

LOVE Has NO Boundaries



Don't Read in the Closet Event 2013

OFF GUARD

Ali MacLagan

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

OFF GUARD

Off Guard

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

This prompt included two pictures. The first was a chiseled man with dark blond hair and blue eyes. His mouth is curved up in the smallest of smirks.

The second picture features a young man with dark hair. The only thing he is wearing is a pair of black briefs and he's bending over a sink displaying his ass to the camera.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I am a bodyguard, an ex-marine. I have not had the time or inclination for relationships, preferring the occasional casual meeting with other men like me. Until now... until him... my new assignment.

He is utterly shameless. He drives me crazy. How did this happen to me? I'm falling for a twink.

Sincerely,

Susan A

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: bodyguard, twink, car bombing, kidnapping/abduction, shower masturbation, homophobia, revenge, mild PTSD

Content warning: mid-level violence

Word count: 24,344

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Joe scanned the crowd looking for his new client. The new client who had texted him saying something came up and he couldn't meet him at the condo, and would be at this address after nine. Joe was going to wring said new client's scrawny, freakin' neck.

Joe thought back to the file he'd received:

Nicholas Daniels. Twenty-three years old. Five foot eleven, brown hair, hazel eyes. Attended Columbia as an undergrad and graduated with honors. He then moved back home to Chicago, where he bought a condo in the Loop and was studying law at Northwestern. His parents were Michael and Dianne Daniels of Kenilworth. Michael was a tenured history professor at University of Chicago. Dianne was a federal judge.

And that's where the trouble started.

Judge Daniels had held her position for fourteen years. She was respected by most of her colleagues and had the well-earned reputation of being a hard-ass. She rarely showed leniency to those who were found guilty in her courtroom. Over the years, she had received her fair share of "fan mail". Letters that would threaten her safety in one way or another. All the letters had been investigated, and dealt with by the authorities. Then last month, a new fan had made himself known. Four letters, one a week, each describing in exacting detail what this fan would do to her when she was least expecting it. All and all, the letters were pretty standard, as far as hate mail went. Blah, blah, tie you up, blah, blah, kill you bitch, etc, etc. The content wasn't what had the judge worried. It was the fact that these letters had arrived at her home, not her office where letters from other fans had been sent. Security had been heightened around the judge. Alarm codes changed, armed escort to and from work, and cops making drive-bys throughout the night. All standard protocol. Then another envelope arrived. The contents of this one had shaken the judge. Four words were printed: *Your son for Mine*. With the brief note were

pictures of Nicholas in various places in the city. In the parking garage by his apartment. Walking into the law school. Picking out an avocado at Whole Foods. In each photo, there was a big red X drawn across Nicholas's face.

The FBI had been called. They took the letters, questioned the judge, her husband, and her son. No one had noticed anything out of the ordinary. The FBI told the judge that the Chicago PD would add her son's address as a scheduled drive-by, but neither the agency nor the police department could offer round-the-clock protection. No one had actually been harmed, and Nicholas was not a federal employee, therefore he was not eligible for protection unless an attempt to harm him was actually made. They were told to lay low, remain vigilant, and call if anything seemed amiss. When Judge Daniels protested the lack of protection—vehemently—one of the agents gave her a card and referred her to Joe's agency.

She'd made the call immediately. And Joe went out to meet the woman and her husband at their home in Kenilworth. Nicholas wasn't there for the meeting. His parents were apologetic. Joe was irritated, though he did his best not to show it. *How was he supposed to protect a man who couldn't be bothered to show up to meet him?* Professor Daniels explained Nicholas had something pressing at the law school that he was unable to get out of. The three of them went over the details, everything that was known. The judge had more than her fair share of people who might want to harm her, so the suspect list was still rather long, though the FBI was chipping away at it and had given assurances that it would remain a priority. After they exchanged information about how to reach one another, the judge assured Joe that she would call Nicholas and tell him to expect a call and to be home by seven so Joe could meet him at the condo. They shook hands and Joe left. Once he reached his car, he exhaled loudly and let his shoulders slump. Extreme wealth made him nervous, his skin itch. He could probably fit four of his small Naperville home into the Daniels' large Kenilworth one. He'd gotten in his beat-up SUV and headed back to the city.

Joe figured that Nicholas was going to be a challenge. The picture in the file had shown a handsome young man in a well-cut grey suit, white shirt and

purple tie, standing in front of a late model silver Audi. Like the car, the man in the photo was sleek, lithe, and exuded confidence. He was attractive and knew it. He also had little concern or respect in regard to the threats against him, demonstrated by his reluctance to wait at the condo for Joe, and not bothering to show up as his mother had originally requested.

There was one other thing that Joe knew that hadn't been included in the file. Nicholas was gay.

Joe knew immediately what he'd find when he saw the address in the text. A former lover had liked dancing and the nightlife, and Joe had found himself in this same club more than once before. And like before, the bodies were hot and crowded. Sweating and gyrating on the dance floor to the ever-present thumping bass that pounded out of the speakers. Finding Nicholas here, having never met him, would be a feat in and of itself. But when Joe found him, *and he would find him*, he was going to strangle him, and then he would have a long, detailed, and professional conversation with the boy about the definition of "laying low".

The lights on the ceiling swung around, illuminating various areas of the crowd in their bright colors. Beyond the dance floor, to the left, there were a few cages up on a platform with twinks dressed in leather trying to attract a daddy for the night. Opposite the cages was a runway-like platform with three steel poles running to the ceiling. One of the spotlights had zeroed in on the center one. Bodies on the dance floor slowly migrated right and turned to watch whoever was currently putting on the show. Joe started to move through the crowd, ignoring the grabbing hands and slurred come-ons thrown his way. He should have left his leather jacket in the car. He felt the sweat beading on his neck and dampening the back of his navy button-down.

He made his way to the bathrooms in the back, but the only thing he found was one of the leather-clad twinks on his knees enthusiastically lapping the uncircumcised cock of a big man who had his hand tangled in the boy's blond hair. Joe's eyes drifted from the twink up to the owner of the cock. The man opened his bright blue eyes and looked right at Joe. He was gorgeous. Broad shoulders, thick legs, tight stomach. The man quirked the side of his mouth

and winked; Joe cocked his head and quirked his own mouth in response. He turned and made his exit as the man's head fell back against the stall, and his eyes fell closed again. *Maybe next time.* He headed back to the mass of bodies, intent on finding the one body he was looking for. His pants a bit tighter now than when he'd left.

The crowd around the center pole had grown. Nicholas was nowhere to be seen so Joe made his way across to join the others, thinking that maybe his client was somehow camouflaged in the mass of men. As he pushed his way closer, looking at each face as he passed, he could see the men were captivated by whatever show was being put on. Drool was dripping from more than one mouth. Joe turned his head to look. Leaning against the pole, with his back to his audience, was the man drawing all the attention. The man was wearing skintight black jeans that made Joe wonder how he could even move in them, let alone dance. Sweat had made the purple T-shirt the dancer wore cling to his back; it climbed its way up as he shimmied slowly down the pole, exposing his nicely tanned back and a hint of what appeared to be a thong. The dancer danced his way up, only instead of his back against the pole, it was his ass, and the man bent forward so the pole nestled right between his jean-clad cheeks. The men around Joe started to swoon. Joe rolled his eyes. He didn't get off on the attention seekers. *The guy getting blown in the bathroom however... hmmm.* Joe looked around at the faces again, and not seeing his client, he headed to the bar. He figured eventually the man would want to find himself a drink.

He took a step, and suddenly he couldn't see anything. Cloth covered his face. He reached up to pull it off and realized it was the purple T-shirt the dancer had been wearing. Joe looked back at the dancer. He'd turned around and those jeans were displaying everything to the thirty or so men who had crowded around, each and every one of them ready to lick his toes and anything else he offered them. Joe's eyes continued up the lean-but-muscled torso, and on up further until they reached the long angular face surrounded by sweat soaked, dark brown hair. Hazel eyes smiled directly at him. *Fuck.*

Hello, Nicholas Daniels.

Nick wondered how long it would take the hired Neanderthal to find him. His mom had sent him a photo so he'd know who to look for. Nick had seen him as soon as he'd entered the bar. That's when he'd made the decision to put on his little show. The man was attractive. Short blond hair, goatee. Deep-set blue eyes. Maybe Neanderthal was not quite the right term. He looked a bit like a modern day Viking. Beautiful and brutal. But, Jesus, the man was tense, intense. Shoulders pulled back tight, jaw set, furrow between his eyes that were set intently upon the crowd. Nick had ducked every time the man's eyes turned his way. Nick wasn't going down without a fight. From the glare the Neanderthal/Viking was giving him, he could tell, it was going to be one hell of a fight.

Nick brought two fingers to his lips and blew the man a kiss.

Nick didn't think Mr. Viking—Joe, his mom had said—could get any tenser, but he was wrong. The man's face turned bright red. The deep furrow between his brows got deeper, the shoulders tenser. He jerked his head towards the bar, with a force that made Nick wonder if Joe the Viking had given himself a concussion. Joe started that way, obviously expecting Nick to follow.

Nick decided to appease him, at least this once, and squeezed his way through his throng of admirers, pausing along the way to shove his tongue down the throat of a hot brunet who grabbed his ass. The guy started rubbing up and down Nick like he was the pole he'd just abandoned. Forgetting all else, except his own super-hard dick, Nick rubbed back. His tongue intensified its assault and Nick could feel the vibration from the guy's moans, which only made him try to shove his tongue deeper and his erection closer. And that's how Joe found him.

“Excuse me.”

Nick looked up to see Joe tapping the brunet's shoulder.

“Back off, buddy.” The brunet said to him, releasing Nick's mouth and moving on to devour his throat. Nick leaned back to give him more room and let his hands drift down to the brunet's waistband. Nick let his head fall back

and looked up at Joe with a smirk. Man, you could almost see the steam coming out of the Viking's ears. He'd be lucky if he had any teeth left, he was grinding them so hard. Nick thought he should give Joe the number of his dentist. Maybe his massage therapist too.

Looking down at Nick, Joe narrowed those deep-set blue eyes and then quickly looked back up at the brunet who was doing a Hoover impression on Nick's neck. "No, you back off."

Oooh, Mr. Viking was getting testy.

Joe grabbed the guy's shoulder this time and pried him away from Nick's body.

"Hey!" The guy glared at Joe and squared his shoulders. A tingle went down Nick's spine. There was something oh-so-appealing about two alphas squaring off over him. Of course, it would be better if it was because they both wanted to fuck him. *Sadly, not the case.* One certainly did. The other probably didn't want to fuck him, but Nick was quite positive at this point, Joe wanted to fling him over one of those broad shoulders, carry him off to some cabin in the middle of nowhere and leave him tied up in a corner, while he guarded the door against any boogeymen. And while certain aspects of that scenario sounded appealing, most did not. *Not middle of nowhere, and not Mr. Straight Neanderthal.*

Joe took a step towards the brunet and Nick decided he should probably intervene, so he stepped between the two and put a hand on each man's chest.

"Whoa, fellas. Okay, Joe right? Let's go talk." He turned to the brunet. "Got a phone?"

"Yeah," the guy said, reaching in his back pocket and handing the phone over to Nick, while still determined to win the staring contest with Joe. Nick pointed the camera at himself, puckered his lips in a kiss, and snapped a photo. He proceeded to punch in his number before handing the phone back to the guy, reaching up, grabbing the guy's head and pulling it down for a hot, wet, sloppy kiss and then turned around. The guy's hands were still around him. They ran up his chest and pinched his nipples with a little twist before they

started to migrate down towards his straining cock. Nick turned his head into the guy's neck, still writhing against him, and licking the outside of the man's ear.

“Call me, so we can finish what we've started.” Nick looked up at the guy who was shooting daggers at Joe over Nick's shoulder. He rubbed one more time against the brunet and felt the guy's erection right against his ass. Nick narrowed his eyes and shot daggers of his own at Joe, before he released his would-be-lover and took a step towards Mr. Neanderthal, who was currently mid eye-roll.

Whatever.

Looking up at him, Nick raised his hand and pointedly jabbed his two fingers into Joe's solar plexus. He heard the man suck in a rough breath.

“You! Let's go.” Nick grabbed his shirt that was still in Joe's hand and walked off with his head high and his back straight. He didn't really give a damn if Joe was following him or not. He pulled his shirt on when he reached the door, gave the doorman a good-bye peck on the cheek, and then headed out into the crisp Chicago night without a single backwards glance.

Nick took a deep breath and tried to calm himself. He was pissed, hot, and horny. He exhaled and heard a throat clear. He turned around to find the Viking looking at him like he wanted to put him over his knee and spank him. *Uh, no thanks.*

“Joe Madsen.” The man said as he reached his right hand out and held up an ID with his left hand. Nick face felt pinched as he glanced up at the ID, and then extended his hand to shake Joe's.

“Nick Daniels.” Joe's grip was firm. Nick looked him in the eyes and tried to remove his hand only to be pulled in close. He could feel Joe's breath on his face as the man's nostrils flared. *Whoa, he was pissed.*

“Nice to meet you, Nick. Now let's go have ourselves a chat, shall we?”

Well, that went well. Joe thought to himself. He ran a hand through his hair and rubbed the back of his neck. They'd made the ride down to the Loop in total silence. His passenger had sat ramrod straight in his seat, looking directly ahead the whole time; occasionally he would let out a dramatic breath and turn to throw a glare at Joe. *Great. Just what I need, a melodramatic, freakin' twink. The FBI better catch this perp quick. There are only so many episodes of Glee I can stand.*

Joe sat on a bar stool at the island in Nick's kitchen. His elbows rested on the counter as he scrubbed his face with his hands. Nick flitted, *fucking flitted*, around the kitchen. He grabbed a glass and poured himself some red wine before moving over to flip through the pages of a cookbook. Pointedly ignoring Joe.

"Listen," Joe started. "I know this isn't the most ideal situation, but someone out there wants to hurt you. And it's my job to stop them. I won't purposefully try to cramp your style or impede your freedom, but unfortunately, until they stop this whacko, that is probably what is going to happen. The more unnecessary risks you take, the more opportunities you give him to be successful in his mission. The FBI is working leads. The Chicago PD is backing them up as necessary. With any luck this will be over before too long, and you can go back to your life in the clubs or wherever else it is that you want to be."

Nick looked up from the cookbook and took a sip of his wine. "You're not telling me anything I don't already know."

Joe kept his voice calm and his body relaxed. Losing his temper would probably get him nowhere. "Look, can we just go over your daily routine and figure out how, at least for now, things are going to have to change?"

Nick looked at him like he was a principal who had just called him into his office for chewing gum. Then he turned and walked out of the kitchen and down the hall. Joe sat and sighed. Nick came out a minute later. He'd changed into dark blue jeans and a button down purple shirt that he'd left untucked. He came over to the counter, grabbed his keys, and without a word, headed to the door.

“Hey, where do you think you’re going?” Joe stood up quickly and grabbed Nick’s arm. “Nick, stop.”

Nick blew his bangs up and out of his eyes. “I have plans. Stuff to do.”

Joe stood back and crossed his arms over his chest. “Oh, like the pressing matter you had this afternoon. The pressing matter that caused you to miss the meeting with your parents?”

“Ha!” Nick threw his head back and sniggered. “Mom has such a way of putting things. Though I suppose she did tell the truth even if she didn’t know it. There was a *pressing* matter. It was my face. It was pressed into the desk while my professor plowed into me from behind.” He held his hand out, looked down at his nails and deadpanned, “I’m getting an A in that class.”

Was this kid for real? Joe opened his mouth and shut it. He had no idea what to say. He shook his head and looked down at the floor. *How the fuck do I get through to the brat?* Joe took a deep breath and lifted his head. Nick was gone. The door left wide open. *Fuck.*

Joe raced out the door, slamming it behind him. He rounded the corner and caught a glimpse of Nick’s foot as he stepped into the elevator. Adrenaline pumping, he took off like a shot and reached the elevator only to watch the doors seal shut. He let out a loud curse and banged on the elevator doors before he turned and headed down the stairwell.

Seven flights later, he banged open the door into the parking structure. Nick was strutting down the middle of the ramp. Joe could see the Audi at the end. He sprinted off, his breath labored until he finally was able to put himself between Nick and the Audi that was still thirty feet away.

“Stop!” He held up a hand to emphasize. “Where do you think you’re going?” His breathing was still strained, but he didn’t have time to catch it. He’d rest when he got Nick back up to the apartment. He’d carry the brat if he had to.

“I have plans. I’m heading up to the North Shore to meet some friends.” He rolled his eyes and waved his hand in the air, in some exasperated motion. His voice seemed to reach soprano and there was that singsong quality to it,

which wore on Joe's nerves like nails on a chalkboard. "Just a small get-together at a friend's apartment. Let's call it a study session, shall we?"

"No, we shall not. What we *shall* do is go back upstairs and have a little heart-to-heart about what it means to have your life threatened by some unknown psycho." Joe's face felt hot. He had better things to do than stand in the middle of a parking garage arguing with some twink. Especially since said twink was the one he was supposed to be protecting, and the parking garage was not exactly the most secure of locations.

Nick let out a long sigh, looking down at the key fob he was holding in his hand. "If I can't live my life, if I can't do what I want to do when I want to do it, unknown psycho guy wins." Thankfully, Nick's voice had come down a few octaves. He looked back up at Joe, cocked his head, and wrinkled his forehead. His eyes looked as if he were begging Joe to understand. Joe didn't buy it.

Joe stared at him, his muscles tense. He'd heard this rationale before. "No, unknown psycho guy wins when you're dead. I am getting paid to make sure that doesn't happen. I am here to keep your ass safe. Keep you safe from whoever it is threatening you, and if necessary keep you safe from yourself."

Nick took a step towards Joe, his head tilted down, still looking at the keys. Slowly, he looked up through his dark bangs. Joe saw the greens and browns swirling in those hazel eyes. He held Nick's gaze and wondered what he was thinking. Nick reached out with his right hand, and his fingers slowly walked up the buttons of Joe's shirt. Joe's breath caught.

"Aw, sugar. That's sweet, but who's going to keep my ass safe from you?" To punctuate the statement, Nick stretched his neck and pressed his lips so very softly against Joe's own. Then he took the tip of his tongue and ran it over Joe's upper lip.

Holy fuck. Who is going to protect me from Nick might be a better question.

Nick pulled away and smirked at Joe, who was standing there dumbfounded, trying to get his voice to work. Nick took a step to the side and

pressed the button on the key fob. Joe was thrown forward into Nick, the breath knocked out of him completely for the second time. His back felt hot; a painful prickle hit the back of his legs.

Shit. The car just blew up.

What the fuck? Joe tried to open his eyes; they felt heavy. He was hot, and the smells of a mechanic's garage on a hot summer's day reached his nose. Only it was more than that. Everything sounded muffled. He couldn't hear any traffic. What the fuck had just happened? Why was he lying on the ground? He felt the rough concrete under his hands, but his head was on something more cushioned. He finally managed to pry his eyelids open, but all he could see was purple. *Purple?*

"Oh fuck! Nick!" Joe's voice sounded too loud. He propped himself up and looked down. Nick's eyes were shut. His head lolled off to the side. Blood ran from a cut on his forehead and down the length of his thigh where his jeans had shredded. "Nick!" He moved up and put his ear next to Nick's mouth while watching his chest. He saw the slow rise and fall and felt Nick's breath on his face. *Thank God.* Joe's eyes drifted over to where Nick's car had been. Twisted metal and melted tires were all that was left.

"Shit, we need to get out of here. Nick, hey Nicky, can you hear me?" He tapped Nick's cheek with his hand a couple times. No response. "Shit." Gently, he took his hands and felt down the sides of Nick's neck. Everything felt like it should. It was risky, but he'd have to take the chance. He didn't know whether or not anyone was watching, waiting to finish the job.

Joe shook his head, trying to get rid of the cobwebs that the blast had put there. He looked around. Nick's car was a skeleton and the cars next to it didn't look much better. He moved into a crouch, ignoring the pain shooting from his back and down through his legs. He felt the adrenaline rush as he scooped Nick up as gently as he could, one arm under his knees and the other supporting his shoulders. Another look around and Joe took off towards his

car, suddenly thankful to have decided to park in the structure instead of the street. *Get Nick to the car. Get somewhere safe.*

The SUV sat parked just as Joe had left it. “Nick. I need you to wake up, man. I gotta get you in the car.” He tried to reach into his pocket to get his keys. *FUCK! Gimme a fuckin’ break already.* Joe knelt down and gently placed Nick on the floor of the garage while he got the back door open. He picked Nick up and laid him down across the back seat.

His whole body winced as he maneuvered himself into the driver’s seat. *Gotta get somewhere safe.* Joe started the car and headed to the exit. He shoved the ticket and a credit card into the machine and then turned out onto street.

Where do I go now? Where can I take him? Not his parents’ house. “Fuck it.”

Joe took the ramp onto the Kennedy Expressway and headed towards Naperville.

Nick’s head fucking hurt. Had Joe knocked him out because he’d tried to leave? God, he felt like shit. His leg felt like a thousand needles had been jammed in all at once. Jesus. He remembered Joe’s lecture. He remembered kissing him, and then... *Aw, fuck. My car. My car blew up.*

He tried to sit up.

“Easy there, Nicky. It’s okay, you’re okay. You’re safe now.” Joe’s voice reached through the layers of cotton that seemed to be surrounding his brain. Nick opened his eyes. Everything was spinning. Nick saw Joe’s face kaleidoscoping around his vision. He closed his eyes again.

“Take it easy there. Let’s lay you back down.” Nick felt the pressure of a hand on his shoulder gently pushing him back. He had no strength to resist. Fingers moved over his face, then one of his eyelids was opened and a bright light shone in. Before he could react, the same happened to the other.

“Stop. My head hurts, asshole.”

“Sorry.” Joe sounded both apologetic and amused. “You hit your head pretty hard when you went down. Pretty sure you have a concussion. You also got nicked on the forehead by some debris and you got a pretty ugly gash on your thigh. Nothing looks like it needs stitches, though. I called my office and they were getting in touch with your parents to let them know you’re okay.”

Nick opened his eyes again and the world seemed to have settled down. He was lying on a bed in a bedroom. Not his. The walls were grey and there were a couple of pictures he couldn’t make out hanging next to a small flat screen mounted there. The bed was big, the bedding black.

“Where am I?”

“You’re at my house.”

Nick closed his eyes, counted to five and opened them again. *Nope, still black and grey.* “Are you colorblind?”

“What?” Nick could hear the concern in Joe’s voice.

“The room, there’s no color anywhere. Just boring grey. I’ll have my decorator call you. She can introduce you to the color wheel.”

Joe chuckled. It was a nice sound. “This coming from the man who only wears purple. I appreciate the offer, but really, I’m all set.”

Nick turned to look at Joe. Thankfully, there was only one of him now. One with no shirt on. One that was only wearing a pair of running shorts. One that had—*Holy hell, are there really that many muscles in an abdomen?*

“You’re beautiful.” Nick put his hand to his mouth. He looked over at Joe and the man’s skin pinked up from his lightly-furred chest all the way up to his cheeks. “Oh God, did I just say that out loud?”

“Um yes, and ah, thank you, I guess.” Joe raised an eyebrow and then turned to walk away, revealing his back to Nick. There was a bandage across the man’s neck and both thighs had been wrapped in gauze. Nick took in a harsh breath.

“Are you okay?” Nick couldn’t name whatever feeling lodged itself in his chest at that moment.

Joe turned back to him. “Huh?”

“Your neck and legs. Are you okay? What’s underneath the bandages?” Nick’s voice was soft as he spoke; the reality of what had happened was starting to sink in.

“I’m fine, Nick. Really. My jacket shielded most of my back, the jeans slowed whatever was flying at me enough that nothing cut too deep. What’s most important is that you are okay.” Joe took a step closer to Nick and crouched down next to the bed, grimacing slightly in the process. “You should sleep.” Joe’s voice was low and soothing as he reached his hand out and patted Nick’s arm. “I’ll wake you in a couple of hours. Right now, I’ve got to make some more phone calls.”

Nick looked down again at the man’s legs. He wanted to say something but the words just seemed scrambled in his brain. Unable to string anything together, he looked back up at Joe’s deep-set blue eyes. The man’s eyebrows were knit together in concern. He patted Nick’s arm again, and then moved his hand up and stroked Nick’s cheek like he would a child. “Go to sleep, Nick.” Nick didn’t want to think more about the ugliness that might lurk under those bandages, so he closed his eyes and went to sleep.

Joe ran his hand through his hair and winced when it hit his neck. He’d forgotten about that cut. He was lucky it wasn’t worse. He took a deep breath and rubbed his temples.

Joe ached. His head, his legs. Sleeping on the couch hadn’t helped much either. He headed to the bathroom to take care of business and grab some more ibuprofen. He pushed the door open and took a step in. His breath caught in his throat. Nick was there, leaning in close to the mirror, inspecting the cut on his forehead. And all he was wearing was that little black thong.

Joe couldn’t move. His eyes wouldn’t look away. When his breath finally caught up with him it was audible. Nick turned his head and looked right at him.

Joe knew his mouth was open. He could only hope he wasn't drooling. *How could I have not noticed that ass before? Fuuuck. No. Not fuck. Client. Young client. Twink client. No fucking. But man, that ass...*

"Where are my clothes?" Nick's words made their way through to his distracted brain. Joe felt the heat rush to his face.

"Um... I had to cut them off you. Your shirt was ruined, and the jeans were ripped when you got that gash. Hold on, I probably have something that will fit you." Joe quickly turned around before Nick noticed another problem that had just popped up, i.e. Joe's half-hard cock. *Shit.*

Joe rummaged through the dresser and came back with a T-shirt and some old sweats that still had a drawstring. Nick was way too thin for Joe's clothes to fit without a little help.

"You cut off my clothes? What the fuck man? Those were my favorite jeans." Nick sounded put out as he pouted.

Joe let out something caught between a sigh and a chuckle. "Well, obviously you don't have any brain damage, since your priorities are still in order. When they catch whoever's behind this, you can sue him for a new pair of jeans, oh—and a new Audi too." Joe handed the clothes to Nick. "Here, these should fit. At least until we can get something else. Why don't you take a shower? Everything you need is in the bathroom, and those towels are clean. I can put new bandages on you when you're done. Then we can find something to eat."

Nick walked out of the bathroom freshly changed and bandaged. He'd found the first aid kit under the sink, and figured he didn't need Joe to do that for him too. It was bad enough Joe had had to bandage him up the first time. Bad enough he was right to begin with. Someone *had* tried to kill him. Both he and Joe had the soon-to-be scars to prove it. The warmth that had been with him since the shower left him; he felt ice cold. His stomach churned. He made his way to the bedroom and sat down on the edge of the bed, too afraid he would fall down if he remained standing for much longer.

Someone tried to kill me.

He bent his body in half, resting his elbows on his knees and hanging his head down low between them. He shut his eyes and forced himself to take a deep breath. *In through the nose, out through the mouth. Find my inner chi or whatever the fuck my yoga instructor called it.* He knew the word, it was lurking somewhere in his scrambled brain, but the only words that found their way into Nick's consciousness were words like *explosion, psycho, hurt and dead.*

Someone tried to kill me.

Fuck. In through the nose, out through the mouth. The words went on repeat in his head. He forced his body to comply and, breath after breath, his mind began to clear. When he felt like he wasn't going to pass out, he lifted his head and looked up at the wall at the end of the bed. There were two photos hanging next to the screen.

Nick stared at them a moment before his curiosity got the better of him, and he got up to take a closer look. The larger of the photos showed a group of five men, barely men, they all looked younger than Nick was now. All of the men wore camouflage pants, two of them had tank tops on, but the others were shirtless. They each had their arms slung around the shoulders of the man next to them, smiles wide on their faces, their eyes showing the gleam of invincibility. And comradeship, friendship. Joe was easy to pick out. His hair was cropped short. It looked almost white, but whether that was just a reflection of the bright sun, or whether the sun itself had bleached it, Nick couldn't tell.

The smaller photo showed Joe with just one other man. The man had dark hair cut short, and the brightest green eyes that Nick had ever seen. Joe and his friend were sitting in deck chairs hunched forward, each with an elbow on their knee and a Budweiser in their hand, leaning towards one another. Joe had sunglasses on. Something had made him laugh and turn his head to look at his friend just when the photographer clicked the shutter button. He looked so relaxed. So happy. There was no furrow in his brow, his shoulders were relaxed. *Was this really the same man who was in the other room?* It made

Nick sad. The Joe that was here with him had nothing in common with the Joe smiling in the picture. Nick lifted his hand and lightly ran it across the glass of the frame. The green eyes of Joe's friend smiled at him, and Nick felt the corners of his own lips turn up. Whoever this man was, he could make people smile without even having met them.

"Hey." Joe's voice broke whatever spell Nick was under, and he took a step back from the wall. "Are you ready for new bandages?"

"I found the first aid kit under your sink and did it myself. Thanks though."

"Did you use the antibiotic cream? Did..."

Nick rolled his eyes and waved his hand, effectively cutting Joe off. "Yes, Mother. I used the antibiotic cream. I even made sure none of the adhesive stuck to the wounds," His voice rose up high and held an entitled air as he spoke. He knew he was acting more uppity than was warranted, but damn it, he was not a child. He might, begrudgingly, need a bodyguard, but he'd be damned if he needed a nursemaid too. He was tired of talking about how he was hurt.

"Nick, we've got to go. I got a call, and the FBI wants to talk to you. Not to mention your parents. I talked with them last night and told them all the pertinent stuff, but they still want to talk to you in person. Your parents aren't very happy with me right now."

"Huh, why? I'm fine. There's nothing you could have done to stop anything. I was the one who left the apartment. You stopped me in time. You got me out of there and kept me safe." The cold feeling in Nick's spine returned. He looked down at the floor and then back up at Joe. His stomach felt like it was on a rollercoaster.

"Well, that's not exactly how they see it. They think you should have gone to the hospital." Joe sighed. "We've got to head downtown for a meeting with the powers that be. They've got a theory about who's behind all this. Your parents will be there too."

Nick didn't want to leave. He felt safe here in this house, even with its black-and-white-movie color scheme. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"So, you were in the military." He lifted his hand and gestured towards the picture on the wall.

"Yeah. Marines." Joe's hands were in his pockets, and his shoulders hunched a bit forward.

"Oooh... my own personal G.I. Joe. I never had one as a kid. But I think I could appreciate *you* as my action figure. Though, between you or Channing? I'd have to pick Channing. No offense." Nick knew he was being a brat. It happened when he got nervous, and the idea of leaving was definitely making him nervous.

"No offense." Joe rolled his eyes at him. Nick thought he could still see the hint of a smile trying to curl its way into the corner of Joe's mouth. Nick liked it.

"I'm only teasing." Nick smirked at him and then looked back at the photo of Joe and the other man. "I am, however, totally serious when I ask, who's the hottie in the picture and when do I get to meet him?" Nick looked back at Joe and waggled his eyebrows.

The almost amused look in Joe's face slid away, replaced with one of pure ice. "You can't. Aaron's dead." Joe turned on his heel and left the room.

Shit. Nick had just wanted to see Joe smile. Instead, he'd hit a mark he hadn't intended to hit. Nick looked at the picture of Joe and Aaron. Aaron had been beautiful and obviously he'd meant a lot to Joe. Nick had just brought that loss front and center. He'd caused more trouble than he'd meant to. Hell, they'd both nearly gotten blown up because of Nick's antics. Nick knew it, felt badly about it. But here at Joe's home, Joe was supposed to feel safe, and Nick had just inadvertently hurt him. Now they had to leave and head back out into the world where cars blew up and people wanted him dead. Nick looked over at the happy Joe and let that tiny bit of warmth flow through him before heading out of the room.

Joe sank down onto the sofa and reached up to rub his neck. *Fuck*. Yet again, he'd forgotten about that stupid cut. *Damn it*. He'd overreacted. Nick hadn't deserved the hostility Joe'd given him. It had been a while since anyone had asked about Aaron, and he'd been unprepared to respond.

"Joe?" Nick stepped into the room. His hands were in his pockets, his voice, soft.

"Hey, Nick." Joe replied, looking up at him. "I'm sorry about that. I shouldn't have been so harsh."

Nick took a few quick steps and sat down next to Joe. Joe leaned back and rested his head on the back of the couch.

"You don't have anything to apologize for, I was being a bit too... well, a bit too me."

Joe turned his body to face the other man. "Nick, you couldn't have known. And don't ever apologize for being yourself. Aaron's been gone a long time now."

Nick looked up at him, his hazel eyes soft with concern. "Did you serve with him?"

"Yeah, we met in boot camp. We were in different companies and ended up with different assignments until both companies got sent to Afghanistan a couple years later. It's like we'd never been apart." Joe gave into the small smile that thinking about Aaron always brought out. "That picture was taken while we were on leave four years ago. He was killed three months later. I got out two months after that."

"I'm so sorry, Joe. He meant a lot to you. I didn't mean to make light of that."

"I know that. Nick, really, please don't feel bad. You had no way of knowing." Another deep breath. Joe looked at Nick again. He cocked his head, and the corner of his lip turned up. "It was Aaron's idea to start the agency.

We were going to be partners. In every way.” Joe’s voice had drifted off to barely more than a whisper.

Nick narrowed his eyes and looked at Joe. “You mean you guys worked together. Like paired up on assignments and stuff?”

Joe shook his head and let out a soft laugh. “No, Nick, we were partners. I think you know what I mean. Last night, that was not the first time I’ve been to that club.”

Nick’s eyes went from slits to saucers as the realization hit him. “You’re gay? Like *gay* gay, not happy gay?”

This time Joe let out a full-fledged chuckle. “Yes, Nick, I’m gay, like *gay* gay. Like, I have sex with men gay. Gay.”

“Holy fuck! How did I not know this? Shit. Are you sure?” Nick was still shaking his head, his brow furrowed a bit as if he were working out a geometry problem and trying to figure out the different angles.

“You sound like my sister did when I came out to her when I was sixteen. I’ll tell you what I told her. Yes, I’m sure, I’ve been sure since I was twelve when all the boys in my class were turning to look at Lucy Wilson’s new boobs, and I was stepping back to look at their asses.” Joe’s smile widened.

“Wow. Like, wow!” Nick sat back and looked right at Joe. His mouth hung open. He shook his head again. “I think I need my gaydar checked. Jesus. Seriously, I can usually smell a hot gay man from across the state, but I was completely oblivious to you.” Nick took in a quick breath and brought his hand to his mouth. His eyes got even bigger. His face suddenly an adorable shade of pink. “Oh shit! I kissed you. Man, I’m so sorry.”

“So you wouldn’t have been sorry if I was straight?” Joe snickered. “It’s not a big deal, Nick. Really. Though if I’d been straight, your car might not have blown up, because I probably would have decked you. Instead, I was just a bit dumbfounded.”

“I’m just sorry. Gay, straight, either way, I shouldn’t have kissed you. I was in my shock’em mode. Take’em off guard and then do what I want to. It

tends to work most of the time. Except for you. Haven't managed to get rid of you yet."

"Nope, and you won't be getting rid of me. Until they catch this bad guy, you're stuck with me."

Joe smiled at Nick and watched the light in his eyes dim a bit. Joe hoisted himself up, reached over and placed a friendly pat on his leg. "Come on man, up and at 'em. We gotta head out before we have the FBI after *us*."

Nick looked down at himself. "Um... No offense, Joe, but I'm not exactly comfortable going out in public looking like this. Got anything else I can wear?"

"Sorry. Any jeans I have would end up hanging down past your ass, and somehow I think *that* look would work for you less than this one does."

Nick looked up at him with his head cocked and waggled his eyebrows. "Maybe, but at least *you'd* get a great view."

"Knock it off. I'll find you a hoodie. You can wear my sunglasses. We'll call the ensemble: Nick Incognito." Joe waved his hand in front of him and put some singsong in his voice. "It'll be the next big thing on the Paris runways. I just know it." Joe scrunched up his nose and quickly cocked his head and raised one shoulder.

Nick giggled. Joe felt that giggle down in his own belly and shook his head. He couldn't hold back a smile as he held out his hand. Nick grabbed it and let Joe pull him up off the couch. A warm comforting feeling spread from Nick's hand and continued all the way down through Joe to his toes. Nick bounced up and then they headed to find the Incognito Ensemble.

"Anthony Harris. Recognize him?"

Nick sat in an aluminum chair, his back straight. He concentrated on keeping his leg still when all it wanted to do was bounce. He felt ice cold and wished they'd turn down the air conditioning. Maybe they did it on purpose so suspects would confess before they froze to death. The way the chubby agent

across the table was staring him down, he was starting to feel like one. His partner, a shorter, bald man just sat there looking bored.

Nick felt all boxed in. The room was small, way too small to be holding the six people that were currently in it. His mother was on one side of him, his dad beside her. Joe sat on his left, quiet and steady, watching the agents with narrowed eyes. Nick wanted to know what he was thinking. He wanted to take the hand his mother had a death grip on and put it in Joe's hand instead.

"Nick, do you recognize him?" the chubby agent asked again. Nick flicked his eyes down at the photo. He'd never seen the man before and said as much to Chubby.

"Judge, Professor Daniels?"

"The man looks vaguely familiar. The name definitely rings a bell." Nick's mother looked at the photo and back to the agent. His father just shook his head.

"How about his son, Jared Harris." Another photo, another blond man, similar features to the first picture. This photo obviously a mug shot with the telltale measurement lines behind him. Nick repeated his answer from the first photo.

The judge picked the photo up. Her eyes widened. "I had his case. He was found guilty of drug trafficking."

Chubby nodded. "Yes, and you gave him the maximum sentence."

"Yes," Nick's mother replied. She let go of Nick's hand and Nick stifled a thankful sigh. His mother was using the "judge voice." The voice was cool, controlled. Nick had heard it many times before, mostly when he was about fifteen-years-old and caught sneaking in after a late night study session with his lab partner. At least that's what he told his mom at the time; most of the time he was studying sex ed, and only some of those times were actually with his lab partner. He felt a small smile trying to grow. The cool voice broke through his memories and the almost-smile vanished.

“It was not his first offense. The sentence was fair. Is this the man that is trying to kill my son?”

“Anthony is, yes...” Baldy leaned forward, finally deciding to speak. “Last week, Jared Harris was found dead in his cell. He’d hung himself with his bed sheet.” The agent’s voice was flat. He looked over briefly, dismissively at Joe, and then he leveled his gaze on Nick and his parents. Nick’s leg started bouncing; he didn’t try to stop it.

“What does that have to do with my family? The letters started over a month ago. The timing doesn’t match up.” Nick’s dad had taken his mother’s hand and looked across the table at the agents with concern on his face.

“It didn’t seem to at first, no. But we delved into things a bit more.” Baldy reached his hand out and pointed at the picture of Jared. “Six weeks ago, Jared Harris was taken to the infirmary. He had extensive injuries. Among them, facial fractures and anal trauma. I think you can deduce what happened to him.”

The judge brought her hand to her chest. Her husband shook his head and looked down at the table. Nick sucked in a quick breath and tensed up even more. A warm hand came and rested on his left knee, stopping the bouncing. Nick focused on Joe’s hand, trying to let the calm that it was lending spread through him.

“Jared was raped.” Joe said, keeping his voice even.

Chubby looked over at Joe. “Yes, Jared was raped.” The agent gave Joe another dismissive look and turned his gaze back to the judge. “We believe that Anthony was made aware of the attack and became enraged and focused all that rage on you.” Chubby nodded at Nick’s mother before continuing. “You were the one who sentenced his son, and thus put him in the place where the rape occurred. Then, when his son killed himself, his target switched from you to Nicholas. *Your son for mine*. An eye for an eye, it would seem.”

“That’s ridiculous.” The judge’s voice had taken a higher pitch as she spoke.

“Maybe to you and me, but not to Mr. Harris. The evidence we collected from the scene of the car explosion has a signature similar to other incidents that were tied to a militant group. We believe Anthony Harris to be a member of this group. These men are not known for being rational.”

Nick’s mother straightened her head and stared at the agent. “So, what do we do now?”

Nick didn’t want to hear what the agent was going to say. Somehow it had gotten colder. The only warmth came from Joe’s hand that was still on his knee. Nick wanted to take his hand and hold it. He wanted to run out the door before Chubby could answer his mother. He didn’t think he was going to like what Chubby would say. Joe took his hand away, and Nick looked over to see the man run it through his hair, only to flinch when it hit his neck. *He needs to stop doing that.*

“We get the guy. Until then, you and your husband will go back to your home. We have agents assigned to you twenty-four-seven. Nicholas will go into protective custody starting immediately. We’ll take him to a safe house where he will remain until Anthony Harris is apprehended.”

Nick’s stomach dropped to his toes.

“Okay.”

“No!” Nick and his mother spoke at the same time. Nick’s eyes were wide; his jaw dropped open and then shut with such force, his entire skull vibrated. His leg was moving like he was running a marathon. The judge looked over at him and placed her hand on his arm gently.

“Nicholas, darling. We need to keep you safe. The FBI will do that.” She tilted her head. “I know you’re worried. I know you don’t like being told what to do, but surely you understand that we all have to make sacrifices here.” She’d busted out the mom-voice, the one he hadn’t heard since he was seven and he’d broken his foot.

Nick turned from Chubby to look at his mother. “I understand I am in danger, yes. I understand this man is a lunatic and blames you for his son being raped and killing himself, and that has somehow mutated into a desire to

see me dead and you suffering. Yes, I get it. I know it. I understand it. What none of you seem to understand is, that while you may be the one receiving the letters, mother, it is my life that is being threatened. And while it may be true that hurting me will indeed hurt you, I am the one who will be in pain. I am the one who will be dead.” He spoke the words with conviction. His voice stayed deep and even. His mother’s face seemed to pale as fast as his face was warming. He didn’t know if he’d ever spoken to her in such a manner, but he wasn’t about to back down. Standing from the table he continued, “That being said, I will assume that you can all understand why I choose not to place my trust in an organization that, as of two days ago, couldn’t be bothered with me.” He snapped his jaw shut and turned his narrowed eyes on the agents. Taking a deep breath, he grabbed the back of Joe’s shirt and hoisted him to his feet with a force that left the man teetering. Nick couldn’t quite read Joe’s face as the man stumbled slightly before righting himself.

“Let’s go, Joe.” Nick took a step behind Joe and headed around the table towards the door, only to find it blocked by Chubby’s wide body when he got there.

“Sit down, Nicholas.” Baldy stood up next to him.

“No, if you’ll excuse me, *please*, we are leaving.” Nick took a step forward and Chubby mirrored his movements. They stood chest-to-chest. Nick glared down at the man. “You need to move.”

“I am not moving,” the man replied. “You are going into protective custody. This is not something you can refuse.”

Nick’s nostrils flared, his heart hammered. He bent down the two inches so his gaze was direct. “Let. Me. Pass.” Nick felt Joe come up behind him. The hair on his neck stood up, whether it was caused by the adrenaline or Joe’s hot breath, Nick couldn’t tell. He would think about it later. Right then, the only thing he could focus on was the portly man in front of him and his bald little partner.

“No.”

Nick stepped to the side. If the man wouldn't move, Nick would simply go around him, but Chubby brought his arms up and latched onto Nick's biceps. Nick felt himself being shoved towards the table.

"Hey!" Suddenly Chubby was on the floor. Nick looked up to see Joe standing between them; his feet planted wide, his hands in fists hanging rigidly at his sides. "Hands off, asshole!"

Joe's hand reached back, grasping for Nick's hoodie. "You all right, Nick?"

Was he all right? Shit. "Um, yeah. I'm okay." His voice was shakier than he'd wanted it to be. Nick pushed off the table, took a step to the side, and walked around Joe to the door. He turned around and looked at the scene he was leaving. His father sat there, gaze steady. He understood and was okay. His mother's eyes bounced between the agent on the floor and Nick. Her mouth hung open, for once it appeared she really didn't know what to think.

"We'll be in touch." Joe's voice had an ice to it that Nick never wanted to hear directed at him. "Professor, Judge Daniels." Joe gave a curt nod and, stepping over Chubby on the floor, made his way to stand behind Nick. Nick got the door open and took a step when Chubby found his voice.

"Listen, you stupid fa—Nick. You cannot leave. We can, and will, hold you as a material witness if you refuse to cooperate."

Nick stopped so fast, Joe bumped into him and bounced off. He turned back towards the room. Joe looked him square in the eye, and Nick knew he was silently asking, "*You okay? Got this?*" Nick gave him an imperceptible nod and he knew Joe understood. Joe reached up and gave his forearm a light squeeze and stepped to the side, allowing Nick to go back into the tiny room.

Nick's parents were on their feet, looking at both agents with their jaws set. Chubby had made his way upright. His face was beet red. If the man breathed any harder, Nick thought he might have a heart attack. Nick felt like helping him get there.

"First of all, *sir*, I may not be studying criminal law, but I know for a fact that putting your hands on me and pushing me are both grounds for an assault

charge, federal officer or not.” The man opened his mouth to speak, but Nick raised his finger and put it in the man’s face, effectively silencing him. Holding the man’s gaze, Nick continued, his voice steady. “Secondly, I *am*, however, studying civil rights law. And trying to detain me would be a violation of my rights as an American citizen. I am not a material witness; I am a target, a victim. I have no knowledge of the perpetrator beyond what I’ve just been told by you, nor do I have any information pertaining to the bombing of my car, beyond the fact that my Audi is now scrap metal. So if you even think about holding me as a material witness I can guarantee a lawsuit so big, this room will seem like a lovely Hawaiian timeshare compared to the cubicle you will be stuck in. And lastly...” Nick paused a moment, stood up straight before lifting his chin and jutting out a hip and placing a hand on it. He leaned over the man who seemed to be shrinking in front of him. He let his voice go high as he channeled his inner RuPaul. *Fuck that inner goddess crap from fifty-whatever-it-was.*

“Lastly, I have been called every name in the book. Twink, fairy, poof, pansy, sword-swallower, pickle-chugger, shit-stabber, butt boy, and *fag*. Among others. Sticks and stones, sweetheart, sticks and stones. If you are going to insult me, be fucking original, you bigoted fat cow cunt.” For emphasis, Nick added two snaps up, turned on his heel and sashayed to the door. “Let’s go darling.” He put his hand on Joe’s arm and looked up at him with a smirk and batting eyelashes. Joe’s face was red, obviously trying to hold back the laughter, his blue eyes were smiling down and Nick could see the tears threatened to spill over.

“But of course, darling.” Joe placed his hand over Nick’s on his arm and led them out of the building.

Joe’s head was stretched back against the headrest of the SUV. He couldn’t hold back the laughter anymore. He and Nick had practically run to the car. He wiped the tears from his eyes and looked over at Nick.

“Oh shit man, that was brilliant! You were amazing in there.” Joe smiled down at the man. Nick was curled up on the seat, part of his face covered up

with his hood. “Hey Nicky, you can’t tell me you don’t realize how perfect that was?”

Nick pulled the hood away from his eyes and peeked out. His face was bright red. Joe could see the corners of his lips turned up. “I shouldn’t have called him fat.”

Joe chuckled and shook his head. “You called the man a cow cunt, but you’re more embarrassed because you called him fat?”

“Well, it was rude. And unoriginal. And...”

“And true.” Joe cut him off. He reached over and pulled the hood all the way back so he could see Nick’s face. “You dressed him up and down, and he deserved every bit of it.”

“But I’m not like that. I know I act like I’m all into appearances and things, but I’ve never been one to look down on someone because they’ve got some extra weight on them. It’s as bad as making fun of someone ’cause of their ethnicity or they have a big nose. It’s part of who they are, not how they act.”

“Okay. I hear what you’re saying. But that doesn’t change the fact that the guy had it coming. He had you all labeled in a box as soon as you walked in there. And as soon as you stepped over his predetermined line, he let his ugliness out. And you took that ugliness and just threw it back at him. You were just a mirror. Only a mirror that was a lot smarter than he was.” Joe smiled. “Remind me not to piss you off by the way.”

“I was going to say the same thing to you.” Nick sat up a little straighter, though he was still hunched down a bit. Nick’s smile had grown. It was a nervous smile, but it was real. “Damn, what did you do to him?”

“Well, he pushed you, so I pushed him back. He was out of line. I put him back in it.” Joe looked over at Nick. “That’s what I do, Nick. It’s my job.”

Joe wasn’t sure, but he thought Nick’s smile dimmed a bit. Then Nick looked up at him, his face suddenly serious. Whatever laughter had been lingering was gone. “So, Anthony Harris.”

“Yes, Anthony Harris.”

“What do we do now, Joe? I pretty much just told the FBI to fuck off, so what happens now?” Nick shoved his hands in the front pocket of the hoodie and looked out the window at the street.

“Now, we do what we have to do to keep you safe. They’ll catch Harris. Regardless of what just went down in there. I have a feeling your mother is currently giving the whole Bureau an earful.”

“But how is this going to work? Where is safe? This guy could be anywhere. He knows where I live, where I shop. He might know about you by now.”

“Yeah, I know that.” Joe looked at Nick before reaching into the back seat and grabbing a silver briefcase. “This is my kit. It has all kinds of things that I might need while on the job.” Popping the case open, he pulled out a small device. “Here, take this. You probably won’t like it, but carry it on you, somewhere that might not be found if something happens and you get searched.”

A mischievous grin spread across Nick’s face. Joe’s face got warmer. “No, Nick, don’t shove it up your ass. Try your shoe.”

“What is it?” Nick asked, inspecting the flat square.

“It’s a tracking device. If anything should happen and we get separated, this will let me know where to find you. Just push that button and it will turn on. Your location will get sent to my phone.”

“Where did you get this thing? Do they have like the super spy store here in Chicago?”

Joe rolled his eyes. “Nick, nowadays you can buy a personal tracking device at Best Buy.”

Looking in the case, Joe pulled out a cell phone, a credit card, and a set of keys. He left the Glock where it was. “Here, I know it’s not as nice as the one you’re used to, it’s only a burner phone. But just in case. My number is already programmed in. Now, let’s go catch a cab.”

“Huh? Why do we need a cab?” Nick’s brow was wrinkled in confusion.

“We need a different car. We’d probably know by now if they’ve seen this one, but I’m not going to take the chance. We’ll head to my office and pick up one of the company cars. One that can’t be traced back to me. Then we’ll find a hotel and hole up for the time being. To be honest, I probably should have taken you to one last night, but I didn’t think walking in bleeding, with my jeans shredded in a very non-fashionable way, would be the best of ideas. And I didn’t have any first aid supplies in my car. You ready?” Joe raised his eyes from the case and looked over at Nick. He looked like he’d just run a marathon, completely exhausted, just slumped down. “Hey, you okay?”

Nick turned his head to look at Joe, still resting it on the headrest. “Yeah, Joe, I’m fine. Thanks. Let’s go.”

Joe couldn’t help thinking that Nick was lying.

Nick looked up at the sky. It was all grey, dismal, and seemed appropriate to him. They’d been at the hotel for two uneventful days. Under any different circumstances, he’d probably be happy to be stuck in a hotel room with Joe. But Joe had been tense and closed off since they’d arrived. When Nick asked what was wrong, Joe said he was just doing his job. He had to stay focused. *This was Joe’s job, you are just a job.* Nick frowned as he realized that at some point along the way, he’d let himself forget that. And it was obvious that Joe hadn’t and didn’t want to either.

Joe hadn’t smiled since they’d left the FBI office. That smile that made his whole face light up and his eyes twinkle. That smile that made Nick’s belly warm and made him want to smile himself. Nick wanted to see it again. Wanted to know he was the reason for it. *It’s just his job, Nick. Stop deluding yourself into thinking a man like Joe could want a twink like you.*

A twink that had already caused enough trouble for him. He knew Anthony Harris was ultimately responsible for everything, but if Nick hadn’t been a brat and had just cooperated from the get-go, the car might have never blown up. The backs of Joe’s legs might not look like he’d had a run-in with a three foot tall Freddy Kruger, and they might not be stuck in some airport hotel waiting

for Agents Cow Cunt and Baldy to nail down Anthony Harris. Then Joe would go on to the next client and Nick would go back to life as usual. Nick sighed as he let the curtain fall, turned back into the room, and flopped face down on top of the bed with a groan.

“You okay, Nick?” Joe asked from his seat at the tiny hotel desk.

“I’m fine.” Nick replied, his voice muffled by the pillow.

Nick felt the bed dip and a warm hand on his shoulder, gently lifting it up. “Look at me, Nick.” Joe’s voice was soft and soothing. Nick turned his head and peeked up at him through his long bangs. Joe’s blue eyes looked down at him, his head bent at an angle so it was parallel to Nick’s. “You’ve been *fine* for two days. Want to talk about it?”

Nick wanted to say something. Wanted to say that something was going on inside of him that he didn’t quite understand. That every time he looked up and saw Joe looking at him, butterflies swarmed around his stomach. That every time Joe sat at that desk with his brow furrowed, Nick just wanted to walk over and kiss it away.

But he knew the response he would get and he knew he wouldn’t like it.

“No, really I’m fine, really,” Nick lied. It was better than hearing some lecture about how it’s normal to form attachments in situations of extreme pressure, but in the long run, those feelings don’t last. *No, Nick, you’re only feeling this way because we’ve been stuck together for days. Really. As soon as this is over, you can head back to school and to the clubs...* Nick didn’t want to think anymore about what Joe would say to him if he confessed.

“I don’t believe you, Nick.” Joe gently patted his shoulder and leaned back against the headboard. Nick turned his head the other way and closed his eyes. He felt Joe’s hand rub back and forth trying to comfort him. Nick felt that warmth spread through him. Suddenly he was incredibly thankful he was lying on his stomach. *Shit. I shouldn’t be getting wood from a guy rubbing my shoulder like I was a little kid who’d just lost his baseball game. He’s just trying to comfort me, not get me off. So why the fuck does it feel like there’s an electrical current running from my shoulder to my dick?*

“Ugh.” Nick couldn’t stop the word from coming out of his mouth. “Thanks Joe, but really, I’m all right. Just can’t wait for all this to be over.” Then maybe he could forget his brutal Viking.

With a final pat that seemed a bit harder than the others, Nick felt the mattress pop up abruptly. He turned his head back and saw Joe was sitting back at the desk staring at the phone. “Soon enough Nick. This will all be over soon enough. Um, do you need anything? I think I’m going to take a shower.”

“No...”

“I know, you’re fine.” Joe looked over his shoulder at Nick and gave him a small smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

Fuck. Fuck. Shit. Goddamned. Fuck. Jesus, Joe, pull yourself together. Joe braced his hands against the bathroom counter and looked up at himself in the mirror. He looked like shit. He hadn’t exactly been sleeping the past couple of nights. Both nights, they’d laid down, each in their respective beds, and each night all Joe had been able to do is stare up at the dark ceiling, listening to the beautiful man breathe and wishing he was in bed next to him feeling his weight draped over his chest.

Joe spun around and turned the shower on. He shed his clothes, leaving them in a pile on the floor and stepped in, letting the hot water run down over his face, hoping maybe it would clear his head out. He hadn’t laughed as hard as he did after Nick’s showdown with Agent Cow Cunt in years. Probably not since Aaron. He missed Aaron. He knew if Aaron were there right then, he’d kick Joe’s ass. Tell him to man up. Fuck the job—well, not really. Protect Nick, but stop acting like he was doing it because it’s his job, because it was certainly more than that. Joe figured that out the minute the door to the hotel room closed. He’d turned around to say something to Nick and couldn’t remember what the fuck it was, because he was overcome by a very sudden and very strong urge to take the man and throw him up against the door and kiss the ever-living life out of him. Nick with his dark hair that fell over his hazel eyes. The hazel eyes that seemed to swirl around, changing color from

golden brown to green and back again depending on his mood. Nick, with that lithe body and that gorgeous ass.

The thought of that ass, the one that had shimmied up the pole in the club, the one that had been proudly displayed in his bathroom, that ass was enough to send Joe's hand straight down to his cock. *Jesus Lord*. He hadn't jerked off in days. He didn't think he could and still look Nick in the eye.

But as he stood in the shower, he didn't care. He stroked his shaft from the base to the tip, and then gave it a twist. He closed his eyes. In his mind he could see Nick kneeling in front of him. The water plastered the man's dark hair to his forehead as he took Joe's cock in his hands. Joe's stroke grew faster. Nick licked his lips; his pupils were blown out, leaving only a thin rim of golden green around them. Joe braced his shoulders against the shower wall. The grip on his cock got tighter as he slowly moved his hand up and down.

Nick looked up at him and Joe brought his other hand and ran it over his rigid belly before continuing up to pinch his nipple. First one, then the other. Giving a slight tug before running it back over his stomach and down to cup his balls. He squeezed gently a couple times and then gave them a rough tug. He bit his lip to silence the groan that threatened to escape. He stroked his cock faster as he felt Nick pushing that tight body up against him, chest-to-chest, thigh-to-thigh, cock-to-cock. *Oh God*. Faster. Tighter. Harder. Frantically, he pulled and stroked and twisted. His balls pulled up tight and he took the hand that had been massaging them and moved it around his hip to glide lightly down the crease of his ass. He squeezed his eyes tight and he could taste the blood on his lip where his teeth pressed down so hard they broke through the skin. Nick wrapped his arms around him. He pushed his middle finger into his hole and twisted the tip of his cock. Nick kissed him. Licking his lips, sucking his tongue, Joe's world went white, his body spasming in orgasm, as he shot ribbons of cum across the shower. He continued to slowly stroke himself until his balls were drained, then slid down the wall and curled up into a ball on the floor of the tub.

Joe opened his eyes. His vision blurred from the water that fell over them as he leaned his head against the wall and stared at the ugly green tile surrounding him as he sat alone in the bathroom while a beautiful man lay on a bed in the next room. He hugged his legs up tight to his chest. He knew what he *should* do. He knew what he *wanted* to do. But he had absolutely no fucking clue what to *actually* do.

Shit.

“Did you not hear me the first time? I said, ‘NO FUCKING WAY!’”

Nick opened his eyes and found himself staring at the hotel wall. He’d been roused from a very non-restful sleep by a very pissed-off Joe, who was on the phone with someone who obviously had not heard him the first time. Nick rolled over, snuggled down in his pillow and looked over at the blond man.

Joe stood at the desk facing away from where Nick lay. His shoulders were pulled back and tense. One hand gripped the phone so tightly his knuckles were white, the other flexed in and out of a fist as it hung rigidly at his side. He hadn’t bandaged the gash on his neck and it wrinkled as he moved his head up and down as if to emphasize the words he was saying. Nick thought it must hurt but Joe was probably too worked up to realize it.

“No. Absolutely not. Listen, it’s your job to find Harris. My job is to protect Nick.” Nick closed his eyes and inhaled through his nose. *His job.*

“Just because you can’t manage to do your job does not mean...” Whoever was on the other end of the phone must have interrupted, because Joe stopped. Nick could see the bone of Joe’s jaw popping out. *He really needed to stop grinding his teeth.*

“Can you guarantee me that absolutely no harm will come to him...?” Joe turned and raised his eyebrows. “Then I stand by my first answer. No fucking way. You are not going to use him as fucking bait because you can’t get the guy. You know his name, his associates, and his last known address for Christ’s sake. Get off your asses and go find the man. We live in the

motherfucking twenty-first century, I'm sure there is some technology available to the almighty FBI that can help you locate Anthony Harris."

Nick took another deep breath. He was tired. He was tired of this hotel room. He was tired of hiding. He felt like a coward. He pushed the covers off him and swung his feet down onto the floor.

"Give me the phone, Joe," Nick said, keeping his voice low as he held out his hand.

Joe shook his head and mouthed, "No."

"Give me the phone." Nick's voice was louder than he'd intended it to be, but it made Joe pause.

"You sure?" Joe's brow was furrowed again. Nick just nodded his head and kept his hand held out until he felt the phone pressed into it.

Nick put the phone to his ear. "Hello? This is Nicholas Daniels."

There was an audible sigh of relief from the man on the other end of line. Joe had started pacing, muttering a curse when he ran his hand through his hair and it hit the gash on his neck. *Again.*

"Nicholas, my name is Craig Anderson. I'm an agent with the FBI, Chicago Division, and I've taken over the Anthony Harris case from Agent Murphy."

"Who's Agent Murphy?"

"Agent Cow Cunt."

Nick blushed. "Oh." Nick pushed the embarrassment aside. He wanted to get to the point. "What do you need Agent Anderson?"

"We've been running down leads on Mr. Harris, and unfortunately it appears the man has gone to ground, so to speak. We need to draw him out."

Nick looked up at Joe. The man had stopped and stood still leaning against the wall closest to Nick's bed. "And you need me to do that." It wasn't a question.

“Yes Nicholas, we need you. We would like you to come out of hiding. Hopefully, in doing so, it will lure Anthony Harris out and we will be able to apprehend him.”

Nick looked up at Joe again. The man shook his head, his eyes pleading with Nick. But Nick was done. He just wanted it over. Nick looked down at the floor before he straightened his shoulders and took a deep breath.

“Okay.”

“No.” Joe looked pissed. Joe *was* pissed. Nick ignored him.

“What do you want me to do?” Nick held his voice firm. He listened as the agent gave him instructions before he gave an affirmative reply and disconnected the call. Nick placed the phone on the bed next to him. In a voice just slightly above a whisper, he uttered, “I have to be at the condo at two o’clock.”

Nick blew out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding and looked up. Joe was standing there with his feet apart, his face red. Nick could see a vein in the man’s temple throbbing and the tendons in his neck were pulled taut.

“Joe...”

“Nick, do you have any idea what you just agreed to do? Any clue at all?” Joe’s voice was strained and he rubbed on his neck but didn’t curse this time. Nick figured he was too pissed off to feel it.

“Yes, Joe. I know what I agreed to.”

Joe continued as if Nick hadn’t said anything. “They are going to parade you around and wait for Harris to make his move, hoping that they have people in the right places. You are going to be in the open. And *I* won’t be there. As soon as we get to your place, they’re taking charge and I am being dismissed. I don’t trust them, Nick. And three days ago you didn’t either. What the hell are you thinking? What the fuck changed?” Joe sank down to the floor, his back pressed against the wall, his arms resting on his knees. Looking down at his hands, he inhaled deeply, before turning his eyes to Nick and tilting his head. His voice was soft and rough. “What’s going on, Nick? What

changed your mind? Can you please explain it to me? Explain what you're thinking."

Nick couldn't help himself; he leaned forward and placed his hand on top of Joe's. "I'm thinking I want this over. I know it hasn't been all that long. We've only been here for three days. But what if three days becomes three weeks, months. When does it stop, Joe? I have school, friends."

"You have a future. A future you could be throwing away by agreeing to this. What if something happens to you?"

"Then something happens. At least it will be over." Nick blew his bangs out of his face and took a moment to collect his thoughts. "Joe, I can't stay in this room anymore. I want my family safe. I want this to be over. One way or another. It's not like I want something to happen to me. But I'm tired of sitting here hiding away not doing anything. I've made my decision."

Nick squeezed Joe's hand gently before he got up off the bed to go get ready. He ignored the very tight feeling in his chest and the intense urge to vomit.

Joe gripped the wheel of the car, his knuckles white. He'd been trying to come up with an alternative plan. Some way to keep Nick from going through with this. He hadn't completely ruled out the idea of turning the car around and heading to O'Hare and catching the next plane out. He didn't think dragging Nick through the terminal bound and gagged would work out so well.

He pulled up next to a parking meter, amazed to have found street parking at this time of day. He didn't want Nick to face the parking garage again. They sat in silence less than two blocks away from Nick's building as he turned the ignition off. They'd barely spoken since they'd left the hotel. *Hell, we've barely spoken in the past three days.* Three days of dodging Nick's looks, answering any questions with a simple word or two. Beyond that, Joe pretended to be busy most of the time. Afraid to look at the man for fear his

body would give into what it wanted instead of doing what his brain told him he was supposed to do.

Joe sighed, still facing forward. “You sure about this? We don’t have to go in. We can go somewhere, not the hotel, anywhere you want and figure out a plan.”

“I’m sure, Joe. Really.” The words struck a place in his heart that he’d forgotten he’d had.

All right then, let’s get this over with. Joe threw open the door and made his way around to the front of the car, meeting Nick as he stepped up on the sidewalk. Joe’s eyes scanned the area, coffee shop, and hotel. Nothing was necessarily outside of the norm, though he doubted it would appear so on the surface anyway. He put his arm around Nick’s back to usher him quickly into the back door of the high-rise. The weight of the gun in the back of his waistband made him feel slightly better, but he couldn’t shake the nerves.

They made their way through the back entrance to the service elevator, where Nick pushed the button and they stood waiting for it to arrive. Joe looked over at the younger man. He was still wearing Joe’s hoodie. It warmed Joe; he liked seeing Nick in his clothes, but they so weren’t the man’s style. He couldn’t hold back the soft chuckle that escaped through his lips.

“What?” Nick looked over at him, questioning. “What’s so funny?”

“If nothing else, it’ll be a relief to be able to choose clothes out of your own closet.”

Nick looked down at himself, as if he’d forgotten about his clothes. A soft pink colored his cheeks and a small smile turned up on his lips. “Oh, shit. Sorry man. Let me give this back to you.”

“No, no. Keep it. It looks good on you.” Joe smirked.

“Liar.” Nick elbowed him in the ribs and Joe winced.

“Hey now. Stop beating on the old man.” Joe heard the ding of a bell and watched as the doors to the elevator opened. Nick straightened himself up and

stepped inside, looking straight ahead, and Joe followed him in and watched him hit the button for his floor.

“I didn’t fuck my professor.” Nick was looking at the floor.

“Huh?”

“I wasn’t fucking my professor when I missed the meeting at my parents. I had to meet with my advisor to explain the situation, tell him that I might need to withdraw for a semester.” Nick’s voice was soft when he spoke.

Joe wanted to hug him. “Nick, you don’t have to apologize or explain. I have no right to judge you for the choices you make.”

“I know, but I wanted you to know.”

“Thank you. Thanks for telling me.”

“You’re welcome. And I’ll get your sweatshirt back to you.”

“Keep it. Maybe you can dye it purple.”

Nick looked up at him with a sad smile. Just then the elevator jostled to a stop and the doors opened. Nick walked straight out and into the corridor, and suddenly Joe couldn’t breathe. Just a few seconds, and Nick would be walking into the less than capable hands of the FBI and out of Joe’s life. *Shit, fuck damn it all.* Joe jumped out of the elevator before the doors could close on him and took two hastened steps.

He reached out his hand to touch Nick’s arm just as he was pulling out his keys. “Wait a minute, Nick. Hold on.”

“Oh, the sweatshirt...”

“Damn it, Nick. This isn’t about the hoodie. I want to talk to you, for just a minute. Please.”

Nick turned and looked at Joe. His hazel eyes were doing that swirling thing that Joe had realized he liked so much. His teeth were nibbling at his bottom lip, and Joe wished those were his teeth doing the nibbling. *Get a grip, Joe.* He tightened his grip on Nick’s arm ever so slightly, dragged him over to

a sofa outside the elevators and sat down next to him. “Sit down a sec. I need to talk to you before you go in there.”

“Okay, I guess we have a couple minutes. It’s not like they’re going to start without me, right?” Nick wore a smile that didn’t reach his eyes and his shoulders were slumped. O’Hare was looking better and better.

“Look at me, Nick.” Joe turned his upper body and Nick mirrored his actions. “Okay. Now, I don’t know what is going to happen after you walk through that door, but if anything, and I mean anything goes haywire, or makes you uncomfortable, if you need anything at all, I want you to call me. I’ll come. I don’t care what time it is, day or night. Okay?”

Nick shook his head. “I’ll be fine Joe. I get to that door and your job is over. You can be done with me and my antics. Don’t worry about it, really.”

What? “My job? Nicky, what are you talking about?” *My job? Antics?* “Where is this coming from?”

“I don’t know. I mean, hopefully, I go in there, they do whatever it is they have planned. They catch Harris. I go back to school, you move on to another client, one that’s probably more cooperative and less work than me.” Nick shrugged his shoulders and turned his head towards the elevator doors. “That’s what’s supposed to happen, right?” *Was that what Nick thought? Really thought.* Realization hit him. Joe had been so paranoid about crossing some line, that he completely alienated Nick. Made the man feel like he was some burden that Joe had been putting up with. Made him feel unwanted. Like he was just a job. *Shit.*

Joe had had enough. “Yes that’s what’s supposed to happen. But that isn’t *all* that should happen.” Joe grabbed Nick’s chin and turned the man’s face so it was square with his, making sure he couldn’t turn away. “There’s a lot that should happen. You are not just a job. You haven’t been just a job for days. And you have never, ever, been a burden.” Joe squeezed Nick’s chin a little tighter and let his eyes bore down on him, trying to convey everything he wanted to say but couldn’t. Nick’s eyes were uncertain. Joe could feel him trying to move his head, but he held firm. “When this is over, you and I are

going to talk. But right now, I need you to promise me, please, that if anything happens you will call me. Can you promise me that, Nick?" Joe let go of Nick's chin. He couldn't say anymore, not with the FBI around the corner. Not when Nick needed to focus on staying safe, so they would have time to have that conversation. Joe exhaled roughly. Nick sat there. Still and silent. "Nick?"

"Yes Joe. I promise. I'll call. I'd better get in there." Nick's voice was a whisper, as he started to rise.

Joe felt a lump rise in his throat. His stomach felt like it was going to lose its contents. He'd said the words he'd needed to say, the ones that could be said. Now Nick was walking away from him. If the FBI screwed up, it could be the last time. Joe's body was moving before he could process what he was doing. He grabbed Nick's arm and twirled him around, clutching him close. Chest-to-chest, thigh-to-thigh. Joe's hand pressed into the small of the man's back.

Nick's eyes were wide as Joe lowered his head those few inches. Joe let his eyes drift shut as he pressed his lips against Nick's and let his lips say all the other words he couldn't. He felt Nick's body relax and push into his. Warmth spread from his lips, all through his body, his cock twitched and filled.

The kiss was slow and gentle. Lips gliding over each other, learning the landscape. Joe nipped at that bottom lip he'd been eyeing earlier, and then licked away the hurt. He was rewarded with what sounded like a soft whimper. His hands roamed up between the hoodie and Nick's T-shirt, slowly exploring the feel of those muscles he'd been admiring for days. He groaned as he remembered that they were out of time. He pulled his lips away and kissed his way down the man's neck.

"God." He breathed out the word as he placed his forehead on Nick's shoulder and brought his hands down to settle on his hips, still under the hoodie.

Nick leaned back, forcing Joe to raise his head. He raised his hand up and Joe felt a single finger run down his cheek to his jaw and watched Nick's eyes

as they followed it before returning to stare into Joe's. "What was that for?" Nick whispered.

Joe let out an amused sigh. "Luck." With reluctance, Joe stepped back, releasing Nick who had taken that finger and was brushing it across that delectable bottom lip of his, and shook his head slightly like he was trying to solve a puzzle.

"Luck. Huh?"

"Luck, Nicky. Luck." Joe gave him a small smile as he reached out and took Nick's hand in his. He turned and took a step towards Nick's apartment but was yanked back and straight into Nick's arms. There was no confusion in the look that Joe was receiving. Nick was serious. Focused.

Nick's voice rumbled. "This one is for me."

Joe's lips were under attack, a vicious desperate, sexy attack. Nick's teeth were tugging at his lips, his tongue pressing for entry, and Joe's parted willingly. Tongues entwined, caressing, stabbing. There was nothing gentle in this kiss. This kiss was all Nicky. Joe felt the man's hands reach up under his shirt, and he tightened his own hands around Nick's waist and let them glide down and grab that fine ass like they'd wanted to for days. One of Nick's hands slipped under Joe's shirt. One traveled up and stroked the skin over his shoulder tickling at his back and the other one pinched and twisted his nipple.

The groan that emerged from Joe's throat was quickly swallowed. Joe moved one hand up to Nick's head and tangled his fingers in his hair, then pulled. Nick whimpered again. Where his cock had given acknowledgement before, now it was standing up and saluting for all its worth. Joe could feel Nick's erection pressing against his thigh, and he wished more than anything there was a broom closet handy where he could sink to the floor and suck that cock down his throat.

The click of a door brought him back down to earth. With one last nip of the man's lip, Joe stepped back. Nick looked straight at him; the swirls in his eyes were back, along with a mischievous glint.

"Nicholas Daniels?"

Still looking at Joe, gaze unwavering, Nick responded, “Yes.”

Joe’s mouth turned up and jerked his head, indicating that Nick should turn around.

The man was attractive, tall with broad muscular shoulders. He wore a grey suit with a blue tie that set off the blue in his eyes. *I fucking hate him.* Joe gave him a nod and a tight-lipped smile. “Mr. Madsen, I assume?”

“Yes.”

“Hi, I’m Agent Craig Andersen. We spoke on the phone.”

“Can we see your ID, please?” The please was forced. But the man handed his ID over, obviously anticipating the question. Joe looked down at it intently, almost wishing he could spot an irregularity so he’d have justification to drag Nick away. The ID was real. Joe sighed as he handed it back.

“Mr. Daniels, why don’t you come into the apartment with me?” The agent reached his hand out to Nick, and Joe had an urge to shoot it off with his gun. Nick looked over his shoulder at Joe, his eyes soft with feeling. Joe tried to smile and failed.

“Thank you for getting him down here, Mr. Madsen. We’ll take it from here.”

Before Joe could open his mouth, the agent had scurried Nick through the door and left Joe staring down an empty, silent hallway.

Nick sat curled up on the end of his sofa facing the two agents. He knew they were talking to him, explaining some plan they had, but the words all swirled around in the air, nothing registering. He wasn’t really there. He was still in the hallway. Still feeling the scratch of Joe’s goatee on his chin. Still feeling the sting of the man’s hand pulling at his hair. The coarse hair of Joe’s chest under his fingertips. The sounds that vibrated from his throat. Still feeling the hard erection against his hip. Mindlessly, he reached up and brushed his fingers over his lips.

“Nicholas?”

“What? Sorry, did I miss something?”

Agent Andersen looked at Nick like he was annoyed. Nick straightened his back and squared his shoulders before crossing one leg over his knee. He smoothed his hands over his leg, and then picked off a piece of imaginary lint. His voice had gone high, when he brought his narrowed eyes down on Agent Andersen. “Can we go over this from the top? I think I missed a couple things. You know how it is. So much going on around me. FBI agents with all their energy, and their big, um, guns. I get a little distracted.” Agent Andersen gave him an eye roll. Nick smiled on the inside.

Whatever.

Joe looked around his yard. It looked pretty good. Grass mowed and raked. Flowerbeds weeded. *Weeded*. He’d never really paid much attention to the perennials before. They’d been left behind by the previous owners. But in the three days since he’d left Nick with the FBI, he had been left with a lot of time. He hadn’t gotten any new clients, and the paperwork and billing hours were caught up.

That first day, he’d watched a movie, or at least pretended to, but after a half an hour, it became clear he wasn’t paying attention and every other man that appeared on the screen looked like Nick. That’s when Joe realized he needed a new plan. So he moved on to physical labor. He felt tired. He took a deep breath through his nose and coughed when he realized the stench he smelled was coming from him.

He headed into the shower, where he promised himself he wouldn’t think about Nick. He ended up breaking that promise.

Nick hurt—again. His head hurt. His shoulders hurt. Everything hurt. He was dimly aware of someone moving about in the room, but his eyes felt too heavy to open. He knew he was sitting down, but he couldn’t move. His arms were tied behind him, whatever was binding them, cutting into his wrists. His legs were bound together. He knew he needed to focus, figure out a plan. Since

the FBI's plan obviously didn't turn out so well. *Don't provoke your captor.* He thought he'd read that in a book once. Made sense, though he was pretty sure his captor was, at this point, provoked by his sheer existence.

Nick tried to open his eyes, only to shut them quickly when he saw the fist that was barreling towards his face. His head was snapped back and his eye felt like it was going to pop. *Shit.*

"I know you're awake." His head was snapped the other way, this time it felt like a backhand.

"Open your eyes, you little faggot."

Nick forced his eyes open.

"Well, hello, there. I was wondering when you'd join the party."

Nick looked back down at the floor, praying the spinning would stop. His world spun more when the fist connected with his nose and blood started pouring out and down onto his jeans.

Okay. Just need to last long enough for someone to find me. I can handle punches. If it hurts, I'm not dead.

His head felt heavy, despite the recent loss of blood through his nose. He struggled to lift it up but couldn't, so he raised his eyes instead. The first thing he saw was a broad chest covered by a brown T-shirt, as his eyes slowly traveled up, he saw a thick neck with straining tendons, and then the sneer and cold blue eyes. Anthony Harris.

The man in front of him bent his knees so his eyes were level with Nick's. "Having some trouble there? Well, I'd say it'll get easier, but I was never one to lie."

Another punch to the face, this time coming from the left instead of the right. *Great, he's ambidextrous.*

"I can tell you, for whatever comfort it might give you, that I'm not going to kill you straight away. I'm going to take my time, like those prison faggots did with my son."

Nick's eyes got wide. An icy tingle went down his spine, and he fought to keep his body still when the urge to pull at the restraints was greater. *Fuck. Please Joe. Find me. Soon.*

“Jared never would have been there if not for your mother. Everyone knows how bad that place is. She could have sent him somewhere else. Hell, the whole thing was rigged from the get-go. Every objection overruled. Evidence not allowed. And your mother was the one responsible. That bitch that birthed you. Jesus, she couldn't even do that right. Look at you, for Christ's sake. Little girly-boy. Way I figure it, I'm doing the world a favor. But know this, none of this would be happening if not for your mother. Everything that happens to you here is because of her.”

None of this would be happening if you weren't so psycho, Anthony Harris. Nick closed his eyes and willed his brain to go somewhere else for a while. He didn't want to listen to the monologue, the psycho's ramblings anymore. He looked up again. Harris had picked up a broom. He looked at Nick, then back to the broom. The man brought his hand up to the top of it and stroked it down the length as his mouth turned up in a wicked smile.

“Oh, yeah, this is going to be fun.”

The last thing Nick saw was the broomstick arcing towards his head, then he felt a sharp pain, and finally, he felt nothing and sunk into blackness.

Where the fuck are you, Nicky? Joe looked down at his phone and then out into the stretch of dirt road that was closer to a hiking trail ahead of him. Nothing but the Wisconsin wilderness on either side of him. Nick was here somewhere. He was close. The tracker indicated he was within a half mile, though it was only accurate to about a hundred yards. Joe kept scanning as the SUV bumped along. *Come on, come on.*

Two hours ago, he'd just gotten out of the shower when his phone buzzed at him. He picked it up and his heart sank when he saw it wasn't a call he was receiving, but the tracking beacon. Nick had activated it. Thank Christ he still had it. Joe had been out the door sixty seconds later. He texted the FBI when

he'd gotten into the car. The tracker had Nick north of Naperville and that's where Joe started, following along as the location refreshed and changed until it finally came to a stop, in the middle of Wisconsin's back woods.

Joe felt like crawling out of his skin. His nerves were on end. Nick was close, the tracker said so. The only things visible were trees and darkness. His knuckles were white where they gripped the steering wheel. Bumping along the road, he saw it. The tiniest of lights shimmered in the dark. Joe switched off his headlights and drove a bit further until he could make out the slight outline of a barn, still some distance away. He pulled over and turned off the ignition. He climbed out, grabbed his gun and slid it into his waistband. He patted his ankle, making sure his knife was still there before closing the door ever so quietly. He took a second to text the FBI; they'd be pissed, but fuck them, he wouldn't need to be here if they had done their jobs to begin with. He turned and headed towards the light.

Joe heard Anthony Harris before he saw him. He crouched low and slowly approached the closest window. It was dirty with years of grime, but through it he could see a broad man pacing and gesturing towards the back wall. He could only assume that was where Nick was. There were no other people visible, no other voices beyond Harris's. Joe stayed in his crouch as he approached the front of the barn. He needed to confirm who was in the barn and figure out the best way to go in.

Nick was roused from unconsciousness. He didn't know how long he'd been out, but however long it was, he was thankful for it. It didn't feel like Harris had done anything more to him in that time. His head hurt like a bitch. He shifted his legs and found them stiff but unbound. The relief dissipated when he realized there was a rope around his neck and his shirt was gone. Panic hit. His breaths came fast and shallow as he looked up to see Harris smiling down at him.

"Now the real fun begins." The menacing sound of his voice made Nick wish he were still unconscious.

Nick pulled at his arms, testing the bonds at his wrists, but there was no give and only caused the rope to cut into his skin. His eyes got wide as he moved his head around to take in his surroundings. It looked like an old barn. The floor was dirt, and old planks made up the walls. Exposed beams lined the length of the room, and screwed into the one directly above his head, Nick realized with an intensified dread, there was a pulley with a rope threaded through it. A rope that was wrapped around Nick's neck. His heart beat faster as he turned his head to follow the other end of the rope, only to have it stop all together when he saw the other end of the rope wrapped around what looked like a winch. Nick couldn't stop the trembling that overtook his body.

Harris moved over to a table that stood on his left. Slowly, he skimmed his hands across the items laid upon it, almost like a hostess from a game show. Nick saw the broom from earlier, a beer bottle, and a couple of knives.

"It's amazing what you can find in an old barn. There's usually a lot of junk, but every now and again, you can find a real treasure."

Nick's stomach churned when Harris's hand stopped to hover over a long metal stick with a U-shaped end and a blue handle. *A cattle prod.* Harris picked it up and pressed a button. The thing buzzed with electricity and a flicker of light jumped between the two prongs. Nick lost the battle with his stomach and vomited its contents all over his lap. *Oh God, please help me.*

Harris walked around behind him. Nick couldn't see what he was doing. All he knew was that the man still had the cattle prod in his hands. He heard a click and a stream of metallic creaks, before the rope started tensing up from his neck. His neck was stretched up and then he was pulled up onto his feet. He heard another click. The motor silenced leaving Nick standing on his toes, struggling for balance to prevent the noose around his neck from tightening. He heard the buzz of the prod again and cringed. The action caused his body to crunch and the rope to tighten. Nick tried to regain his footing, and when he finally did, he drew in a rough breath.

"You see, Nicholas, my son was a good son, a dutiful one. A father couldn't ask for more than Jared." Anthony Harris's voice was cold and it scared Nick more than anything. Nick could hear the man's footsteps as he

came round to face him. “But that was all taken away from me, and your mother was the cause. She sent him to that place. And then those prison faggots raped him. Held him down, shoved their dicks in his ass, ignored him as he screamed. And the guards, they were no better, they could’ve helped. They had to have known, yet they did nothing, and my son, after having been raped and beaten, ended up hanging from a bed sheet. Do you know how angry that makes me? Can you imagine what it is like for me to think about what he went through?”

Harris looked at the cattle prod and then back, straight into Nick’s eyes that were wide with terror. “Maybe you can. And if not, you will. Everything my son felt, you will feel. That is a promise. Don’t worry though. I have no intentions of putting my dick anywhere near your filthy faggot ass. I have other things planned.”

The man took a step closer towards him and Nick tried to draw back, but the rope around his neck wouldn’t let him. Gripping the prod in one hand, Harris reached the other one out and flicked the button on Nick’s jeans. Nick’s heart beat erratically, faster and faster, as Harris stepped back around Nick, out of his view. He felt the man grab at his jeans and boxers and pull them down to his ankles, effectively binding his feet again.

No, no, no, no, no! Oh God. No! Please. God. No! The words went round and round in his head, his mouth worked the words, but his voice wouldn’t come. As if it knew that to make a sound would only further the man’s fury. He felt the metal prongs dragging lines along his calf and up past his thigh. He clamped his eyes shut and prayed to whoever might be listening to just turn off his brain and his body. He willed the unconsciousness to come back but it wouldn’t, and he jumped when the cattle prod scratched up the crease of his ass. He heard the man behind him draw a breath. Nick’s whole body tensed.

A loud metallic sound started and Nick jerked forward, the rope cutting off his airway. He felt a deep scratch moving up his back and he was jerked again when the most intense pain he’d ever felt radiated from the center of his spine. He could feel the scream trying to escape but it was literally caught in his throat, and all that came out was a high-pitched squeak. He couldn’t breathe.

That thought sent him into more of a panic. His body jerked again and again. He became unaware of his surroundings as he closed his eyes and focused all his energy as he tried to get his body back under his control. Throwing his shoulders and head, he wrenched himself back, and some of the pressure on his trachea was removed. He inhaled successfully once then twice, and with the second breath, regained his footing and balanced on his feet, naked with the rope around his neck and the pants around his ankles. He took a breath. Sweeter air than he'd ever tasted traveled from his mouth to his lungs. Another breath, and another, and another. Nick savored that sweet taste and momentary peace. Then he opened his eyes.

Joe had felt his heart stop when he'd finally found a hole in the barn wall that let him peer inside. Nick naked, held up by his neck. Anthony Harris walking around him, stalking, prodding with a cattle prod. *Anthony Harris is a dead man*. He needed to get inside, but first he needed to get Harris away from Nick. Away from the winch that would wind the rope tighter around Nick's neck. Get him away before he could do anything with that fucking cattle prod.

Quickly, he turned and let his eyes scan his surroundings. Nothing but weeds surrounded him. An old tractor, long past working he was sure, sat about thirty feet away. At the far corner of the barn past the small door, Joe saw what looked like the edge of an aluminum trash can. He moved closer to see and found not one but two. Joe had to improvise. He tried to tip one of them, but it was heavy. He was only able to tilt it an inch and he heard liquid sloshing around the inside. He grabbed at the other and it moved. Joe sent up a prayer. He bent his knees and lifted it, moving back a few feet and hoisting it as high as he could, throwing it with all his strength into the other can. A loud clanging sound echoed through the trees. And Joe moved.

He pulled the gun from his waistband, flicked the safety off, and took two quick steps to the door just as a strangled, garbled scream came from inside the barn. Joe lifted his leg and kicked the door in, his gun held straight out in front of him. The door bounced off the wall behind it but Joe barely noticed as his

entire focus was on Anthony Harris, who had moved from behind Nick and now stood between them.

“Get on your knees.” Joe stared the man down. His gun was pointed at chest level. Joe managed to keep his voice cold and steady even as his heart was threatening to beat out of his chest. He needed to stay in control. He heard Nick’s labored breaths, but he couldn’t afford to look up at him, knowing the moment he did, his focus would shift, and that might be all Harris needed to get the upper hand.

Harris stood there. His gaze directed at Joe’s, cattle prod still gripped in the hand at his side. He cocked his head and narrowed his eyes, as if he were trying to puzzle out the situation. Joe had the answer, as he put a gentle pressure on the trigger, effectively letting the man know there would be no compromise.

“Get. On. Your. Knees.”

The corner of the man’s mouth turned up slightly. Joe’s brows knit together questioningly, but the other man held his hands out to his sides and his hand loosened slightly on the cattle prod. He made to drop it, but instead, swung his hand back and flung it forward as he charged. Joe squeezed the trigger.

The prod went wide and Anthony Harris fell to the floor, a perfect red circle in the center of his forehead. Brain matter and bone littered the floor. Joe took a deep breath and clicked on the safety of the gun before he tucked it into the back of his pants.

Finally he looked up at Nick, who stood stock still, silent tears running down his cheeks. Joe felt the sting of tears behind his own eyes, and he crossed the barn and bent down to cut the rope using the knife at his ankle. Nick slumped and Joe reached out to gather him in his arms before he could fall.

“I’ve got you, Nick. I’ve got you.” Nick eyes stared at him, through him. His nose was crooked and looked broken. His left eye was swollen, almost shut. Ugly purple bruises were blooming on both sides of his face. Joe

couldn't fight the tears anymore as they ran down, wetting his cheeks. "It's okay, baby. He can't hurt you. No one is ever going to hurt you again. Let me get these ropes off you okay?" Joe saw the tiniest of nods. Gently, he turned Nick around and reached up and loosened the noose before cutting it. He didn't want to have to pull it over Nick's head; he was already traumatized enough. Then Joe sliced through the rope at Nick's wrists and fought to keep his breath silent as he looked at the angry abrasions they had left there. *Oh. Nicky.* He bent down and grabbed the pants at Nick's ankles and gently pulled them up.

His eyes leveled on an ugly gash running from Nick's ass to the middle of his back where it ended in a burn mark left from the cattle prod. Joe leaned over and placed a tender kiss on the wound. Nick's body started shaking, and the sounds of sobs filled the room. Joe wrapped his arms around him and pulled him tight against his body. Anthony Harris got off easy.

"Come on Nicky. Let's get out of here." Joe turned Nick around and tucked his head against into his neck, making sure to keep his body between Nick and the corpse on the floor as he moved them out the door.

Nick lifted his head and took a deep breath through his mouth as soon as they stepped out of the barn. The night was cool on his bare chest. He couldn't breathe through his nose, but he could taste the air on his tongue, and at that moment he could think of nothing better than the taste of fresh pine. He would never take breathing for granted again. He raised his hand to his throat. The skin was rough where the rope had been. He knew there would be ugly bruises there to match the ones on his wrists. His hand traveled from his throat to his face and gently traced around the puffiness, wincing when he went over his nose. It was broken. He probably wouldn't recognize himself if he looked in the mirror right now.

He closed his eyes, letting the night wash over him. He felt the calm of the woods and the sound of a breeze through the trees. He opened his eyes and tilted his head up to look at the sky and the millions of stars shining down. Stars he couldn't see through the city lights of Chicago. He wasn't afraid

anymore. He brought his gaze down to Joe's face. A face filled with concern. His brows were furrowed again, and Nick didn't stop himself from bringing up his hand to smooth them out. He had the urge to smile, so he did.

"Nick? Are you okay?" Joe took his hands and rubbed them up and down Nick's arms. Nick didn't know if Joe did it more to reassure Nick or himself, but he let out a quiet sigh and leaned into the man.

"Nick?" There was a quiver in Joe's voice. Nick pulled back and looked at him.

"I'm okay. Joe. I'm okay." Nick's voice came out scratchy and nasal. He brought his hand to his throat and swallowed.

Joe's brought his hands up and gently placed them on each side of Nick's face. His eyes darted around to Nick's bruises and then back to his eyes, as if he were trying to decide if Nick was lying. Nick moved his hand up to cover one of Joe's. "Really. I'm okay."

Joe sucked in a breath and Nick watched as the veins on his forearms and neck started to pulse as if under a large strain. "Nicky..." Joe's breath caught; his eyes were moist. Nick pressed his face into Joe's hand. "Nicky, did he... did he..."

Nick didn't want Joe to finish. He didn't want to think about what would've happened if Joe had been even sixty seconds later.

"No, Joe. You got here in time." The expression on Joe's face relaxed, though it remained concerned. Then he drew Nick into a tight hug.

"Thank God. Thank God you kept the tracker. Thank God, Nicky. Thank God."

Needing the mood to lighten now that the danger was gone, Nick let himself smile again. "Wow. Mr. Neanderthal finds religion. Huh? Who woulda thought?"

The curve of Joe's mouth warmed Nick's belly and spread out through his limbs.

"No, Nick. I found you. I found *you*."

Nick pushed up on his toes and pressed a chaste kiss to Joe's lips just as the FBI arrived.

Joe leaned back into his sofa and propped his beer on his knee. He hadn't wanted to cook, so he'd ordered a pizza and figured he'd eat it and watch the game. It had almost become a routine. It had been nearly two months since that night with Anthony Harris. The FBI had swarmed in, and before he could do anything, Nick was carried away, and Joe was plopped into an SUV and taken to an office and questioned for hours. Joe had headed to the hospital as soon as they let him go, but Nick was gone. His parents had him transferred to a private facility to avoid press, where he could recover in peace.

Joe had called and left messages, texts. None had been returned. Joe had taken a couple weeks off, and when he went back, he'd taken mainly assignments working out of the office, coordinating jobs and consulting over the phone. He knew he wasn't quite ready to head back to the field. He'd even gone to see the therapist. Not uncommon for police officers and war veterans. Joe had fought in a one-man war, and won but that hadn't stopped the nightmares. Nightmares that woke him at night. Nightmares of strangled screams and of Nick hanging from the rafters because Joe had been too late. They had lessened somewhat over the weeks, but even as recently as two nights ago, he'd woken drenched in a cold sweat unable to return to bed.

Letting out a long sigh, he swiped at the condensation dripping down the beer bottle with his thumb. The doorbell rang, and he leaned over and grabbed his wallet before he hoisted himself up and headed to greet the pizza guy.

Joe opened the door and sucked in a rough breath. It wasn't the pizza guy.

"Nick."

"Hi, Joe." He looked good. He sounded good. His voice seemed to have recovered from any damage the rope might have caused. The bruising on his face had vanished, and he looked exactly the same except for his nose, which had a small bump right in the middle of it. Joe's heart thumped wildly, and he fought off the urge to bend over to kiss that bump and then those lips. Nick

hadn't called him back. That was enough of a sign for him to realize that the feelings that had caught him so off guard were one-sided. That last kiss, and every one before it, had been adrenaline fueled. He'd come to accept that fact. Adrenaline faded, but unfortunately, Joe's feelings didn't. He looked down and saw his grey USMC hoodie folded neatly under Nick's arm, and his heart sank.

"Can I come in?" Nick's voice was soft as he looked up at Joe through those dark bangs.

"Yes, of course, sorry... I thought you were the pizza guy." Joe opened the door and stood back to let him pass.

"No, I should have called first, but didn't want this conversation to be over the phone."

"Um, all right. Have a seat. Do you want a beer or something to drink?"

"No, no thank you. I don't know how long I'll be staying."

Joe dropped his gaze to the floor. Dread flooded through him and mentally he threw up every wall he could. He didn't want to have this conversation. He was happily miserable living with the small hope that one day Nick might come back to him. *Not like he was ever his to begin with.* He looked at Nick and tried unsuccessfully to smile, knowing that he had to accept whatever it was the man had to say. He had to accept it and let that miniscule speck of hope inside him die. He owed Nick that much. Finally, he took a deep breath and closed the door.

The doorbell rang. *Goddamnit.*

He threw the door open with a little too much force, not hearing what the man said, just shoving a twenty in his hand and grabbing the pizza. He grunted a thank you and closed the door.

"Want any pizza?"

"No thanks, Joe. I'm fine really. I need to say some things and then I can let you get on with your evening. Um, I brought your sweatshirt back. Thank you for letting me use it." Nick pointed at the sweatshirt he'd placed on the

coffee table. He was sitting with his back straight, and had started fidgeting with his hands.

Joe's feet were heavy as he walked to the kitchen table and tossed down the box before steeling himself and heading back to the living room. He took a seat in the armchair across from where Nick was on the sofa. He scrubbed his hands over his face and rubbed the back of his neck before resting his elbows on his knees. Then he raised his head to look at the handsome man sitting across from him.

“Okay. What do you want to talk about, Nick?”

“I just wanted to thank you. Thank you for everything you did. You saved my life that day.”

“I ended Anthony Harris's life, Nick. You saved your own when you activated that tracker.” Joe looked back down at his hands. There were so many other things that he wanted to talk about. Anthony Harris was not among them.

“The tracker that you gave me...” Nick's voice was soft, and he had turned his head and looked out the window. The sun was starting to set, and Nick's face was glowing in the orange light. *God, he is beautiful.*

“Nick, you don't need to thank me.”

“Did you get the check from my parents?”

“Yes, Nick.” The Daniels had sent a check covering his fees to the office. Another check totaling more than three times his annual salary had arrived at his home. That check remained in a drawer in his desk.

“But you didn't cash it?” Nick was looking at him, his head cocked to the side, questioning.

“I didn't want the money, Nick. It wasn't about the money.” There was an edge to his voice he hadn't meant to be there.

Nick took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a few seconds. He looked like he was trying to calm himself, or working out the right words to say. Joe waited in silence.

Then Nick started talking.

“It’s been a long two months, Joe.” Nick paused, but Joe didn’t think he was looking for Joe to fill the quiet. So he waited.

“After the FBI came, I was caught in a bit of a whirlwind. Doctors, agents, my parents... It was just room after room, question after question. I don’t remember what I said to them. They said I was in shock. I tend to agree.” Nick exhaled in a sigh. “My parents showed up, and a whole new shit storm started. I’m sure you can imagine my mother was not too happy with the FBI. She went up one side of them and down the other. It made my cow cunt speech look like praise.” Joe looked over at the man who was looking at his lap and smoothing his hands over his jeans. He thought he could see a hint of a smile on Nick’s mouth.

“Anyway, I’m sure you know, I was transferred to a hospital closer to home and got released about a week later. They were worried about head injuries, between the car bombing and the repeated blows to the head. But my wounds healed, and there are no long-term repercussions to my brain.”

Joe just looked over at Nick and drank him in while he could. It felt awkward between them. Nick was closed off. He’d never seen him look as unsure as he did sitting on that sofa.

“I heard, Nick. Your mother wrote me a letter and sent it with the check.”

“Oh, God, I’m doing this all wrong.” Nick ran his hands through his hair, and his leg had started bouncing. Joe moved over and sat next to him on the couch making sure to leave plenty of room in between them.

“Nick, it’s fine, you’re fine. If you don’t want to talk, you don’t have to. It’s okay.” It wasn’t really, but those were Joe’s issues. He just wanted to comfort Nick, but stopped himself from reaching out physically.

Nick let out another sigh. “No, Joe, I need to say this. I’ve wanted to call for weeks, but I’ve been trying to deal with... I’ve had some anger issues.” Nick turned to look at Joe. His face showed a determination that hadn’t been there before. Joe didn’t want to hear what he’d say. He’d already gone over all

the mistakes he'd made with Nick. He knew when he heard the same words come out of Nick, they would hurt twice as much.

“Nick, I’m sorry. I know I need to apologize, I couldn’t figure out the right words to say how sorry I am, that I let you get hurt. That I wasn’t there to stop him from taking you. I’m...”

Nick reached up and put two fingers over Joe’s lips. Joe’s heart raced with the contact. “No, I’m not angry with you. I’ve never been angry with you. You got me out of there. You never did anything wrong. I was angry with everyone else, the FBI, my parents, Harris, the world. But I’ve never been angry with you, Joe.” He let his fingers slide down, and looked up at Joe with those swirling hazel eyes. Joe couldn’t look away if he’d wanted to. “I was in a dark and ugly place for weeks after you saved me. But I’m working through it. I’ve been talking to some people, and they are helping me. But I wasn’t ready to talk to you. Not until now.

“I didn’t want you to see that ugliness. And, I wanted to make sure what I was feeling was real. Not something that sprang out of an intense situation. But the truth is that I haven’t stopped thinking about you for the last seven weeks. I close my eyes and see you, and it’s not you standing over Harris’s body. Or you when you wrapped your arms around me and cut the ropes off. No, I’m thinking about how your laugh sounds or the look in your eyes when you’re talking about your friends. The way you cursed when you forgot about the cut on your neck and rubbed it anyway. I want more of that. I want to see more of you. I know I’m younger and...”

“Shut up, Nick.” Joe grabbed Nick and pulled him into his arms before crushing his lips down on that pretty mouth. Nick sat stiff for a moment before sinking into Joe and the kiss with a sigh. When his lips parted, Joe took advantage, pushing his tongue in between to explore. Nick squirmed and moved his hands up to run through Joe’s hair. Joe pulled back to look into Nick’s face. Nick looked at him with wide, swirling eyes. “I want you, Nick. All of you. Every outrageous, beautiful, amazing piece. I want it. Somewhere in there, I fell. I fell hard. I haven’t found my way back, and I don’t want to.”

Butterflies swarmed in Nick's stomach. Joe wanted him. His whole body tingled. He pulled Joe's head over to kiss him and pushed them both back so they were lying on the couch. He felt Joe's hands rubbing up over his back and finally down to squeeze his ass. Nick sighed into Joe's mouth as he broke the kiss and let his lips and tongue move down over the stubble and down to Joe's neck. He sucked at the pulsing vein and then placed a gentle kiss on Joe's prominent Adam's apple. He felt the vibration and heard a groan before he moved over to the other side, chuckling, and licked up his neck to nibble at Joe's earlobe. "Take me to bed, Joe."

Nick suddenly felt weightless, and the next thing he knew he was staring upside down at Joe's mighty fine ass. He couldn't stop himself as he leaned in and gave it a bite through the thick denim. Joe yelped, and then Nick was flipped over and onto the bed. He looked up to see Joe stalking towards him. The man's blue eyes were dark as he pulled his T-shirt over his head and threw it onto the floor. Nick stared at him, not caring that he was drooling. He felt his cock fill as Joe crawled over and laid himself down between his spread legs. Nick reveled in the weight pressing down on him and bucked his hips up as his mouth frantically searched for Joe's lips, needing to taste them. He brought his arms up to Joe's shoulders and squeezed tight before letting his nails dig their way down the man's back. Tongues tangled; Nick's hands followed the skin from Joe's back and down under the waistband of his jeans. He pulled Joe's hips towards his own, needing friction and relief.

"We've got too many clothes on." Joe's voice was breathless as he pulled back and got off Nick to stand at the side of the bed. Nick groaned at the loss but knew it was worth it when the sound of a zipper reached his ears. Joe looked into his eyes, never breaking contact as he pushed his jeans and boxers to the floor. Joe's cock was thick and cut and stood up proudly against his belly. Nick licked his lips and maneuvered to the edge of the bed. Glancing up at Joe, he stared at the hard cock in his face before leaning his head to the right and tracing a line from the man's thigh to his hip with his tongue. Nick watched as goosebumps rose all over that tanned skin. He smiled as he continued his quest, his tongue moved over to Joe's belly button and dove in.

“Lie down, Joe.” Nick’s voice was shaky and he didn’t care. He got up off the bed and Joe lay down on his back, slowly stroking his cock with one hand, the other rubbing up over his ribbed abdomen to his furred chest. Nick thought he’d come just at the sight of it. “God, you’re beautiful.”

Joe chuckled. “I guess we can’t blame the head injury this time huh?”

“I couldn’t blame the head injury then.” Nick watched Joe’s eyes widen as he slowly unbuttoned his shirt and then let it fall off to the floor. He toed off his shoes and socks and rubbed his hands down his chest pausing to pinch at his nipples. He watched as Joe’s cock got thicker, his eyes darker.

“Do you know how many times I imagined this? How many times I lay in my bed and stroked myself off imagining it was your hand or your mouth? How many different ways I’ve thought of having that fine cock of yours, wondering how you were going to taste?” Joe was shaking on the bed. His pupils blown, his cock dripping. Nick licked his lips. “I’m going to find out, Joe.”

He brought his hands to the buttons of his jeans and flicked them open. Hooking his thumbs in his waistband he turned around and bent over to display his ass as he wiggled his pants and boxers to the floor. He slowly rolled his body back up and turned back and found his face an inch away from Joe’s. One of Joe’s hands grabbed the back of his head and brought it to his in a desperate kiss, the other roughly grabbed at Nick’s cock. If Nick could have breathed, he would have whimpered at the contact. Nick shoved his tongue into Joe’s mouth and they twisted and tangled. Hands were everywhere. Rubbing, touching, grabbing. Nick caught a breath and brought his hands up to Joe’s chest. He captured a nipple between his fingers and twisted. Joe growled. It was the sexiest sound Nick had ever heard.

“I thought I told you to lie down.” Nick raised an eyebrow. Joe narrowed his eyes at him, but did as he asked. Nick crawled on top of him, lining them up mouth to mouth, cock to cock. He took his tongue and traced around Joe’s mouth and when the man’s tongue darted from between his lips, Nick caught it with his teeth. Joe whimpered and Nick released him. He pushed up on his knees and bent his head down, tracing Joe’s body with his tongue and nipping

with his teeth. Joe groaned when he sucked his nipples into his mouth, first one then the other. He sat up and ran his hands over Joe's chest, relishing the feel and scratch of the hair beneath his fingertips. Nick's cock was hard and twitching. He moved his hips and let it rub up against the length of Joe's.

He moved down the bed before his cock overruled his mind and finished this much too early. He bent his neck to lick at the toned muscles of Joe's abdomen. Joe's cock was trembling at his chin, and he smiled and brought his hand over to stroke it slowly from root to tip. Joe let out a long moan. "Nicky..."

Nick smiled. He released Joe's cock and bent and placed a kiss on Joe's hipbone. He laved it with his tongue and sucked at the skin, marking him before moving down between Joe's legs. Joe gasped when he took his tongue and ran it up the line separating his balls. He circled each one before drawing it into his mouth. Joe tasted salty and musty and all man. Nick loved it, as did his cock, which was raging and angry and desperate to come. Nick reached down and tugged at his sac, hoping to relieve some of the need and buy himself some more time. He traced his tongue up from Joe's balls to the tip of his cock, lapping around the crown and sucking up the precum that had pooled there before taking the whole thing down his throat.

"Holy fuck! Nick! Jesus stop. Don't stop. Nick, I'm gonna..."

Nick pulled off and clamped his hand around the base of Joe's dick. "Oh no you don't, not yet. Where's the stuff, Joe?" Joe reached a shaky hand over and fumbled in a drawer of the bedside table then threw a strip of condoms and a bottle of lube at Nick. Nick laughed. "Ready, huh?" Another growl. Nick's cock poked up at his belly.

He tore the condom wrapper open with his teeth, then quickly rolled it down over Joe's hard cock before he took a squirt of lube and reached around behind him to stretch himself. He kept his eyes on Joe's and watched as the man's eyes became impossibly large. He smiled down and wiped his hand on the sheet before moving up to position himself over Joe's cock. He closed his eyes as Joe's hands traveled up his torso and back down to settle on his thighs. He grabbed Joe's cock and held it firmly as he worked his way down onto it.

He breathed in with the burn and slowly moved himself up and down, letting the tip slip in just an inch before raising himself back up and doing it all over again. Joe's breath was coming hard, and Nick looked down at the man beneath him. His neck muscles were tight and his jaw clenched. Nick felt his own need building and building within him, and he pushed himself all the way down with a feral cry.

“Oh, fuck me, baby. Fuck me. Fuck me. Hard.”

Nick drew himself up to the tip again and crashed his weight down, feeling Joe's balls against his ass. He did it again. Joe moved his hips up to match the rhythm. The room was filled with the smell of sex and sweat, the sounds of slapping flesh. Nick couldn't stop the mumbled gibberish that was coming out of his mouth. He needed to come. He needed to come now. He reached his hand down to his prick and Joe batted it away. He gasped as the man stroked his length, twisting at the end. Nick felt his balls pull up tight. “Oh yeah, God, Joe. Please I need... I need...”

“Come for me, Nicky. Come for me now.”

And Nick did. He came with a scream. His vision filled with white and he covered Joe's hairy chest with streams of cum. He rocked his hips once more, and Joe's deep groan filled the room, his hands grabbed at Nick's ass and held them steady as he pumped his cock up once, twice then came with a deep shudder and a shout that Nick could feel vibrating in his belly.

“Come here.” Joe pushed up, pulled Nick's face to his, and kissed him long and deep. He broke the kiss and pulled back, resting his forehead against Nick's as he caught his breath. “Jesus. That was fucking amazing.” His eyes were blue and soft when he looked up into Nick's eyes. He pulled his head back and stroked down Nick's hair. Nick pushed his head into the touch. He felt sated and safe.

“You are amazing.” Nick's voice was almost a whisper. Joe looked at him and smiled, still combing his hands through Nick's hair.

Joe sighed and lay back, as he pulled out of Nick, then leaned over to toss the condom in the garbage can. He lay back on the bed and pulled Nick close.

Nick placed his head on Joe's chest, closed his eyes and listened to the beating of his heart and the breath moving in and out of his lungs.

“Nick?”

Nick propped his chin up on Joe's pec. “Hmm?”

Joe looked serious. His eyes were narrowed and that damned furrow was back between his brows. Nick stiffened, unsure of what Joe planned to say.

Joe's voice was stern when he spoke. Needles crept up Nick's spine. “You took me by surprise. I usually don't like teases, or teasing. You took control. You got off on it too. I gotta be up front with you, Nick...”

Nick knew his eyes were big with worry. *Oh, fuck. He didn't like it, Joe didn't like it. It was a one off. He'd come on too strong. Shit, shit, shit.*

“All that licking and sucking...” Joe leaned over and sucked Nick's bottom lip into his mouth. Nick saw a hint of a smile that grew into a bigger one when he released Nick's lip. “I'm a competitive man, Nick. I need to warn you of that, because...” He took a deep breath. Nick's breath stuck in his throat. “Payback is a bitch.”

Nick was taken off guard as Joe tackled him and proceeded to show him that, along with being a bitch, payback could be mind-blowingly incredible as well.

THE END

Author Bio

Ali MacLagan lives in a small town in Maine with her two children. It has been an embarrassing number of years since she's written anything substantial. In between refereeing her two teenagers, and her full time job working with mentally ill adolescents, she enjoys photography and taking strolls in the woods or by a lake.

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