

Time To Trust

By JLNicky 01/15/06

Disclaimer: This was just a short story that got completely out of hand. I hope you enjoy it. Some angst, and cursing included within. Please give me a small break on the whole magazine running business details. I don't, nor will I ever, run a high level conglomerate magazine in New York. Oh, and for that matter, I've only been to New York twice. Random comments: Stop smoking. Dance more. Try flowers.

Time To Trust

Nicole Darcy pulled her collar higher on her khaki double-breasted trench coat, blocking the cutting wind trying to enter through the exit door. Her leather-gloved hands pulled the ends of the coat belt tighter as the chill from the cold air tried to wiggle inside the edges. Puffs of warm breath steamed out of her mouth as she stood at the table near the doorway, checking her posts. Feeling the chill soak into her slacks, once again, she was glad her father didn't have a beef about his female workforce wearing pants in the office. As traditional as he seemed in rhetoric, his observations about women were generally right on target. Thank goodness he possessed that particular gift since he was the leading stockholder in the well-established fashion magazine *Risqué Rag*. He spent his last twenty years building this investment and his daughter was being groomed for the lead position. Nicole shivered at the thought of her final semester graduate studies advisor and his often mentioned outdated policy that women should dress to please (i.e. show their knees). She grumbled 'jerk' under her breath as she pushed the exit door wider and stepped onto the wet icy pavement outside the post office.

She swept one end of her thick knitted scarf over a shoulder, trapping some of the auburn strands of her hair in the process. Bright, happy blue eyes took a long look down the snow-lined streets of 4th Avenue. Her attitude improved even in the frosty air. Today had been quite the nice surprise. She received payment for her very first article in this month's magazine. Nicole felt very happy at the unexpected windfall. Dropping by the post office she paid all her bills in one stop and still had sufficient funds to splurge a bit. Thinking of that leather jacket

she had seen off the strip, she headed out toward the public walk. VW Bugs, Hondas, Hyundai and Nissan were parked along both sides of the street, tires covered by snowdrifts pushed over by the snowplows. She watched a few cars drive up and slow to ease near the outdoor postal bins where a tall figure standing off to the side caught her eye.

It was a woman, Nicole discovered, as her eyes roved over the breast line and rounded curves. A young and very cold, barely dressed woman, Nicole thought, seeing the hardened nipples poking through the cotton shirt. Although temperatures were nearing fresh snowfall conditions, the woman wore only a button-down long-sleeve shirt and some threadbare blue jeans. Her tall frame was thin and willowy, the wind shears pressing the long shirt tightly against the body. Nicole frowned as she watched the girl look at an envelope in her hands then at the postal boxes, a huge frown marring her face. A strong shiver made the girl wrap her arms around her thin upper body as the cold air swirled around, stirring up loose snow flurries. Nicole glanced at the pale but clean looking face and unruly black hair billowing everywhere and grimaced at the odd situation. A mental warning and a quick berating to herself, she still took a chance and walked over to the figure, stopping a few feet away.

Dark eyes raked over her in clearly a mistrusting manner. A scowl of defense replaced the frown. Nicole suppressed a smile at her similar thoughts. New York was surely not a great place to take chances.

“Nice day for snowfall, huh?” Nicole said looking over to try and meet the dark gaze now looking down to tour over her attire. She felt a sudden faint spark of recognition. Young thing was definitely ‘family’.

Nicole tried really hard to suppress the curl of her smile from growing larger. She didn’t want to make the girl angry by looking amused. Her father always said her dimples were either great weapons or beautiful armor. Sometimes she knew they could be used to sway things her way. Right at this moment she didn’t want to pretend, or sway. She listened to a non-committal grunt.

Reaching up to tuck a wind swept strand of hair behind her ear she could clearly feel the tension in the young woman. An untamed gleam

shone from the depths of those dark eyes. Nicole knew she only had a few seconds before the girl bolted.

“Trying to mail something?” The girl hesitated from turning away. Nicole looked away down the street trying to act nonchalant about the entire conversation she seemed to be holding with herself. She looked back at the woman standing beside her and caught a sharp nod. *Thank goodness.* Nicole turned and smiled, projecting her full charm. Her natural smile with dimples became taming weapons as Nicole motioned to the bins.

“You just need to drop it in the...” a glare and then rolling eyes told her she was on the wrong track. Nicole stopped and took a quick glance at the thick envelope. A sudden recognition hit her. No jacket and threadbare clothes meant no money. Nicole reached into her pocket and pulled out the envelope that contained a double sheet of stamps she had just bought. An instant idea raced in her thoughts as she glanced from her pocket up at the taller woman. She was being studied once again. A shiver ran through the form of the stoic girl, her frown had returned.

“I got some extra stamps if you need them. I’m pretty sure they will just sit in my desk until they expire. I hate to have to buy those additional small stamp things. I just buy new ones when I need some. Would you do me a favor and use these up?” Nicole asked carefully, innocently questioning in her most friendly manner. The dark eyes looked at her, then at the envelope of stamps, then back at her. A hard edge and a thin line argued internally. Nicole watched the girl’s silent battle.

Checking her watch and grimacing slightly at the time, Nicole knew she was going to have to hurry to get back to work on time. Lunch break was almost over. “I have to get back to work. You take these and use them and I’ll feel better knowing I’m not going to waste them once again.” Regardless of the outcome she shoved the envelope into the girl’s bare cold hands and grinned at her shameless attack upon the frozen one.

A clearly puzzled look with eyes widened in shock was a perfect opportunity for Nicole to hit the streets. She strode off with a quick

wave and an impish smile. Her inner heart made lighter from the instant opportunity to share an early Christmas gift warmed her deeply as she strode across the square towards her father's high-rise corporate building. She knew it was really a generous gift. The stamps were only one part of the envelope's contents. Nicole grinned at the imagined gasp of shock when the girl found the three crisp one hundred dollar bills inside.

And a very Merry Christmas to you, rebel girl, Nicole bit her lip with the good feelings coursing through her body. *Almost better than sex, my girl, almost better!* For a quick moment those dark purple eyes gazed at her and soft lips parted invitingly. Nicole shook her head. *She is a kid, Nicole Anne Darcy. Just a stranger.*

Nicole entered the towering thirty-floor building her father owned and flashed her employee badge with a dimpled smile to the guard who waved her through. Her thoughts were totally removed from her return path to the small office she resided in as an assistant to one of the editors. She kept trying to figure out what the girl would grow up and look like. She frowned knowing she might not ever know.

A bitter whip of wind made Trace's amazement disappear as she realized her benefactor was leaving. *Free damn stamps; that cuts a little too close to the food stamp arena, don't you think? Was she beautiful or what? Damn. Too bad you're such a klutz. Where the hell is she?* The envelope crinkled as Trace strained to catch the khaki coat and auburn hair moving into the crowd of bodies streaming to and from the university. *I should give them back. But I need them.*

She looked down at the somewhat crumpled envelope and straightened it out quickly feeling her fingers tremble at the sudden emotional overload that sprang up from the unexpected offering. Trace never got the quick break. Her life was one messed up string of bad luck, starting with her alcoholic mother and her unknown father. She fought the string all her life. She grimaced in the cold winter air and turned to walk across the pavement into the slightly warmer environment of the Federal Post Office. *At least I have some stamps to use.* The gift would, as the woman had requested, not be wasted. Too bad that lady had cut and run. I really only needed three or four

stamps. Trace hated to take the whole sheet. She just wanted to try and get this packet into the mail.

She pushed open the doors and hurried to the back of the tomb of mailboxes. A table with attached pens was standing empty. Sliding the thick sealed package containing her best photos in 8.5 x 11 glossy, she used the small scale provided and weighed it. The weight versus cost chart confirmed, Trace had the right amount of stamps to use. Retrieving the envelope, she used the tip of her finger to untuck the seal. Her voice was wooden as she watched the edge of money green appear. "Holy shit!" Unnoticed by the teen, the package slid off the scale. The package displayed strong handwriting of a label for Photo Submission, Risqué Rag, P.O. BOX 22345, BANTAM ROAD, NEW YORK, NY.

Trace trembled as she touched the edges of the money. Her fingers barely graced the edge to confirm the truth of the money's presence. She hesitated, and then bit her lip. Reaching in, she pulled the entire envelope contents out. Her eyes bulged at the hundred dollars marking on the top bill. Removing the stamps, she held the green in her hand. Three. Three notes. She spread them out and literally felt her heart beat out of control. Her eyes closed and she swayed.

The frigid doors opening at the front had her stiffening her spine. *Three hundred dollars, oh my God! She gave me three hundred dollars.* Her quick glance around the silent area showed one guy bending to look in his lower postal box window. She shoved the bills into her jean pocket and fiddled with the stamps and package. Putting the six stamps onto the package label, she frowned and tried to concentrate. *Three hundred dollars, why?*

Nicole walked into the boardroom, her navy pumps clicking professionally across the designer tiled floor. The matching pantsuit was perfectly tailored and complimenting the fashionable style of her auburn locks. Pausing at the door she surveyed the occupants of the conference room and smiled at the four older gentlemen present. She crossed to her customary seat, the chair to the right of her father's huge leather chair at the head of the table. Placing various items of

her busy schedule onto the huge gleaming table, she held a future preview storyboard leaflet version in her hands and moved to the sideboard to pour some hot water for her tea. She flipped open the thick leaflet and read the bold comments that were felt-penned in red across the surface. She stirred in one spoon of sugar and returned to her seat. Various articles and probable photos were listed and suggested for the upcoming issue and Nicole sliced and diced off the fat. A great shot of some child staring amazed at the stylish vogue dressed woman walking down the sidewalk was great. Nicole flipped up the photo briefly and noted TC at the corner. The photography department hit gold on that hire.

Nicole made a quick note of 'great shot, give raise', and then started reading the article. She lowered herself slowly, distracted at some strange wording by one of her writers. *Need to send Kenny a dictionary for his birthday.* Nicole grimaced at the words being used incorrectly. Pausing after the article, she checked her thin gold watch and frowned. Shuffling some beige folders stuffed with paperwork, and a notebook of notes, she found her blackberry PDA/phone system on the table buried under the stack of work she carried with her. Checking the time on that device her frown deepened. The board meeting was set to begin in five more minutes. Where was her father? Her blackberry rang and vibrated in her hands.

"Nicole? It's Sandy. You need to come to the hospital. Your Dad's been admitted..." Nicole stood up with a jerk. The boardroom attendants stopped their immediate conversation. The pale-featured woman had their full attention.

The details washed through her as she made instant decisions. "I'll be right there, Sandy." She closed the phone and holding back her fear, she turned to the boardroom members and gave them each a solid look.

"My father's been admitted at Mercy Hospital with chest pains. I'm heading over there now. Phillip, will you please excuse me?" Nicole gathered her belongings and nodded to her father's executive officer as he mumbled 'of course'.

“Give him my best, Nicole. We’ll see you two soon. I’ll reschedule this meeting.” Phillip moved to open the boardroom doors just prior to Nicole’s reaching them. She grasped his arm and whispered ‘thanks’.

“I don’t know how you do it, Trace. This is fantastic work. We hit the jackpot hiring you three years ago.” Bernice pushed the arrow button on her keyboard once again. The next shot opened in the digital photo slide show. She narrowed her eyes at the image and mentally clipped out the surrounding noise factors. The focus was on the model. Her designer clothes seemed to jump out of the photo. The shot was perfect. The sky, the lighting, the motion, the styling, were perfectly perfect. Bernice marked the image for possible use on the mag cover.

Trace stood leaning against a wall, off to one side of the office room, her body relaxed and loose. Her eyes, however, stared intently at the older woman sitting in front of the computer. She completely ignored the words of praise from the older woman. Trace listened for the hammer fall. She stood up swiftly when the older woman leaned back in her chair.

“You just keep getting better. You’ve got three shots here for possible covers. I’m definitely reviewing your profile for promotion.” Bernice looked at the young woman standing nearby. The unmoving attractive features and slightly wild curly black hair revealed nothing at the news. Bernice might have thought she was talking to some frozen block of ice if she hadn’t known what clues to look for. She noted the slight tightening of the hands, the squaring of her shoulders and the slight lightening of those amazingly dark eyes.

It had only taken Bernice a few photographs and a quick discussion with Trace about her equipment, which she pampered, to figure out her new photo princess was a possible future photo queen. She quickly snapped up the protégé from a pool of creative artists and put her in a spot where she could take an active role in Trace Carter’s career. The contrasting youth of the photographer and the maturity captured in the photographs showed a view of life filled with passion and promise. Bernice befriended the girl and took her under her wing.

The obvious fact of Trace's being family had Bernice introducing the youngster to her own wife of 10 years. The three women formed a friendship and Trace was suddenly in the industry. Bernice found her gaze looking over the other woman from a sudden enlightened perspective. Trace had matured over the last three years into a beautiful woman. Bernice gave her photographer a wicked grin and watched as Trace raised a single eyebrow in response.

"What is that look for?" Trace's slightly husky voice made Bernice want to call her wife, but she suppressed the urge.

"I just know you're going to stand here all day until I say one thing bad about your work. Well, today I finally have something bad to say. It's so obvious I'm surprised you didn't think of it yourself." Bernice stood up from behind her desk. Trace unconsciously frowned and bolstered herself for any bad news. Bernice leaned over her desk, placing her fists on the surface and glared at Trace unrelenting.

"You need to make sure..." she hesitated with a fierce expression. Trace bowed her head to take the hit. "You need to ALWAYS make sure you take more film with you. I can't believe I only have 300 shots here. Next time you leave this building you had better have 12 plus rolls. Got it?" Bernice grinned as Trace lifted her head, eyes narrowed. The photographer caught the grin and battled not to smile. The slow shake of her head at the outrageous comment made Bernice laugh loudly. Trace couldn't hold it in any longer. The bark of laughter she released started a continued laugh that was rich and deep and cleansed her throughout. She reached over and grabbed the soft velour stress ball and bounced it on the desktop at Bernice for the audacity the woman brazenly showed.

"You're a creep," she told the older woman. Bernice blew on her nails and buffed them on her jacket smiling at the younger woman's rolling eyes.

"I got what it takes and so do you. It's incredible work we do. Get out of here and let me send these forward. I need to call my wife and tell her just how great I am for hiring you."

Trace felt a burst of happiness wash over her. She watched as Bernice unsubtly edged the small plaque that sat on her photo-covered desk. Trace read the encouraging words once again and gave a half smile. "Easy Street is found one step at a time."

The phone rang. Bernice picked it up and gave her phone spiel. Her features paused and froze in place. "Honey? Are you OK? Are you sure? God damn that stupid thing. It's going in the garbage as soon as I ... Yes. I'll be right there. Mercy?" Trace turned back at the name of the hospital. She turned to glance at Bernice, her concern showing. Bernice waved at Trace to wait. Nodded. Bernice wrote down something on her sticky note and ripped it off. She handed it to Trace and nodded for her to get going. Trace read the note and nodded. She turned sharply and left the room.

Five minutes later she was astride her running motorcycle, her spare helmet dangling from her fingers as she watched Bernice exit the building and rush down the twenty steps toward the growling beast. Bernice grabbed the helmet and started giving a brief description on how to get to Mercy Medical Center. A gruff 'get on' and Bernice just grinned. Trace had no idea how droll she could sound when she didn't want to hear something. Bernice stepped carefully onto the passenger peg and straddled the bike. The one other time she had been in this position, behind the leather clad Trace, she had fully realized just what it was about bikes, and the scent of leather, and the total attraction to the moment that could make a lesbian find salvation. Thank goodness she had her wife to explore those feelings with later that night.

Trace gunned the horses and then with a quick 'hang on tight' she felt Bernice grab her around the waist. She released the clutch and the large bike began to roll forward. The short drop off the sidewalk and Bernice began to feel the power between her legs surge forward.

The soft tail skirted obstacles, finding its own path. Billowing streams of instantly cooled air smoked out of the hot twin pipes. Like every other New Yorker the twin V beast roared and rumbled. Trace carefully maneuvered around cars and across the slick roads. She took an unknown path and Bernice was thankful to hear the sounds of ambulance trucks in the distance. Trace downshifted and took a

sharp left into what looked like a junkyard. She cut across the dirt road that ran between stored junk piles, squeezing the low rider through the broken fence on the other side. The hospital was before them. The traffic nearing the busy hospital widened to allow entrance to the black beast. Trace pulled up to the emergency entrance, slowing to drop her passenger off.

Bernice, wide eyed, just shook her head. "Totally amazing. Park that thing and come in. I'll be with Shawna. Find us." Bernice handed back the helmet and still shaking her head moved into the electronic doorway.

Trace parked her bike in the provided motorcycle parking and locked one of the helmets into the cargo bin on the side. She carried her own helmet back in with her as she searched the emergency lobby area for Bernice. The inner sanctum of the emergency room reminded her of the two prior times she had visited. Trace shook off a horrible memory of following the EMT's as they rushed her unconscious mother into the hospital. Her gaze swept the room for Shawna and Bernice as she fought to avoid the other memory from surfacing. The two women were sitting in uncomfortable chairs along the far room.

She strode over to them and carefully neared the smaller woman with her dark eyes showing an open rawness in them. Shawna took one look at the younger woman and ordered her to sit down. Shawna reached over and grabbed Trace's arm.

"I'm fine. That stupid garden contraption went berserk on me and my hand got caught up in the blades. Good to see both of you. The nurse said they would see me in a minute." Shawna glanced down at her towel-covered hand and shivered at the blood that had soaked into the towel. Bernice pulled Shawna toward her and held her closer. The hospital became the enemy as she watched her partner tremble. Before Bernice could say a word, Trace stood up. Her height towering above them lent strength to the two women. Bernice likened the sensation to feeling a huge monster unfold as Trace gave Shawna a once over and turned to prowl over to the nurse's station to attack. The poor unsuspecting nurse behind the desk was out of her league. Twenty-one and oozing power, Trace relayed her demands to have Shawna looked at right away. Her voice began charmingly, only to

drop into a commanding and deadly serious tone. A brief glance at the pale and bleeding figure sitting near the wall caused the nurse to shout to one of the orderlies to grab a wheelchair.

The women quickly moved into a large triage area that had individual beds. Four or five people stood down near the end of one bed, surrounding a partially open area; a hanging curtain blocked the occupant. Trace stood at the foot of the bed where Bernice and Shawna sat together. A new nurse moved in, drawing the surrounding bed curtains around the area and enclosing them all within. A brief examination and murmur of the standard platitudes of 'we will see what the doctor thinks', 'let's get this cleaned up a bit' about the injury and the ball started rolling. Eventually, the doctor and med tech arrived and had Shawna stitched and cleaned up pretty quickly. Bernice was much calmer as she held her wife's good hand and listened to the doctor comment on having Shawna stay for a one-hour observation period.

Trace was feeling much less hostile, as the curtain was pushed back to its initial position. The room opened and Trace looked around quickly only to lose her breath in a sharply drawn gasp.

Bernice and Shawna looked over at sound to find Trace staring at someone nearby. Bernice followed the taller woman's gaze and found its target. Her eyes widened with recognition. Looking back at Trace she was equally shocked to find a very clear expression of emotion displayed on her friend's face. Examining the emotion was completely impossible. It quickly disappeared and was replaced by an unreadable mask. Bernice was equally amazed when the auburn-haired woman twenty feet away turned to look at them and caught sight of Trace. Another audible gasp sounded in the room. Somehow Bernice thought she recognized a satisfied glint in Trace's eyes.

"Are you all right, Trace?" Bernice reached over and grabbed the rigid forearm of the younger woman. Trace glanced down, and then back upward at the woman across the room. Her obvious fixation was totally out of character. Bernice heard Trace reply with a distracted 'uh hmm'. Then Trace looked down at Bernice and did something that she rarely displayed. She smiled. Bernice felt Shawna stiffen next to her and looked over at her wife. Bernice realized Shawna was

unfamiliar with her good friend's expression. The smile Trace bestowed on them both was nothing less than beautiful. Her entire face, void of the suspicion and anger, opened to reveal the beautiful woman within. Trace couldn't help herself; the one woman in the world she had thought she would never see again was standing right across the room.

"Excuse me for a moment, ladies." Trace murmured already turning to make her way toward the shorter auburn-haired beauty.

"Trace, wait! Let me tell you..." Bernice was unable to stop the headstrong woman. Trace was out of reach and not listening. Shawna gave Bernice a questioning look and nudged her with an elbow. Bernice shook her head looking at Trace Carter's back as the young woman left the two women behind. Bernice grimaced, slightly worried as she looked at her wife. "That's Nicole Darcy." Bernice pointed to the nice looking woman across the room. "The owner of Risqué Rag." Shawna's eyes grew large as she watched the confident Trace walk toward the other woman. Amazingly the shorter woman stepped away from her party and moved to intercept Trace. They met a few paces apart and stood looking at each other. Trace gave her benefactor a crooked half smile as she took in the differences of her memory and the reality.

Oh god, she is beautiful! Nicole watched the tall beautiful woman standing across the room and felt her body heat rise. The quick glance she gave toward her father showed he was still talking with the nurse who was taking a reading of his blood pressure. Nicole found her gaze locked back on the sexy creature twenty feet away. *Good lord. Look at that body...oh man!* Nicole swallowed as her mind dropped into the gutter and wallowed with her imagination. Her blue eyes darkened without realizing. She felt her heart flutter wildly in her chest. Her lips parted to draw in more air.

Nicole watched as the woman from her past turned to look down at the two women sitting on the examination bed. Recognition dawned as Nicole glanced at the women closely. Her gaze was sidetracked as she watched her dream woman step into her life. The young woman smiled and looked over. Nicole felt her stomach flip. Nicole gave a soft smile in return. Excusing herself, she turned to head

toward the younger woman while her father, mother and sister were deeply engrossed in the information the nurse was giving them.

Nicole hardly remembered stepping away, but she found herself standing in front of the taller woman in the middle of the room. They both stood there and Nicole searched through the chaos in her mind trying to find something to say. A crooked half smile made her catch her breath.

“Thank you.” Trace said one of the many things that she had dreamed of saying to this woman if they ever met again. She was rewarded with that beautiful dimpled grin. A strange flutter began in her stomach. Feeling a safety with this stranger that she rarely felt with anyone, she relaxed and smiled back.

“What is your name? Please?” Trace practically begged. She felt an enormous weight lift off her back as Nicole finally spoke.

“Nicole. Nicole Darcy. You’re welcome.” Nicole couldn’t pull her gaze away from those powerful dark eyes. The older version of the rebel girl was definitely beyond anything Nicole might have thought up. And for weeks after her encounter she had managed to dream some whoppers. This fresh and true version had a towering height, strong broad shoulders and a tapered waist. The impressive body was leather encased, topped with black unruly curls of thick hair and those sexy dark eyes. The potent and incredible combination of traits took Nicole’s breath away. The charismatic essence of this woman was making her knees weak. She heard the soft reply and barely nodded her head.

“Trace Carter. My name is Trace.”

Trace, that’s gorgeous and it fits, Nicole reflected.

Trace swept her gaze over the changes she could find. A more stylish hairdo was the first alteration. Those bright blue eyes seemed just a touch darker than Trace remembered. The dimples were just as beautiful and engaging as she remembered. A thinner, more mature woman stood before her. *Nicole. That’s perfect. She looks so*

beautiful. Trace reached over, without hesitation, and tucked that ever-present loose strand of rich red hair back behind Nicole's ear.

Both women held their breath, reveling at the ease in which that motion was made and accepted. Trace gave another crooked half smile. She let her gaze drop and watched as Nicole licked her dry lips. A slight lean toward the smaller woman was interrupted as a low, rich voice called Nicole back to the corner.

Trace watched Nicole blink and then step back. A hand reached up and covered the soft lips as if Trace had already kissed them. Trace was amazed at her own reaction. She barely knew this woman. She didn't want to even discuss her lack of sexual prowess. Her few and far between romantic encounters were pretty much disasters.

Trace watched Nicole turn to move back toward the small group of people. She felt the loss growing and shot out an arm to hold back the impending separation. Nicole paused and looked back at Trace her blue eyes regarding the hand on her arm and then the tall woman. Trace released the arm and felt a blush rise to her cheeks.

"Can I see you? I want to thank you...properly." Trace hesitated not knowing how to express the special gift Nicole had bestowed. Nicole smiled softly at the troubled gaze Trace revealed. She nodded. Pulling a small gold lacquered business card holder she removed a card and handed it over to Trace. An instant puzzled expression crossed Trace's features.

The Risqué Rag emblem confused her. She looked back at Nicole and frowned.

"Nicole, come here please." Nicole heard her father call again. She tried to smile back at Trace, but was met with an unreadable expression.

"Call me. I'd like to know what you're doing these days." Nicole said and then tucking the hair behind her ear again, she returned to her father.

Trace let her thumb rub over the Risqué Rag emblem. Her confusion was evident. She looked down at the card and read the gold embossed name. Nicole Anne Darcy. She clenched her jaw struggling to understand.

“Trace? Are you OK?” Bernice wondered. Trace had slowly moved back over to them. Bernice was beyond curious. “How do you know Ms. Darcy?” Trace looked up from the card to Bernice. Her eyebrows lowered as she frowned at Bernice.

“Do you know her? Nicole Darcy?” Trace liked the way her name rolled off her tongue. It was melodic. Trace shook her head quickly as Bernice calmly answered.

“She is the owner of Risqué Rag. She signs your paychecks. Didn’t you recognize the name?”

A look of denial was evident as Trace looked back at Bernice. The instant glance down toward the end of the room showed the truth. The President of Risqué Rag, Thomas Darcy was standing beside his wife Sandy, and his two daughters Nicole and Patricia. Trace recognized him right away from the company newsletter everyone received each month. Instantly she remembered the various comments Thomas made about his daughter Nicole grooming for the future. Trace struggled to understand why Nicole hadn’t mentioned it. The bared look of total confusion displayed across the young woman’s face had Bernice completely concerned. She stood up and touched Trace on the arm.

“Are you all right, Trace? What’s wrong?” Trace let her emotions ride for a moment as she tried to figure out the complicated puzzle. But, just like the first time they met, Trace was at a complete loss as to the motive of the strange woman. Her features slowly cleared to become the well-known stoic mask.

“I’m fine, Bernice. I think I’ll take off for a while. I’ll stop by tonight sometime to check in with you both. Please be careful, Shawna.” Shawna looked up at the young woman and found those dark eyes looking back at her were slightly dazed. Obviously, something was wrong.

“Be careful, Trace. We are here for you.” Shawna’s comment brought the dazed expression back into focus. Trace smiled down at the wife of her good friend, nodding. “I’ll be fine. See you two later.”

Later that night Trace arrived at her co-worker’s house and seemed to have recovered from the hospital chaos. Her gaze was clear and focused. Bernice didn’t want to pry into the younger woman’s business, so earlier she asked Shawna to avoid the topic. The three women spent the evening relaxing and laughing at Shawn’s one-handed attempts to complete tasks. The sexual problems Shawna might face doing one-handed was the least of Trace’s wicked teasing. Bernice practically cackled at the ease of the joking. Trace just smiled wryly as, when she was leaving, she noticed the garden device, in a dejected lump, beat to a pulp and sitting out on the curb.

At the midnight hour Trace found herself parked in front of the 4th street post office. The never empty building still servicing the night shift, she sat watching complete strangers pull in, get out, walk inside, and then return to their cars. The easy rhythm of the process was strangely comforting to her mind.

Although confused, Trace fingered the business card, caressing the embossed lettering with the pad of her thumb. She saw those blue eyes with her imagination and felt her heart beat race out of control. Twice Nicole had been able to surprise her, confuse her and make her question the concrete rules of trust Trace grew up learning about people. She looked down at the card and remembered the first time with awe. Nicole had made her see with new eyes. She had changed Trace forever with her gift.

Now here she was again, offering to meet and talk and get to know one another. Trace flipped the card over and over between her fingers. The blue eyes showed no ulterior motive. The direct gaze was completely open when Nicole gave her this opportunity. Trace frowned at the unaccustomed urge to find a phone and call the woman. Her urges were not taking into account this was the owner of the company she worked for. Releasing a deep sigh, Trace placed

the card carefully into her jacket pocket and leaned down to start her bike. She looked at the building once more and smiled sadly. *I'm not what she needs.* Trace felt her heart break into a thousand shattered pieces. She swallowed the pain as she pulled the bike into the traffic.

Four days later Bernice sat at her desk ticking off blurs and possible crop lines on the images of the 300 shots she had to traverse. Her office door was open and her assistant, Christian, was busy on the phone scheduling one of the three photographers she had under her supervision for a full shoot. After the last batch of candid photos Bernice wanted to promote the artistic skill of her favorite sharp shooter. She was not exaggerating about the profile review. She wanted Trace promoted and that meant cover shots and design work. Her young talented shutterbug was going to get into the full swing of the professional elements of the magazine if Bernice had to drag her around and force it on her. She was just listening to the confirming of the model shoot at the Tavern on the Green's delightful courtyard. The shoot would be a highlight for the spring issue. Year round the courtyard was kept alive with a riotous bloom of various plants. The upcoming clothing lines would be a good mesh. Besides, Trace could make a stone look lovely with her skill. Delighted at the thumbs up motion her assistant made, she casually watched the deliveryman have Christian sign for a thick packet of documents.

Christian smiled and hung up the phone. Her hands had the package open and emptied onto a freshly cleaned spot of the desk Bernice had recently covered. Rolling her eyes she listened to the efficient assistant and flipped open the folder. Her gaze was delighted to reveal a copy of the tack sheet full of the boss's candid first impressions. She murmured thanks to Christian; already distracted, she began to review the photo sections. The brief red markings were read and annotated on a clean page of her trusty clipboard.

The flow of her rhythm was briefly interrupted when Christian knocked on her door, breaking into the haze.

“Yes?” Bernice frowned as she tried to complete writing her own note on the shot they had decided to use for one particular article. She looked up to find Christian standing in her doorway a worried frown on her face.

“What’s wrong, Christian?” Bernice wondered. The young woman relayed a phone call was waiting. It’s Ms. Darcy, ma’am, from the suite.” Bernice knew her poker face just failed her when Christian’s worried expression deepened.

“I’ll transfer it to you immediately.”

Bernice picked up the transfer and tried to speak calmly.

“Yes, Ms. Darcy. How can I help you?”

“Hello Bernice. Glad to catch you. I was wondering if you had a chance to review the tack sheet yet? I was just reviewing the material and wondered if you had any questions on my brief notes?” Bernice felt her eyebrows raise then lower confused. She had never received a phone call before. She’d been delivering high quality work for the last seven years. Her curiosity wondered what this call was all about. Taking the question head on she shrugged her shoulders.

“I’m reviewing it now. I’ve made some detailed questions for the review meeting and will be starting second production level this week. The photos should be ready to review in less than two weeks. Is there something you wanted to discuss in particular?”

There was a pause. Bernice heard what sounded like an indrawn breath.

“Is your partner, all right? I noticed you were both at the hospital.” Bernice sat up straight. She had no idea Ms. Darcy was even aware of her relationship. She narrowed her eyes wondering at the point. A sudden idea formed and she smiled slightly.

“She is going to be fine, Ms. Darcy. Thank you for asking. It was just a deep cut. She was stitched up and is doing fine. Is your father...how is he doing, if I’m allowed to ask?” Bernice tried to throw

into the conversation her grand idea of being subtle. “My partner Shawna, my good friend Trace, and I, all noticed he was being examined.”

A muffled sound through the phone and Nicole released a sigh. She sounded a bit frustrated. Bernice listened intently.

“Um, yes. He is doing well. He has some medical history and he is watching it more closely. We haven’t really released the news yet. I’d appreciate if you didn’t discuss it with anyone.” Bernice knew that made total sense. She cleared her throat, to agree. Nicole cut her off.

“Is Trace a good friend of yours? I don’t mean to pry but she is someone I met once and haven’t seen for a long time. I was wondering if you could tell me a little more about her?” Bernice smiled at the parched sound of the last three words Nicole pushed out then cleared her throat.

“You do know Trace works for you?” The astounded silence on the other end of the line made Bernice frown. “Ms. Darcy? Ms. Darcy? Are you there?”

“She works for me?” A purely amazed voice squeaked out through the line. Bernice slowly stood up at her desk and knew her face matched her voice when she released a very angry rhetoric.

“You didn’t know? How could you not know? You’ve been reviewing her work for three years? Trace Carter a. k. a. TC., she made cover three times now.” Bernice clenched the phone in her hand disbelieving the murmur of ‘Oh God’ coming from the phone receiver. Christian poked her head into the room and with pleading eyes reminded Bernice exactly whom she was talking with. Bernice clenched the phone in her hand and practically growled out a request to have her door shut. Christian nodded and shut the door.

Bernice breathed deeply. The other end of the line was quiet. Grimacing at her out of control temper she tried to troubleshoot.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Darcy. I don’t know what came over me. I am a very good friend to Trace and I have a very protective streak when it

comes to her. I don't like to think she is being hurt." The silence remained across the line. Bernice was wondering if this was the moment security would sweep into her office and find the 64 favorite lesbian stories she stored on her personal files. She started to speak when a tremulous voice commented on the other end.

"I'm sorry, Bernice. I am really sorry. I did not realize TC was Trace. I'm totally..." Bernice heard the strain in Nicole's voice as the reply trailed off. "I can't even imagine what she thinks." Bernice wondered if that was the tone of disgust. Nicole was starting to go a little overboard with this. Bernice was worried about Trace, but had taken a little time to discuss and think about the two women's exchange in that hospital. Shawna had missed the look on Trace's face when she had first located Nicole across the room. There was definitely some longing in that gaze. Bernice took a deep breath and held it for a second.

This was not totally about Trace either. Bernice remembered the owner of the company regarding Trace with her own stare of amazement. There was something there between them. Bernice released her breath and took the gigantic leap of faith her wife had always warned her would be an ultimate rush.

"Why don't you ask her?" Her voice was calm and direct. She closed her eyes realizing she had just told the owner of the 30 million dollar magazine Risqué Rag how to handle her love life. The total silence on the other end was deafening. Bernice grabbed the stress ball and squeezed rhythmically. Shawna truly underestimated the rush. It was swallowing her whole.

A soft and timid voice came through the line.

"How? I don't know what to say?" Nicole sounded so raw, vulnerable in that moment. Bernice squeezed the ball tightly as she pushed forward with her boldness. She mentally kept chanting two birds, one stone, two birds, one stone.

"Trace is in line for a promotion. She has only worked for Risqué for three years; I want to move her up to one of our first level photographers. Her talent is obvious. I think she will be a great asset

to the company. She will need a management review. I'll send her package up to you." Bernice realized she was probably breaking 50 different moral clauses with the suggestion that Nicole mix business with pleasure but...it was up to Nicole. Hopefully, the two women would figure out the direction their hearts lay in.

A brief clearing of a throat and the owner of the company came back online. "Thank you for your time, Bernice. I'll be expecting that package shortly." Bernice looked at the receiver frowning. She cleared her own throat and gave a grunted, "My pleasure, Ms. Darcy. Glad I could help."

An instant pause on the other end had Bernice listening closely. A soft musical chuckle sounded out. Bernice smiled softly at her suspicion that Nicole Darcy was extremely nervous.

"Sorry, Bernice. I'm a little...um... thanks for the conversation. I'll be in touch."

Bernice hung up the phone her elbows resting on her cluttered desktop, her fingers immediately stapled and propping up her head. She thought of giving the wife a call. Her little matchmaking sideline was definitely not something she wanted to continue. *There is way too much stress involved. Maybe I can just take up basket weaving. Maybe find a nice little lesbian campground somewhere in Maine? Nawwww the weather sucks there.* She totally ignored the galoshes and winter coat hanging on her coat rack in the corner. Releasing a heavy sigh, she couldn't resist letting a cocky grin spread across her face. *Ah...what the hell?* She picked up the phone and dialed her home number.

Trace stepped off the elevator on the 29th floor of the building containing Risqué Rag management. She stood looking at an elegant dark cherry wood and beautiful ruby red interior. A secretary sat facing the elevators, her huge desk bigger than Bernice's entire office. The woman was occupied with a phone call, her low voice

inquiring to take a message. Trace looked around briefly and felt a tension larger than life stretch her stomach lining. The lobby split off into three different paths. Immediately behind the secretary were the huge double doors to the conference room. The doors were currently open and the beautiful skyline of New York could be seen. Trace stepped up to the desk; the secretary smiled nicely and motioned for one more second.

“Thank you, Todd. I’ll give you a call today and confirm the schedule. OK. Bye.” The older woman looked over at Trace and smiled. “Good afternoon. Do you have an appointment?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m here to see Nicole Darcy. My name is Trace Carter.” Trace stuck her hand into her pocket to finger the business card. She was beyond nervous. The scheduled review for her work was in the hands of a woman she was longing to be near. Bernice had prepped her on the review process and informed her Ms. Darcy was going to review the photographer herself. For the last two days, Trace had been unable to take a single shot without a slight tremble.

“Yes, Ms. Darcy is expecting you. Go down this hallway and you’ll come to her office. I’ll give her a call that you’re on your way,” the efficient woman said as she jotted a note onto a checklist of upcoming appointments. Trace turned to head down the hallway and heard the woman contacting Nicole behind her.

Ms. Darcy, Ms. Darcy. Her name is Ms. Darcy. Remember that Trace or your ass is gonna be kicked. God, Nicole. What the hell is going on?

Trace stood outside a large executive door that was closed. Just as she raised her hand to knock, the door opened. Nicole stood there looking back at her. They looked each other over and both women felt a deep satisfaction at the other’s nearness.

Trace took in the slight shadows under the blue eyes and the small drop of Nicole’s shoulders as she stood staring at her. Nicole looked tired. Unfortunately, her mouth kicked in and Trace stunned herself by expressing just that fact.

“You look tired. Are you OK?” Trace winced at the disrespectful remark and reached up to scratch her neck, knowing this meeting was going to be a battle in control. Nicole looked at Trace and gave a half smile.

“Nice to see you too, Trace.” Her voice slightly colored with sarcasm. Trace winced again.

“Sorry, Ms. Darcy.”

Nicole lifted her head from her brief perusal of Trace’s professional suit. The slacks and jacket were tailored to fit the tall frame. Trace looked gorgeous. A confused expression crossed Nicole’s face and then instantly cleared.

“Umm yes. Trace. About that Ms. Darcy thing...can you step into my office?” Nicole turned leaving the door open for Trace to follow. Trace entered behind the shorter woman and watched as the shorter woman crossed to a large desk. A single file sat on the center of the desk near the large leather chair. Nicole motioned for Trace to take a seat in one of the visitor’s chairs. A brief glance around and Trace lowered herself into the chair. Nicole took the seat behind the desk and pulled the file toward her. She paused and looked over at Trace.

Her mouth opened then closed then opened once more. Trace watched as the blue eyes looking at her darkened with emotion. Trace leaned forward slightly with anticipation.

“I’m sorry I didn’t realize you worked here Trace. I just didn’t realize it. I hope you don’t think I was playing some sort of game with you. I have over 3000 employees on my staff. I...just...I wasn’t aware...” Nicole searched for words. Trace saw the troubled expression and realized Nicole had and was being totally honest with her. When she gave that card to Trace, she did not know Trace worked for Risqué Rag. Trace regretted not calling the woman for the last five days. She should have at least asked. She reached up and held up her hand to stop Nicole from continuing any attempt at an apology.

“I...Don’t...” Trace struggled to express her understanding. Nicole watched the struggle and suddenly smiled. Trace watched amazed

as the sunlight came from behind the clouds. That dimpled grin was infectious. Her own lips curved to respond.

“I’m so glad we had this chance to talk, Trace.” Nicole remarked, rolling her eyes at both their inability to speak. Trace released a slight chuckle as her stomach eased up with the vise-grip action.

Nicole leaned back into her chair and blew a puff of air to move a thin strand of escaping hair from the pulled-back hairdo. Trace looked away from Nicole as her fingers twitched.

“I’ve reviewed your work and found you’re an excellent candidate for promotion. I’d like to move you into level one work on a trial basis. We have some upcoming events that will require set shots. Your work is mostly candid, so I’m going to have you listed available for scheduling with the big boys. Are you ready for that?” Nicole asked her question penetrating the growing excitement Trace had building within.

Nodding, Trace remembered to vocalize her agreement. Bernice had stress she talk out her replies and not just grunt.

“I am really looking forward to it. I have some ideas I’d like to try on set shots that I think the magazine would really like.” Trace let her voice sound professional, mature and in control. She didn’t want Nicole to think her age was a factor.

Nicole listened and watched with piercing blue eyes. She liked the intense look Trace revealed when she spoke about her job. The file she reviewed practically shouted talent of the highest caliber. Nicole let her curiosity leak out.

“When did you start taking pictures?”

Trace looked over at her boss and licked her suddenly dry lips. She was hoping her personal life would not be brought up. Nicole noticed the tensing and lowered her gaze to watch the soft lips being licked. A sudden urge to get up, crawl over the desk, and kiss those beauties had Nicole twirling her chair, and jumping up to stare out of the wide glass panes showing her the snow covered city of New York.

Trace jerked at the lightening fast movement. She watched Nicole fasten her eyes on something in the distance and wondered what the hell just happened. She reviewed the conversation and wondered what she had done. Those dark blue eyes, she remembered, glancing down. Trace licked her lips at the returned dryness that struck her. She felt a delicious flutter erupt in her stomach as she realized the attraction Nicole was feeling.

Trace stood up and moved around the desk. She neared the shorter woman and came up behind her more closely than she thought she should. Her body wasn't listening to her head. She looked over the thick strands of luscious brown streaked with red beneath her chin. She breathed in the fresh scent of shampoo.

Nicole felt her presence and without turning she leaned back slightly. They touched. Trace felt the small form press into her and closed her eyes at the sensations rushing through her.

Nicole released a soft cry, as Trace rested her strong hands on Nicole's hips. They stood together for over a minute. Trace couldn't stay like this not knowing more. She gently grabbed the tense shoulders and turned the smaller woman around and they locked gazes.

Their breath mingled as the attraction between them grew with each millisecond of time. Two strangers who had felt a connection finally found each other. The oxygen was charged with passion and longing. Trace watched royal blue deepen to midnight as they simultaneously leaned together. Their lips were a breath apart. Trace whispered her need. "Nicole."

Nicole answered, "Yes."

They kissed. Their lips touched, heat to heat. The soft, firm, sensitive connection held the two women together, sealing their fate. Abandoning any barriers they merged together and found their place. Trace felt her lips tingle at the contact and the surge of electricity that shot through her body had her pressing forward. Nicole melted into the strong woman against her, her passion rising as their mouths

parted. The first taste inside was offered and accepted. Hands clutched and tightened as they pressed together. Nicole felt her knees weaken as Trace slid her hands from their resting place on her shoulders down her lower back to slide down and cup her body in her grasp. Her own hands found a pattern as they slid up the silk blouse-covered taut abdomen beneath the suit jacket. Her fingers touched beneath the curve of a breast. She could feel the tightening of Trace's body as they molded together.

A trembling touch stroking over the hardened tip of her breast and Trace lost her mind. She groaned into the delicious taste of Nicole's mouth. Her larger body practically lifted the smaller woman over to the only surface available. A crash of some paper bins falling off the edge didn't register as the two women pressed together.

Nicole was drowning in sensation. Her body was on fire. She felt her body lifted and a strong thigh wedged between her legs. She spread her legs and wrapped around the tall form as the desktop supported them both. Another moan sounded as Nicole felt the flexing thigh press against her core. She dug her nails into the back muscle she had grabbed as they spun. Trace whimpered a sound of desire into her mouth.

The phone rang and time stopped. Their lips parted and blue eyes met the intense dark eyes looking back. Trace felt Nicole tremble in her arms. She slowly brought them vertical from their practically reclined position. They stared at each other, breathing in deep gulps of air. Trace slowly lowered her eyes and then dropped her forehead onto the curve of Nicole's shoulder. "Nicole." She practically sobbed as she felt the smaller woman grasp her in a full body hug. Nicole repeated the only conversation she could muster. She hoped Trace understood. "Yes!"

Trace punched a hand held remote to dim the backlight to the far right of the model. Her method of the RGB slotted light system was the rage of the magazine world. She faded the red and pushed the green to enhance the green eyes of the model with a subtle touch. It had only taken a year to get her new lighting system defined and built. But, since production began she had become the top

photographer in New York. Her photos ran in *Risqué Rag* astounding people with the intensity of the shots. The last 11 covers had been shots she created. Her career was undeniably at the top.

Trace felt the soft clicking of a speed shutter in her hand as she pressed and released the button on her other remote. She moved from angle to angle and murmured soft commands to the beautiful woman she was shooting. The hall was quiet and calm. The other twenty people stood back from the set and watched the intricate process. Trace let a sensual smile curve her lips as she caught a glimpse of auburn colored hair moving forward in the back. She tilted her head to view the model one more time then pointed her remote at the huge black box over in the corner. Instant music began to play. Chicago 17 spilled across the room. The model smiled. Trace winked at her and spoke loudly for the first time in two hours. "Take a break. Eat something."

The model rolled her eyes at the teasing photographer. She looked over the tall woman and arched an eyebrow full of meaning. Trace didn't notice as she wrapped her small cords up from the floor. She was tempted to just leave them and turn toward the woman who stood back in the wings. Her heart beat with the knowledge Nicole was watching her. A brief glance showed her girlfriend deep in conversation with another executive who was visiting the set. Trace took a moment to flip the camera lens 180 and aim at the auburn haired beauty. The single computer image formed on the machine Trace monitored for a birds eye view. She pressed the shutter and smiled as blue eyes looked her way briefly. The soft image of her lover was caught forever.

Trace breathed a momentous sigh of release. Thomas Darcy would be forever amazed that Trace had managed to capture his successor with such a focused passionate gaze. But, he would never question the gift he received from his daughter-in-law on his 60th birthday.

After stepping down from his position, the board members voted and acknowledged his daughter Nicole Darcy as the only possible candidate to replace him. Her work with the magazine was exemplary. She stepped in to the position without complications.

At the promotion party, six months after Nicole and Trace had begun their relationship, Trace had taken time to spend with the elder Thomas Darcy. After wishing him all the best in his retirement he had drawn her into a conversation on the future of Risqué Rag. Voicing her proposal on the photography front she had captured his interest. They struck up a bargain, which yielded a contract and the eventual building of her light system. Of course, Trace didn't realize the doting father even knew who she was and she found herself completely flummoxed when Thomas shook her hand expressing his favored opinion on Nicole's choice in women.

Trace's dark eyes had searched the crowd for the most beautiful baby blues. She regarded the smaller woman and felt a huge grin cover her face. Thomas hid a smile of satisfaction for the couple. His heart was happy for his daughter.

Trace broke from the treasured memory and noticed Nicole heading her way. A quick push of the monitor power button and the image of Nicole's smile disappeared from the screen.

Nicole walked over and stood next to the taller form clearing her throat. Trace leaned back slightly and increased the pressure. Nicole's grip on her arm tightened in reaction.

"You're not playing fair. You have to play fair, Trace." Trace nodded in contemplation.

"Agreed. How bout you go on a date with me and I'll play as fair as you want all night?"

Her dark eyes zoomed into capture that sweet flush that rose on the pretty face of her boss.

Nicole smiled. Her dimples showing, she grinned at Trace and nodded, excited with the idea.

"I'll pick you up at your apartment at seven?" Trace questioned.

Nicole nodded. Her grin dimmed slightly. "Does that mean you're not going to lunch with me? Because I would really like you to discuss

your expansion plan for the photography stages with William and Peter.” She motioned to the two men standing over by the exotic model near the free buffet table.

Trace shook her head. “I’m good to go. I have all the shots I need. I was just going to check the last set then tell Monique to take off. I’ll be ready in twenty minutes.” Nicole squeezed Trace’s arm again.

“Thank you, Sweetheart. I was really hoping to see more of you today.” Nicole murmured her voice and eyes caressing the tall form. Trace smiled and turned back to her console.

“Give me twenty and I’ll be ready. I’ll see you tonight at seven too.”

The night air was crisp as Trace pulled up into the apartment’s electronic gate. She punched the code for entrance and rumbled her bike forward toward the far right condo. She ran a hand through her flattened curls, ruffling them after pulling off her helmet. Reaching down, she gathered the flowers from the cargo bin. Their beautiful red color and fresh scent had her smiling.

She walked up to the entrance and knocked softly. Nicole opened the door and gave Trace a beautiful smile. They stood looking at each other until Trace moved the flowers slightly to catch Nicole’s eye. Her parted lips and wide eyes made Trace push the flowers toward her and lower them so Nicole could look down at the tops of the 12 beauties. Four of them were pink and red. Nicole looked at one for a moment then frowned.

A narrowing of her eyes, she reached over and tugged at the edge of one of the tight buds. A petal came off revealing the curled edge of an embedded part of some money. Trace eyed the smaller woman and handed her the bouquet. Nicole moved into the condo, leaving the door behind her open for Trace to follow. As Trace moved inside, she softly shut the door.

As she walked inside she found Nicole holding the flower and slowly pulling off petal after petal. A curled 100-dollar bill was already

resting on the table. The other pink and red flower was being taken apart as she removed a 2nd hundred-dollar bill. Nicole looked up with such love in her eyes that Trace had to swallow the pressure that rose in her throat. The third rose revealed a third bill. She quickly pulled it out and pressed it flat to the other two. Nicole picked up the fourth rose and gave Trace a confused smile. Trace nodded, urging Nicole to take a look.

The first petals removed revealed more petals. Nicole pulled off petals and more until a glint of something metal caught her eye. She squinted at the rose and looked over at Trace. More petals fell to reveal a stunning diamond ring. The trembling fingers lifted it from within the last few petals and held it up to the light. It glittered brightly. Trace moved around and reached up to gently remove it from Nicole's hand. She slipped it over her ring finger and watched as the ring fell into its place. A slight dip of her head and Trace kissed the fingers with a touch of gallantry. She lifted her gaze to find twin tears rolling down Nicole's cheeks as she gave a tremulous smile with dimples included. Nicole stepped forward and tucked her head, pressing close to Trace. She listened to the strong heartbeat of the woman who captured her heart. Trace let her longer arms wrap around the beauty. She felt a calm invade her soul as they shared the magic of the moment between them.

Trace looked down and found Nicole tilting her head upward. The slightest dip of her chin and they shared a kiss. It was a kiss filled with promise and dreams. Trace left the soft lips to kiss a pattern across the tip of a nose, over closed eyes, a soft touch to her forehead and one more on top. She pulled Nicole tighter and expressed her one need in a released breath of happiness. "Nicole!"

"Yes!" The happy reply was given.

The End.

Author's notes: I could have had them have a sex scene here but...I didn't feel it. I guess I'm a mushy romantic. Sue me.

JLNicky