again.

"If this is all my fault, Jamie, then I could have simply avoided the situation by letting Bruce's friends turn me into their own little fuck toy. Would you have preferred that?"

"God, no, Nicky," Jamie whispered. "I had no idea that —"

"And I didn't tell you because the first thing out of your mouth that day was *I told you so*. You didn't ask if I was okay or how badly I was hurt or even if I needed help. You just started in on how you never liked Bruce in the first place, which essentially made the entire situation my fault once again. That's like saying I deserved what happened to me."

Jamie shook his head quickly.

“And Troy is right. I’m an adult and if you meant it when you said you were sorry then you need to learn to speak to me instead of yell at me. There is a distinct difference that I don’t think you have a handle on.”

“I meant what I said. I *am* sorry.”

“Good.” Nicky turned his gaze to Troy. “And you, Mr. Summers, need to remember that I am perfectly capable of fighting my own battles. If for some reason I can’t I’ll call you but until then, you need to stand back and let me handle it.”

“Nicky, I just –” Troy started. Nicky held up his hand to stop him.

“If you two ever come to blows over me again I won’t speak to either of you for a month. I care about both of you and I will not let either of you put me in a position where I have to choose between you two. Is that clearly understood?”

Jamie and Troy both nodded, looking like little boys who’d gotten caught stealing cookies from the cookie jar.

“Now, would either of you like to listen to why I think Bruce is after me or do you want to argue some more?”

Both Troy and Jamie nodded. Nicky grinned.

“Drugs.”

“Drugs!” Jamie exclaimed.

“Bruce played around with them a little while we were together, even tried to convince me to try some. I always said no and made him promise never to bring them into the house. But I’m not so sure he listened.” Nicky started pacing. “I always wondered why Bruce would choose me when he clearly didn’t want to be with me. After being with Troy and talking with him, I got to thinking.”

“About what?” Troy asked.

“If you were going to sell drugs, what’s the perfect cover?” Nicky asked. When Troy and Jamie looked at him, confused, Nicky smiled. “How about living with the brother of a cop? If the cop ever started to suspect you then you could just say he was doing it because he didn’t like you, throw suspicion off.”

“Fuck me!” Jamie exclaimed.

"Damn, Nicky, we need to get your laptop," Troy said. "If Bruce wants it so bad then there has to be something on it that he needs."

"You did say that Graham and Paul were bringing the car back today, didn't you?"

"Yeah," Troy said, "they needed to finish up some paperwork and couldn't bring it last night but they promised to bring it this afternoon."

"Then maybe you should call them and tell them to get their asses in gear." Nicky turned and started toward the bedroom door. He paused in the doorway to glance over his shoulder at the two shocked men still sitting on the bed. "I'll make lunch. We'll have a *Bust Bruce* party."

Nicky walked out of the bedroom, stopping outside the door when he heard Troy begin speaking. He leaned against the wall to listen, covering his mouth to keep from laughing.

"Damn!" Troy exclaimed. "Is your brother always like that?"

"No, this seems to be a recent development," Jamie replied. "He's a little scary, isn't he?"

"He's fucking hot!"

Chapter Eight

Troy unlocked the front door and walked into the home he shared with Nicky. He closed the door and paused in the entryway, sniffing the air. He couldn't smell anything cooking, which was unusual considering Nicky had dinner on the table almost every night by the time he got home.

There also wasn't any singing, music, or noise. Troy's heart stuttered as he imagined why there wasn't. The computer forensics' lab was still combing over Nicky's laptop so they weren't sure yet what evidence against Bruce they might have. Bruce was still on the loose.

"Nicky? Baby?" Troy called out. "Where are you?"

“Back here.”

Troy pressed his hand against his chest as his heart started beating normally at the sound of Nicky’s voice. He dropped his bag on the floor and his keys in the small crystal bowl on the sideboard then walked toward the back of the house.

Troy paused, staring down at the floor in bewilderment. A small trail of red rose petals started at the beginning of the hallway and led toward the bedroom doorway. Every few feet sat a brightly colored, gift-wrapped box.

Troy picked up the first box and pulled off the lid. A large bottle of lube lay cushioned inside. Troy smirked. So, that was what Nicky was up to. He walked the next few steps to the second box.

This one wasn’t nearly as heavy as the first one. Troy frowned when he pulled the top of the box off and found two pieces of folded paper. He unfolded them and smiled when he saw their test results. Guess they didn’t need condoms after all, which made Troy very interested in what could possibly be in the third and last box.

Troy’s anticipation was killing him. He quickly stepped forward and grabbed the third box and flipped the lid open. Troy nearly swallowed his tongue as he separated the bright blue tissue paper.

The box was filled with erotic pictures of Nicky in various states of undress. One picture showed Nicky dressed to the nines in a tuxedo and top hat. The next photo pictured Nicky with the suit jacket off, his shirt unbuttoned and the tie hanging loosely around his neck.

The pictures after that one made Troy groan and his cock leap. One showed Nicky with just a pair of black slacks and suspenders, another had Nicky in nothing but a white, button-down shirt, and a third showed Nicky with only a black tie around his neck. A low growl worked its way up Troy’s throat.

“Oh sweet hell!” Troy exclaimed when he saw the next picture. This one was decidedly not for public viewing. In fact, as far as Troy was concerned, no one would ever see it . . . except maybe him when he needed to jerk off.

Nicky lay back on a bed of pure white fabric. He looked right at the camera as he stroked the full cock in his hand. His other hand seemed to be caressing his nipple. But it was the full lip caught between Nicky's teeth that really drew Troy's attention. It was so incredibly hot.

Troy drew in a deep breath and flipped to the last picture . . . then promptly dropped all of the pictures on the floor as shock and white hot lust spiraled through his body, making his cock ache and his breath come out in great huffs.

Nicky was still on a cloud of white fabric. He was still naked. Only this time, he knelt on his hands and knees, glancing back over his shoulder at the camera. A bright red bull's eye had been painted on his ass. The red butt plug in Nicky's ass was the center of the bull's eye. A sign sitting on the bed next to Nicky's body proudly announced, "Do you think you can hit the target?"

Troy raced into the bedroom, hitting the door so hard it slammed against the wall. His gaze was instantly drawn to the bed. Troy's legs shook, his knees trembled, and his cock throbbed at the sight before him.

"Christ, Nicky, you're going to kill me," Troy whispered as he took in Nicky's beautiful body. Nicky still knelt on his hands and knees. The bright red circles on his ass highlighted the butt plug in Nicky's ass.

Nicky didn't say anything. He just giggled and wiggled his ass. Troy dropped everything on the floor except the lube. That, he tossed on the bed next to Nicky. He couldn't tear his eyes away from that delectable ass as he practically ripped his clothes and shoes off, tossing them on the floor before stepping over to the bed.

Troy's hand shook as he reached out to caress one round globe then the other. Nicky's skin was so silky. Troy could touch him for days, years. Hell, centuries. Nicky's soft skin felt glorious.

Even still, he couldn't help but chuckle at the red circles on Nicky's ass. He frowned. What had Nicky used to paint a bull's eye on his ass? More importantly, *who* had painted it? That thought brought a deep growl to Troy's throat.

"Nicky, who painted this bull's eye on your ass and took those pictures?"

Nicky pointed to the container of acrylic paint sitting on the dresser and the camera on the tripod at the bottom of the bed. Troy was surprised he didn't see the camera when he came into the room. It was just a few feet from the end of the bed.

When Nicky held up the camera remote and handed it back to him, Troy realized that his jealousy was unfounded. Nicky had obviously taken the pictures himself. Troy took the remote and set it on the bed next to Nicky. He might need it later.

"So, this is all for me?" Troy asked as he trailed his hand from the nape of Nicky's neck down his back to his ass. He grabbed the butt plug and jiggled it then pulled it out a bit before shoving it back in. "Even this?"

Nicky groaned and bowed his back, pushing back against the plug.

Troy arched an eyebrow at his lover. "You like that, baby?" he asked as he thrust the butt plug into Nicky's ass several times.

Nicky keened and his body bucked. Troy bit his lip, fighting back his impending orgasm. He was hanging on by a thread and he hadn't done more than simply caress Nicky. They hadn't even gotten to the good stuff yet. But they were about to.

Troy grabbed the lube and opened it. He squirted a liberal amount onto his cock and spread it around. His dick was so engorged, so sensitive he thought he might not make it inside of Nicky before he exploded. He gripped the bottom of his shaft until the sensation to come lessened.

Once he was in control of himself again, Troy squirted more lube onto his fingers then dropped the bottle onto the bed. He grabbed the butt plug, twisting it around a few times before pulling it from Nicky's ass and replacing it with his fingers.

Nicky's heavy panting and small whimpers nearly drove Troy to his knees. The man spread his legs farther apart, giving Troy a glorious view of the full cock and tight ball sac that hung between Nicky's legs.

Troy thrust his fingers into Nicky, sending up a prayer of thanks when he discovered Nicky's hole fully stretched from the butt plug. They'd been working for ages on getting Nicky ready for him, using fingers, dildos, and butt plugs. Apparently,

they'd finally reached their goal. Troy could take Nicky without worrying about hurting him.

Troy felt an overwhelming urge to slam his cock in Nicky's inviting hole, to claim the man, but he also wanted to make their first time together special. No matter where their relationship went, he would only ever have one first kiss, one first time with Nicky. He wanted his lover to always remember it fondly.

With that in mind, Troy picked Nicky up and swung him around. Nicky squeaked and grabbed for him, which worked out just fine for Troy. He lay back on the bed and placed Nicky's body so that the man straddled him.

"You have to take it from here, Nicky."

Nicky grinned and sat up on his knees. Troy reached for the remote on the camera and spread his legs wide. At the same time, Nicky reached behind him. Troy's breath caught in his throat when he felt Nicky's hands grip his cock, guiding it to Nicky's tight entrance.

"Fuck," Troy groaned as Nicky sank down on his hard shaft. He could barely remember to click the remote, shooting picture after picture of Nicky being impaled on his cock. He wanted to remember this special moment. Pictures would do it.

"I never really believed you'd fit," Nicky whispered as he gazed down at Troy. "But you do."

"I told you, baby, we just needed to get you ready."

"What we need to do is move," Nicky said as his body finally settled down on Troy's. "Now, damn it!"

Troy chuckled. He handed the remote to Nicky. "You click. I'll fuck."

Nicky took the remote, staring at it as his mouth dropped open. "You're taking pictures of us fucking?" He quickly glanced over his shoulder then down to where their bodies were connected.

Nicky finally faced Troy again, his face flushed, his eyes wide. "We need to start a photo album just for us," he said as he started clicking the button on the remote.

“Only next time, let’s forget about the remote and just put the camera on a timer. I want my hands free to play.”

Troy arched a brow. “It would only take a moment to fix that then your hands would be free for you to play with whatever you want.”

“Problem,” Nicky said. “I’m not giving up the cock in my ass.”

Troy knew Nicky was trying to prove his point when the hot silky channel cradling him suddenly tightened around his cock. Troy groaned, arching up into Nicky’s body as he gripped the man’s hips tightly with his hands.

“I can take care of that for you. Put your arms around my neck.” After Nicky did as he asked, Troy got to his feet, his cock moving inside of Nicky with every step he took toward the camera. By the time he got across the room, Nicky was crying out, his head hanging back.

“Fix the camera, baby, put it on a timer.”

Nicky’s head came forward. He just stared at Troy with a dazed expression. “Huh?”

“The camera?” Troy asked as he nodded toward the small device on the tripod.

“Fuck! You want me to think right now?”

“You want pictures?” Troy countered.

“Yeah, yeah,” Nicky gripped but turned to mess with the camera. A moment later he dropped the remote to the floor and turned back to Troy. “There, done. Now fuck me until I can’t walk. I’ve been waiting weeks for you.”

Troy chuckled as he moved them away from the camera. And people thought Nicky was the quiet one? They couldn’t be more wrong. Nicky was learning to express his desires as much as anyone else. Troy couldn’t be happier about that.

“Your wish is my command.”

Troy stopped in the middle of the room between the bed and the camera. He turned them sideways and grabbed Nicky’s ass. He watched Nicky’s face as he trailed his hand down between the man’s butt cheeks to where his cock impaled Nicky.

Troy moved Nicky's hips away from his body, slowly drawing his cock back until just the head remained. Nicky's mouth hung open and rapid little pants huffed out. His eyes were wide, dazed, his skin flushed.

Troy slammed Nicky back down on his cock. He wasn't sure whose cry was louder, his or Nicky's. He just knew he needed to do it again. He lifted Nicky away from him then rammed into him over and over again.

The pleasure was explosive. Every inch of Nicky's hot grip wrapped around Troy's cock. It didn't matter if he pulled most of the way out or was buried to the root; Nicky surrounded him, caressed him with his silky skin.

When his knees began to shake, threatening to fold on him, Troy moved them both to the bed. He laid Nicky down on the pristine white comforter and covered him. He grabbed Nicky's legs and wrapped them around his waist, spreading them farther when he leaned down to kiss Nicky's lush lips.

Nicky lay there, his breathing rapid, punctured only by his moans. He gripped Troy's arms and hooked his ankles around Troy's waist. The harder Troy thrust, the more Nicky's head thrashed on the bed.

Troy was in heaven watching Nicky. The man was more responsive than anyone he'd ever met, even when he didn't say a word. Troy knew when he hit Nicky's sweet spot. Nicky's entire body suddenly stiffened and he cried out as he seemed to try and crawl into Troy.

Troy took note of the particular position and continued pumping into the tight hole holding him, aiming for Nicky's sweet spot with every thrust. He had to use one hand to hold Nicky's hips up close to his when Nicky's body started to melt into the mattress.

He used the other hand to tweak Nicky's nipples. He used his lips to suck up a deep mark on Nicky's neck. When Nicky's hands moved up Troy's arms to his shoulder and his fingernails dug in, Troy knew he was done for. He wasn't going to last another minute, maybe another second.

"Nicky," Troy groaned, "I can't—gonna—"

“Yes!” Nicky screamed. His entire body shuddered against Troy’s. “Yes!”

Troy pounded into Nicky, losing all sense of restraint, intent on savoring the feelings of desire racing through his body. Nicky’s whole body stiffened. A loud cry sounded in Troy’s ear and streams of hot, wet cum filled the space between Troy and Nicky’s bodies.

Troy gritted his teeth. He had just enough time to lift his head from Nicky’s neck before Nicky’s inner muscles tightened down on him and ripped his orgasm from him in a white hot blaze of fire that consumed him.

“Nicky,” Troy roared as he filled Nicky with his seed, Nicky’s body milking him for every last drop. His body languid, Troy collapsed. He planted little kisses against Nicky’s neck as he waited for his heartbeat to return to normal.

Troy wasn’t sure that would happen any time soon. Troy hadn’t spent his life going from one man’s bed to another but he’d been around a few years. Still, no one ever took him to heaven and made his world explode the way Nicky did.

“Can’t breathe.”

Troy lifted his head and looked down into Nicky’s flushed face. He chuckled and rolled them over until Nicky lay over his chest. He refused to remove his cock from Nicky’s ass until he absolutely needed to.

Troy stroked his hand down the side of Nicky’s face. “You okay, baby?”

“Uh uh.”

“Anything hurt?”

“Nope.”

Troy chuckled. “Are you going to speak to me?”

“Nope.”

Troy pushed his legs between Nicky’s then spread them slowly until he knew the camera could get a good view of his cock deep inside of Nicky’s body. He waited a few moments until he was sure the camera had taken a few good shots then squeezed Nicky’s ass.

“You know the camera is still on, right?”

"Uh uh."

"Do you care?"

"Nope."

Then Nicky made his first move since Troy rolled them over. He brought his knees up to rest next to Troy's chest then grabbed Troy's legs and brought them up until his knees were bent and falling to the side.

Nicky lifted his head and propped his arms up on Troy's chest. His lips twitched and he arched a brow. "Do you think that will give you the picture you're looking for, hot stuff?"

* * * * *

Something woke Troy. He couldn't say exactly what it was but something wasn't right. Which didn't make a lot of sense to Troy since Nicky was sleeping, wrapped in his arms. Troy cocked his head to one side and listen for whatever woke him. He heard nothing.

Knowing he wouldn't be able to go back to sleep until he checked out the house, Troy gently rolled Nicky onto his back and tucked the blankets around him. Nicky whimpered. When Troy gently patted him, Nicky snuggled into the blankets and went back to sleep.

Once Nicky quieted, Troy rolled to the side of the bed and reached for his pajama bottoms. He stood and pulled them up his legs. With one last look at his lover, Troy made his way to the bedroom door.

He stood in the doorway and looked down the hall. He could see the light from over the stove shining through the kitchen archway. The faint glow of moonlight shined in from the other direction.

Still, Troy couldn't see anything out of place. But every instinct he had told him something was wrong. He started creeping along the hallway wall, staying to one side.

When he reached the kitchen entry he peeked around the corner. With the light over the stove he could see pretty much all of the room. Nothing stood out as wrong.

He moved on down the hallway to the living room. Stepping through the archway into the room, Troy looked around. Once again, nothing seemed out of place. He scratched his head in confusion. Maybe he was being over dramatic.

Shaking his head, Troy turned to go back to the bedroom and his sleeping lover, when something in the front foyer caught his attention. He walked over, his concern growing by leaps and bounds when he figured out that a breeze of cold air was blowing in from outside through the small crack made by the front door being slightly ajar.

He stepped over to check the door when he heard a small creak come from behind him. Troy started to swing around, knowing that particular sound could only be made when someone stepped on one of the loose boards by the living room entry.

Before he could get all of the way turned around, pain exploded in the back of his head and he crashed to the floor. The last thing he saw before darkness overtook him was the sight of grey snakeskin boots standing in front of his face.

Nicky didn't own any boots.

Chapter Nine

Nicky sat up suddenly. One moment he was asleep. The next moment he was awake. Wide awake. He rubbed his eyes to get the sleep out of them then looked down to where Troy should be sleeping. He wasn't.

A glance around the bedroom told Nicky he was alone in the room. Nicky could even see into the bathroom and he didn't think Troy would be standing in there with no light on. Nicky just hoped Troy was somewhere else in the house and he hadn't been called in to work.

Nicky rolled off the bed, grabbed his pajama bottoms and pulled them on. He started to walk toward the bedroom door, but a muffled voice coming from down the

hallway brought him up short. Standing at the edge of the doorway, he turned his head so he could listen. What he heard made his blood run cold.

"What did you do with my laptop?" a dark voice growled.

"Fuck you!"

Nicky recognized Troy's voice immediately. The other one was a little hard to place. It was low and rough but something about the tone niggled at Nicky. His heart hammered in his chest. He crept closer.

"I want that damn computer," the voice demanded. "I know you have it. Nicky gave it to you. It's mine and I want it back."

"And here all this time I thought it was Nicky's."

Nicky heard the sound of flesh hitting flesh and suddenly knew where he heard that voice before. He walked back down the hallway to the bedroom as quickly and as quietly as he could. He pushed the bedroom closed almost all of the way then ran across the room to grab the cell phone off his nightstand.

Running into the master bathroom, Nicky hit the speed dial button for Jamie. His fingers gripped the phone as he waited for his brother to answer. He kept glancing out the crack of the doorway to make sure Bruce hadn't figured out that he and Troy weren't alone.

"Hello?" asked a groggy voice.

"Jamie?" Nicky whispered. "You have to come, please."

"Nicky?"

Nicky peeked out the crack in the bathroom door before answering. "Yes," he said. "Bruce is in the house. I think he has Troy. You need to come."

"Christ!"

Nicky heard a bunch of rustling from Jamie's end of the phone. He bit his lips when Jamie swore again, only this time it seemed to be in pain. "Jamie?"

"I'm okay. I stubbed my toes," Jamie said. "Listen, I'm calling Graham and Paul on my house phone. You stay on the line with me."

Nicky nodded then realized Jamie couldn't see him. "I'm here."

"Where's he, Nicky?"

"I'm in the bathroom. Something woke me up and Troy wasn't in bed with me. I went to find him when I heard voices coming from the living room. It took me a minute to recognize Bruce's voice but there was no mistaking the sound he made when he hit Troy."

"Are you sure he hit Troy?"

"Yes." Nicky shuddered. "I'll never forget that sound."

"Okay, hold on while I talk to Graham. Don't leave that bathroom."

Nicky wanted to tap his foot or drum his fingers. He wanted to bounce from leg to leg. Anything to relieve the tension coursing through his body, but he knew he had to be absolutely quiet while he waited for Jamie to come back on the phone.

Nicky knew Jamie, Graham, and Paul were all coming to the rescue. He just didn't know if they would arrive in time. Bruce had sounded pissed and that was never a good thing. Nicky knew from experience how dangerous Bruce's temper could be. Bruce also wasn't patient. If Jamie and the guys didn't get here soon it might be too late.

"Okay, Jamie, we're on our way," Jamie said when he came back on the line. "I want you to stay in the bathroom, okay? Stay on the phone with me. We're going to be coming in silent so you won't hear us. But don't worry, we *are* coming. I'm only about ten minutes away."

"Oh God, you have to hurry," Nicky whispered desperately. "Bruce wants my laptop and if he doesn't get it he's going to be seriously pissed. Bruce isn't very nice when he's pissed, Jamie."

"I know, bro. But you just need to stay in the bathroom. I need you to be safe. I'll be there in just a few minutes. I promise."

"Just hurry, Jamie," Nicky said. "I don't know what Bruce will do to Troy if he doesn't get what he wants—"

Nicky stopped talking when he heard a loud crash from the living room and someone cried out. *Troy*. Nicky's limbs frozen with fear and he struggled to move. He couldn't leave Troy out there to fight Bruce alone.

"I've got to go, Jamie," Nicky whispered. "I love you."

"No, Nicky," Jamie shouted. "Nicky!"

Nicky snapped the phone closed and slipped it into his pocket. He walked back into the bedroom, feeling cooler, more composed, than ever before. It was as if someone had thrown a switch, putting him on auto-pilot. At the nightstand, he pulled Troy's gun out. He checked it for bullets as Jamie had taught him then slipped the gun into his other pocket.

He grabbed one of Troy's clean t-shirt out of his dresser and pulled it over his head. It fell down nearly to mid-thigh on him, long enough to hide the small bulge the gun made in his pocket. Satisfied that he looked okay, he took a deep breath then opened the bedroom door.

"Troy?" he called out, knowing that Troy and Bruce would both be able to hear him. "Where are you?"

Knowing what he might be facing the moment he stepped into the living room, it took all of Nicky's courage to walk down the hallway, especially since he needed to pretend that he didn't have a clue about what awaited him.

"Troy? Honey?" he called out again. He purposely rubbed his eyes with his hands as he walked into the living room. He didn't want Bruce to know he knew anything was wrong. "Troy, answer me, damn it. Where are you?"

"Jamie, get out of h—" Troy cried out.

Nicky lowered his hands from his eyes just in time to see Bruce smack Troy across the face. Troy knelt in the middle of the living room, his hands crossed behind his back. He didn't look happy to see Nicky. In fact, he looked terrified.

"Bruce," Nicky whispered. He didn't have to fake the tremor in his voice. "What are you doing here?"

The sneer Bruce sent Nicky made the man look a lot less model-like than he usually did. It simply wasn't a good look on the man. Bruce seemed to take great pride in the look, though, as if he thought it made him handsome.

He stroked his finger over his chin as he regarded Nicky. "It's so good to see you, Nicky. I was wondering if you were going to join our little party." Bruce gestured to Troy with the gun in his hand. "Your little friend here and I were just discussing what you did with my laptop."

"Your laptop?" Nicky asked. "I didn't do a damn thing with your laptop. The last time I saw the thing it was sitting on your desk in the office."

Bruce's lips tightened into a thin line as he glared across at Nicky. "I wasn't talking about my black laptop, you dimwit. I'm talking about the one you always carry around, the one with all the stickers on it."

Nicky frowned and started edging into the room. "But that's *my* laptop. I had it long before you came along."

"I want to know where it is, Nicky," Bruce snapped. Nicky's breath caught in his throat when Bruce pointed the gun at Troy's head. "Or your little fuck buddy gets a new orifice."

"I don't have it," Nicky said. Bruce shoved the barrel of the gun harder against Troy's head. Nicky held up a hand to stop him. "No, wait, it's just not here. Jamie has it. I've been staying with Jamie. He has all my stuff."

"Bullshit," Bruce snapped. "You've been staying here with lover boy."

"No, really, I dropped all my stuff at Jamie's house. Yes, I've been spending the night here at Troy's house but that was mostly to hide from you. I didn't know if you'd find me so I left everything at Jamie's house."

Bruce waved the gun at Nicky. "Call him. Tell him to get that laptop over here now."

Nicky walked right over to the landline and dialed Jamie's cell phone. Jamie answered immediately. "Hey Jamie, I'm sorry to bother you. I know it's late but I wondered if you could do me a favor?"

"Nicky? What the hell is going on?"

"Yes, I understand that it's the middle of the night. I'm sorry but I really do need your help."

"What in the hell are you talking about, Nicky?" Jamie asked. "Are you still in the bathroom?"

"No, no, everything is fine," Nicky said. "I just need you to bring me my laptop."

"Is Bruce there?" Jamie whispered. "Is he listening?"

"Yes, it is the middle of the night and no, I am not waking Troy up."

"Okay, so Bruce is there but he can't hear me?"

"Yes."

"Okay, good, just stay calm."

Nicky barely contained a snort. Jamie wanted him to stay calm? Was he nuts?

"So, can you bring me my laptop? I really need it, Jamie. If I don't get this project done I can't get paid. If I don't get paid I'm liable to be sleeping on your couch."

"I'm just pulling up round the corner now, Nicky."

"Then I'll see you when you get here." Nicky hung up the phone and turned to Bruce. "He will be here in about fifteen minutes."

Bruce waved the gun at Nicky. "Get over here," he snapped. "I want both of you in one place where I can keep an eye on you."

Sitting next to Troy was exactly where Nicky wanted to be. He watched Bruce carefully as he crossed the room to stand next to Troy. He could feel Troy's gaze on him like a wet blanket. It was intense.

"On your knees, Nicky boy," Bruce ordered as he went over to stand by the wall next to the front window. Nicky knelt on the floor next to Troy, purposely sitting so that the pocket with the gun was between them.

He watched Bruce peek out through the front curtain as he scooted as close to Troy as he could get. He hoped Bruce wouldn't spot Jamie, Graham, or Paul, but he couldn't think of anything else to say to Jamie when he called him.

"Why do you want my laptop so much?" Nicky asked. He wanted to keep Bruce's attention off of who ever might be sneaking in from outside. He also wanted to keep Bruce's attention off him and Troy but both couldn't happen. Jamie coming to the rescue was his best bet.

Bruce turned to glare at him. "None of your fucking business."

"It's my laptop."

"Shut the hell up, Nicky," Troy growled.

Nicky rolled his eyes. How wonderful it would be if just one person took him seriously one of these days. He did have more than one brain cell and he knew how to use them.

Nicky watched Bruce look out the window again. He carefully inched his hand down to his pocket, keeping his eyes on Bruce. Every time Bruce looked back at him and Troy, Nicky froze. When Bruce glanced away again, Nicky reached for the gun in his pocket.

It took him a few moments to get a good grip on it and pull it out, carefully moving it between him and Troy until he could slip it back around to Troy's hands. His heart plummeted to his feet when he realized that Troy's hands were tied behind his back.

Troy would never be able to wield the gun. Nicky racked his brain trying to figure out what to do next. He glanced over at Troy only to find the man watching him, his eyes wide, his eyebrows almost up to his hairline.

Nicky tilted his head a little and shrugged. What else could he do? Then suddenly it hit Nicky. He scooted the gun under his ass and sat on it. Reaching behind Troy, Nicky moved his fingers over the rope tying Troy's hands together.

He could feel the knots, the ends of the rope. He couldn't figure out how to get the rope untied without looking, and looking didn't seem like his best option. Nicky had no doubt that the gun in Bruce's hand was loaded and he knew the man wasn't against using it.

Nicky looked over at Bruce and wondered what he ever saw in the man. At this point, his model good look weren't even that good. Nicky knew he'd been lonely when he met Bruce. He just didn't realize he'd been that desperate.

"What's taking him so fucking long?" Bruce suddenly snapped.

Nicky's heart pounded when Bruce started pacing around the room. Bruce seemed to be getting more upset by the second. Nicky hoped Jamie would make his move soon. He was afraid of what Bruce would do if this went on much longer.

"He should be here pretty soon," Nicky said. "I did wake him up. It might take him a few minutes to get dressed and drive over here."

Bruce suddenly raced over to Nicky, grabbing a large handful of his hair and yanking his head back. "Shut the hell up," Bruce yelled. "None of this would have happened if you had just done what you were told."

Nicky's eyes widened. Terror shot through him. Bruce couldn't be serious. How could he even think this was Nicky's fault? Because Nicky hadn't agreed to fuck his friends? The man was obviously out of his mind.

"I'm not a fuck toy for you to peddle to your druggie friends."

Bruce yanked on Nicky's hair as he bent over to get in Nicky's face. "You'll be whatever I damn well tell you to be."

"No!" Nicky had no idea where his courage to defy Bruce came from. He knew that the likelihood of dying was pretty high. Still, he was tired of being afraid of Bruce. He was tired of Bruce intimidating him. He wanted it to end. "I do not belong to you and you can't tell me what to do."

The pain that exploded across Nicky's face when Bruce hit him with the butt of the gun almost made him pass out. He fell forward onto the floor, resting his body on his arms as he spit out drops of blood onto the carpet. Troy was going to be pissed.

Nicky could hear Troy struggling against his bonds. He hoped his lover would stay still and not bring Bruce's attention to him. Better that Bruce kept his eyes on Nicky, at least until after Jamie arrived. Nicky didn't want Troy hurt.

Nicky sat back up and glared at Bruce as he wiped his hand across his mouth. "I can't believe I fell for your shit," he said. "I thought you were a great guy but you're obviously just an asshole in a pretty wrapping."

"Nicky!" Troy exclaimed. Nicky could hear the astonishment in his voice. He knew Troy was shocked at his words, especially considering that Bruce held a gun on both of them. But Nicky was too pissed to care.

"Oh please," Nicky snapped. "Bruce used me from the very beginning. He knows it and I know it. He didn't want to be with me. He just wanted a place to deal his drugs."

Nicky glanced over at Bruce when he heard a soft hiss. He chuckled. "What, you think I didn't know about that? You've been dealing drugs longer than I've known you. I just looked the other way because I hoped you'd stop. Boy, was I wrong."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Bruce said.

"Oh really?" Nicky asked. "Then those men you brought over to the house the night I left? They weren't there to fuck me as part of some sort of drug deal? Do you really think I'm that stupid? You peddled my ass to them for money."

"And you just had to fuck it up, didn't you?" Bruce shouted. "If you had just kept your fucking mouth shut none of this would have happened. Now, I have to give them a bigger percentage of my cut because of you."

Nicky's eyebrows shot up. "And that's my fault?"

"If you had just —"

"Then I guess they weren't happy with your ass." Nicky laughed. "Sorry sack of shit. Couldn't even keep your drug buddies happy. Didn't they enjoy fucking you? Were you not good enough?"

Nicky was egging Bruce on. He knew it. The red flush in Bruce's face grew darker. But he needed to keep Bruce's attention centered on him. He knew Jamie, Graham, and Paul should be coming to their rescue at any moment. He just wished they'd hurry the hell up. Bruce looked pissed enough to shoot him.

"No wonder you wanted them to fuck me." Nicky smirked. "You knew they'd never be happy fucking your ass."

Nicky was in no way surprised when Bruce pointed the gun at him. He was shocked, however, when Troy suddenly jumped over in front of him, pushing him back

onto the floor. As Nicky fell backward, he heard a bunch of yelling and someone struggling.

Nicky expected to hear a shot. When he didn't, he raised his head to find Jamie and Graham holding Bruce between them as Paul took the gun away from him. Bruce looked so angry. He kept glaring at Nicky.

"This is all your damn fault," Bruce spit out.

Nicky pushed himself up then climbed to his feet. He stalked over to Bruce and jabbed a finger in the man's chest. "This is *your* fault, Bruce. I just wanted to be with someone. I never agreed to the shit you wanted. Never."

Bruce tried to jump toward him. Nicky jumped back, relieved that Jamie and Graham held Bruce secured. "Selling your drugs was your business. I stayed out of it. I never even told my brother what you did. But when you came into my home and threatened the man I love, you made it my business. Now, I'm going to tell him everything, and I'm giving him my laptop. You never should have threatened Troy."

Nicky glared at Bruce for another moment before walking back over to Troy, who still sat on the floor. He knelt behind his lover and untied his hands. Once Troy got to his feet, Nicky stood and wrapped his arms around Troy's waist.

"You are a surprise, Nicky Everson."

Nicky smiled. He trailed a hand down Troy's naked chest, running his fingers through the hair there. "I try to be."

"Yeah, but did you have to try so hard to piss him off?"

Nicky shrugged. "It seemed like the thing to do at the time. I knew Jamie was on his way. I needed to keep Bruce occupied until he arrived."

Troy waved his hand to where they had been sitting on the floor. "And all of that stuff about knowing Bruce was selling drugs? Was that just to egg him on or was he really selling drugs?"

"Oh, Bruce was selling drugs all right," Nicky said as he glanced over at the man. "I suspect he's even more involved than I first thought he was. Why else would he have such a hard on for my laptop? There has to be something on it that he wants."

"Shut your mouth, Nicky," Bruce suddenly shouted. "Shut your fucking mouth."

"Don't want me to tell them everything, Bruce?" Nicky snapped as he looked past Troy to glare at the man. "Then you shouldn't have involved me. I was happy just to leave and never see you again. You're the one that kept coming after me, remember?"

Bruce started to struggle. He slugged Graham in the face, dropping him to the floor. He pushed Jamie back, grabbing for his gun at the same time. Jamie fell back, tripping over a chair and falling to the floor.

Nicky's mouth dropped open in shock then a small cry fell from his lips as Troy shoved him to the floor. Nicky glanced up just as Bruce took aim at Troy. Time slowed for Nicky as he watched the love of his life look down the barrel the gun.

Without giving thought to the consequences, his only focus saving Troy, Nicky picked up the discarded gun from the floor and pointed it at his ex-boyfriend.

"Bruce," he said quietly. "Put the gun down. I don't want to shoot you but I will if I have to."

Out of the corner of his eye, Nicky saw Graham and Jamie freeze. Troy didn't even look like he was breathing as he held his hands up, keeping his eyes on the gun in Bruce's hand.

Nicky slowly got to his feet. "I mean it, Bruce. I *will* shoot you if you don't drop the gun."

"You expect me to believe that?" Bruce sneered. "You're not going to do shit. I'm going to walk out of here or lover boy here gets it."

"Could you be any more dramatic?" Nicky snapped, hoping to turn Bruce's attention back to him and away from Troy once again. "He's going to *get it* if I don't let you walk out of here? Seriously? This is not a 1940s gangster movie and you are not Jimmy Cagney."

"Jimmy Cagn—" Bruce frowned, the gun in his hand wavering. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

"Drop the gun, Bruce!"

"No, I'm leaving and you're not going to stop me."

Bruce looked slightly confused as he started to back up toward the front door. Nicky could see Graham and Jamie moving in toward him from one side of the room, Troy from the other. He knew Bruce. If Bruce felt he was being pinned in, he'd start shooting. Nicky had to keep him occupied.

"Not going to happen, Bruce."

"Nicky!" Troy growled out of the corner of his mouth. "Shut up."

Nicky shook his head. He could see the door behind Bruce opening slowly and Paul ease through. He stood a mere step behind Bruce, ready to pounce.

"Fine, you want me to drop my gun?" Nicky asked. "Then stop pointing yours at Troy. Just point it toward the ceiling or something. You don't even have to drop it. I don't want you *accidentally* shooting Troy as you leave."

"And you'll let me leave?" Bruce asked.

Nicky didn't know how the guy thought he'd get away but he nodded anyway, anything to get Troy out of the line of fire. He turned the gun in his hand sideways, showing Bruce what he was doing.

"See? I'm putting the gun down," Nicky said. He kept his eyes on Bruce as he slowly began to lower the gun to the floor. "Just point yours somewhere else."

Bruce backed toward the door another step. Nicky was surprised that he couldn't feel Paul standing behind him. They actually stood that close together.

"You're such a naive little fuck." Bruce chuckled. "I barely had to use any effort to get into your life. One little kiss and you did whatever I wanted."

Yeah, Nicky couldn't fault Bruce's words. They were true. He'd been desperate enough to have someone care about him that he looked the other way at Bruce's bad behavior. He had only his own bad decisions to blame for the situation they now stood in.

"You're right, Bruce," Nicky said. "I was desperate. But you took advantage of that. You didn't even want me for anything other than as a cover for your drug business. I know that now. And I'll be happy to testify in court about every damn thing I know about you, your friends, and the drugs you peddle."

Bruce snarled. "You're not going to testify about shit!"

Nicky saw several things happen at the same time. Bruce pointed the gun at him and pulled the trigger. Paul and Graham leapt for Bruce. Troy and Jamie leapt for Nicky. Nicky pointed his gun at Bruce and pulled the trigger.

A huge weight crashed into Nicky, taking him down. He grunted as his body was crushed between Troy and the hard floor. Nicky heard another loud crash then silence dominated the room. He couldn't hear anything except heaving breathing until Troy spoke.

"If you ever fucking scare me like that again, Nicholas Everson," Troy growled as he gripped Nicky by the arms and shook him, "so help me, I will tan your ass and not in a good way."

Nicky grinned up at Troy. "I like you, too."

Chapter Ten

"Honey, I'm home," Troy said as he shut the door behind him. He could smell the flavorful aroma of Nicky's lemon chicken cooking and hear soft music playing in the background. He expected Nicky to come running as he usually did when Troy came home from work but he didn't. "Nicky?"

"Back here," Nicky called out from the bedroom.

Intrigued, and hoping for another photo session, Troy dropped his bag on the floor and dropped his keys in the small crystal bowl on the sideboard by the front door. He hung up his jacket then took off his gun and holster, put them in the drawer then walked toward the bedroom and his lover.

Troy was disappointed to find Nicky dressed and sitting in the middle of the bed with his brother, Jamie, sitting at the end of the bed. He would have voiced his displeasure except for the huge grin on Nicky's face as he leafed through several photographs in front of him.

“Hey, baby,” Troy said as he walked over to sit on the side of the bed. Photographs and company be damned. Troy picked Nicky up and settled the smaller man in his lap before claiming his lips in a deep kiss.

“I think you missed me,” Nicky said as Troy finally let him up for air.

“I might have.” Troy glanced over at Jamie. “I know I missed your brother today. I thought you called in sick, Jamie. You look pretty healthy to me.”

Jamie laughed. “I was helping Nicky.”

“With?”

“It was a surprise,” Nicky said. He reached down and grabbed the stack of pictures he had been looking through and waved them at Troy. “I found us a house. Jamie took me over to see it and to take pictures for you.”

“Oh?” Troy took the pictures and started looking through them. Nicky seemed so excited he could barely be still in Troy’s lap. Troy didn’t care what the house looked like. Anything that made his baby that excited won his approval.

“And you like this house, Nicky?” he asked.

“Oh yes, it’s perfect. It’s a cottage with large front windows and flowers in the yard. There’s a fireplace in the living room, a formal dining area, and a breakfast nook. The kitchen will need to be upgraded because I need my appliances, but other than that, it’s perfect. It even has a family room so we can have a pool table for Graham and a sectional sofa and widescreen television. You’ll have plenty of room for you and your friends to watch the game.”

“It sounds nice,” Troy said. “What’s the catch?”

“If we want it we have to make an offer by this weekend. The seller wants out from under it as fast as possible so he’s asking practically nothing. It will be snapped up fast. The only reason I know about it is because Leon and Carmine knows the realtor. It hasn’t been officially advertised yet.”

Troy nodded and tried to look like he was giving it a lot of thought. “Well, you do our finances, baby. Can we afford to make an offer?”

Nicky grimaced. "We could. It might make things a little tough for awhile but I think we can do it. I could take on a few more clients to make up the difference."

Nicky looked so hopeful. His eyes begged Troy to agree. Troy couldn't deny Nicky. He figured that out over the last several months of living with the man. He couldn't deny Nicky anything that made him happy.

"True," Troy finally said, "or you could sell some photographs to Leon and Carmine. They've already offered you more than enough to make a down payment on a house."

"Oh, but — those are *our* photographs."

"Yes, but if you offered to take photos of Leon and Carmine instead and framed them the same way you did ours they might be willing to do that instead."

Nicky's brow furrowed for a moment then slowly evened out, a huge grin crossing his face. "I could do that, couldn't? Then I wouldn't have to give up any of our pictures."

"You have a natural talent, Nicky. The camera loves you, your subjects love you. Why not take pictures of people that love each other and make enough money to buy the house that you love with it? It seems to be like a win-win situation to me."

Troy laughed loudly when Nicky squealed and tackled him to the mattress. Kisses were planted all over his face and neck. When Nicky finally lifted his head, Troy smiled up at him. "I take it you like that idea?"

"I like you," Nicky whispered.

Troy knew Nicky's words meant more than just *like*. Nicky was telling Troy how much he was loved. It just seemed to be their way.

Troy chuckled. "I like you, too."

Jamie groaned. "I'm getting a serious sugar overload here," he said. "I think I need a beer to counteract it."

"I'll get it," Nicky said as he jumped up and bounced out of the room.

Troy laughed and sat up, gathering Nicky's house photos up and stacking them in a pile.

"You really love him, don't you?"

Troy glanced up at Jamie in amazement. "Yes, I do. Does that surprise you?"

"Yeah, I guess it does," Jamie said. "I've always worried about him. I just never thought he'd find someone who accepted him the way you do. I have yet to see anything you didn't support Nicky in. He needs that. I certainly haven't done a stellar job at it."

Troy snorted. "I didn't support him when he pulled that fool stunt with Bruce. I wanted to strangle him."

Jamie grinned and rolled his head back on the mattress as he laid back. "I don't know. I think he did pretty good with Bruce. He gave the guy a lot of shit and didn't back down one bit. I think it was kind of cool."

"And would you have still been thinking that if Bruce shot Nicky?"

Just thinking about the danger Nicky put himself in six months ago still gave Troy chills. Bruce could have very easily killed Nicky, especially when Nicky kept egging the guy on. If the situation hadn't been so dire, Troy would have made good on his promise and paddled Nicky's ass.

"Oh, come on, Nicky called for help, got your gun, and basically rescued us all. Granted, Bruce wouldn't have gotten far. A sea of police waited outside for him, but still"

"Nicky should have let us take care of it," Troy said. "We're the trained police officers, not him."

"Now who's not having faith in Nicky?"

"It has nothing to do with having faith in Nicky. I know he can handle a gun. He told me all about you teaching him to shoot. He just should have let us take care of it. We're trained for situations like that. Nicky isn't."

"Yeah, and he still did a pretty damn good job."

Troy chuckled. "Yes, he did."

"Shot that bastard right in the leg," Jamie laughed then sobered quickly. "I'm glad he only wounded Bruce, though. I'm not sure Nicky could have lived with the knowledge that he killed someone."

"He was protecting those he loves. Nicky could handle anything if it meant he'd protected those he loves."

"Who woulda thunk it, huh?" Jamie asked as he crossed his arms behind his head.

"I always knew it," Troy said. "Nicky can do anything he wants if he wants it bad enough. It doesn't matter if he's doing embroidery or shooting a gun. Nicky's a lot stronger than most people give him credit for."

"Which is why I'm so damn glad Nicky found you," Jamie said. "I don't think anyone could appreciate the things Nicky does the way you do."

"It's simple, Jamie. Nicky wants the same things I do: a home, a family, someone to love him. I don't think it's a matter of appreciating them, just wanting the same things."

"That's starting to sound pretty good to me," Jamie said.

"Which would explain why you spend so much time at our house," Nicky said as he walked in with two beers.

Troy scooted back against the headboard and opened his arms. Nicky settled right into them, handing Troy a beer. The other he handed to Jamie.

Troy leaned down and kissed the side of Nicky's neck. "I have some news for you too, baby."

"Yeah?" Nicky asked as he leaned his head back.

"Bruce took a deal," he said. "You won't have to testify."

Nicky sat up, mirroring his brother as they both gaped at Troy. "Bruce took a deal? What sort of deal?" Nicky asked. "He's not going to get out, is he?"

"Not for a very long time," Troy replied. "He was facing a lot of time, Nicky. You have to think of the charges against him. Not only did he try to kill a police officer, kidnap one, and assault you, but we also found a shitload of information on your

laptop about his drugs deals. Bruce knew once word got out about that his life wouldn't be worth spit so he squealed."

"So, what happens now?" Nicky asked.

"Bruce is going to be doing fifteen years for attempted murder and kidnapping. He can't fight those charges. However, with his testimony against those in his drug dealings, he will be placed in protective custody. He'll still serve his time but he'll be protected."

"But —"

Troy held his hand up. "I know it doesn't seem fair, and it's probably not, but I want you to remember that the names we found on your laptop implicate a lot of people, people high up in the drug trade. This is going to bring down a lot of dealers and get a lot of drugs off the street." Troy grinned. "In fact, they are creating a drug taskforce just to bring these people to justice. This has ripped the lid off the drug trade, not only here, but all the way to the east coast. This is a good thing, Nicky."

"Can any of this be linked back to Nicky?" Jamie asked.

Troy shook his head. "As part of the deal, the prosecutor removed all reference to Nicky from the records. I refused to turn the laptop over to him until he agreed to it and he wanted it real bad." Troy held up his hands and quoted the air with his fingers. "Officially, an anonymous source provided the information."

"Seriously?" Nicky whispered.

Troy dug into his pocket and pulled out a small thumb drive, handing it over to Nicky. "This is what I was able to save off your laptop before the prosecutor took it. Sorry, baby, you won't be getting your computer back."

Nicky took the thumb drive and stared at it for a moment before he started to laugh. "If he keeps Bruce behind bars and my name stays out of it, he can have the damn thing. It's brought me nothing but misery."

"It brought you to me."

Nicky looked up at Troy and shook his head. "No, we would have found each other somehow. The laptop, Bruce, even you partnering with Jamie, none of it had

anything to do with us meeting." Nicky's fingers threaded through the hair on Troy's chest as he laid his head on Troy's shoulder. "We were meant to be together."

"You think so, huh?" Troy asked, tickled to his very bones that Nicky believed what he said. He couldn't agree more. They were meant to be together and would have found each other no matter what. Nicky was the love of his life. Troy couldn't imagine being with anyone else, ever.

"I know so." Nicky smiled, his blue eyes sparkling. "You're perfect for me."

~The End~

About the Author

Stormy Glenn believes the only thing sexier than a man in cowboy boots is two, or three, men in cowboy boots. She also believes in love at first sight, soul mates, true love, and happy endings.

When she's not being a mother to her six teenagers or cleaning up after her two 70-pound lap puppies, you can usually find her cuddled in bed with a book in her hand or her laptop, creating the next sexy character for her stories. Stormy welcomes comments from readers. You can find her web site at www.stormyglenn.com

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