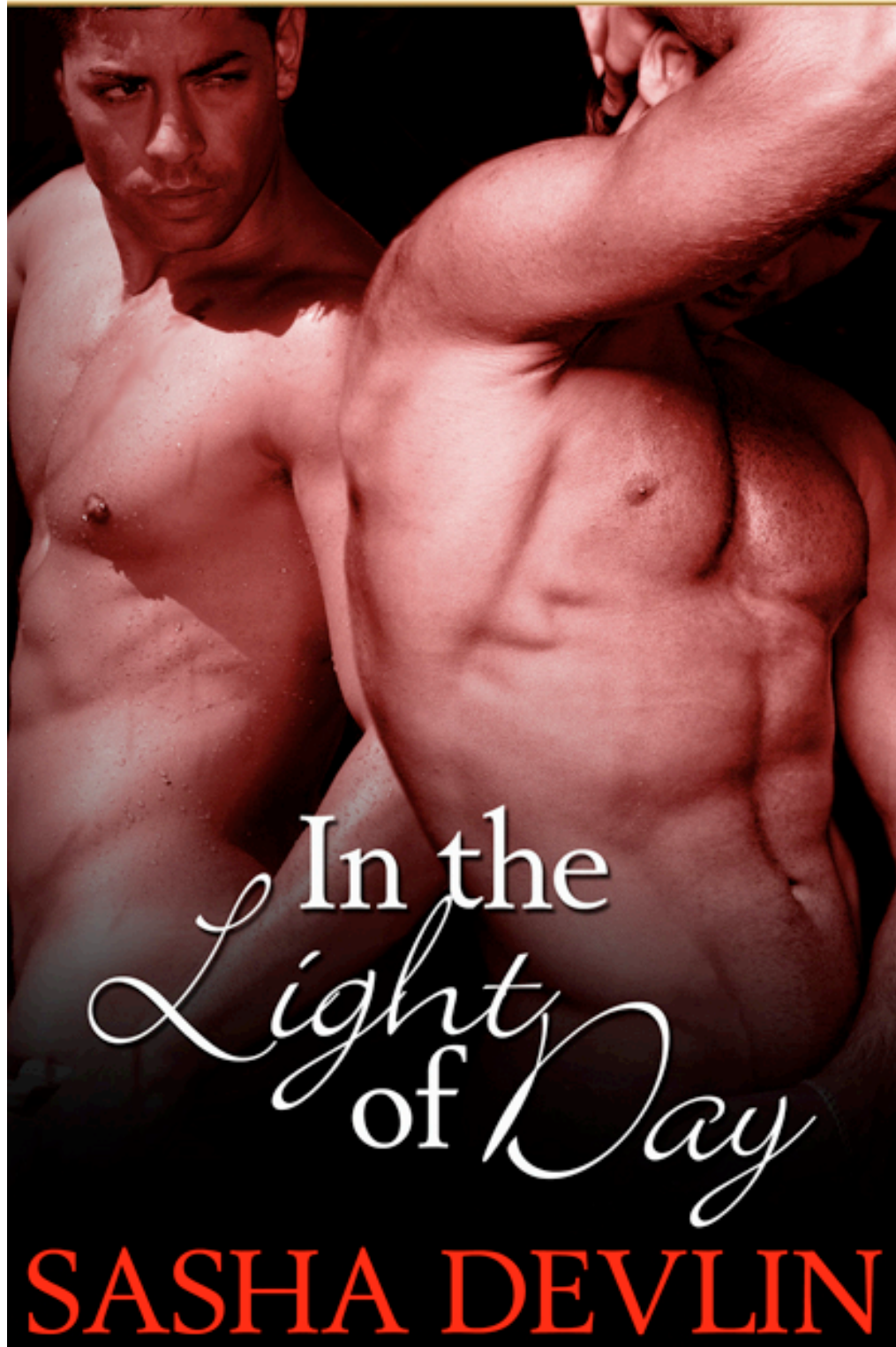


ELLORA'S CAVE *Spectrum*



In the
Light of Day

SASHA DEVLIN

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Jaren's birthday weekend isn't going as planned. Instead of being in the arms of the man he fell hard for, he's alone at his lake cabin. With a bottle of wine. When Cooper shows up on his doorstep, all appears right with the world. Until Jaren realizes the real reason Cooper is there.

Cooper didn't mean to fall for someone he was working a case with. And certainly not a *man*. Cooper always thought he was straight, but posing as gay lovers to infiltrate a pornography ring had felt all too real. Now he has feelings for the sexy younger man. Strong ones. Just as he's prepared to drive to the cabin and give Jaren a birthday in bed he'll never forget, Cooper gets word the criminal they put away has escaped—and is coming after Jaren.

Jaren finally has the man of his dreams where he wants him, but for all the wrong reasons. He can trust Cooper to guard his body, but what about his heart?

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In the Light of Day

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IN THE LIGHT OF DAY

Sasha Devlin

Dedication

To Gilli and the Rats, we all know there wouldn't have been a book without your constant encouragement and harassment. And a special thanks to my personal cheerleaders CM Torrens and Lanie Jordan, who read this story multiple times and still talk to me.

Chapter One

“What do you want from me?” The last word broke on a sob. Cooper’s guts twisted, but he continued to listen. He was the cause of the misery. The least he could do was hear it.

“Want me to beg? Because I will. I’ll beg, I’ll crawl, whatever you want. My pride’s gone at this point. I lo—” There was a crashing noise, then dead air for several moments before the message cut off. Shit.

Coop stared at the clock on his dash. He’d been sitting in this spot for the past hour replaying those six messages in a nonstop loop. From hopeful to complete despair in less time than it took most pizza places to deliver.

Nightfall was in thirty minutes and he still hadn’t made a decision. Did he go to Jaren and admit he couldn’t get him out of his mind? That his every waking moment was plagued with fantasies of what they might have done if the case hadn’t wrapped so soon? Or did he try to find some other way to get the man out of his system? Like a woman.

He grimaced. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t tried. In the weeks following the bust, he’d plowed his way through more women than a man his age should even think about. None of it had helped; none of them were Jaren. He’d finally stopped when he realized it was too much effort to get hard.

All he wanted was Jaren, on his knees, bent over a table, any way he could have him. But if he went to Jaren, he was admitting he was gay. Just the thought left a sour taste in his mouth. His parents, his team, all of them would look at him differently. He would no longer be the tough-as-nails, take-no-shit cop. There was no way any of them would believe that if he took a man as his lover. But if he didn’t go to Jaren, he might be missing out on the best relationship of his life.

Their time had been short, intense and the hottest experience he'd ever had in his life, even though they'd never had sex. The problem was, he didn't feel gay. He didn't simper, he didn't pout and he had never called anything "fabulous" in his life. He frowned. Neither did Jaren.

Coop knew this was a game changer. Everything he said or did would be filtered through his attachment to Jaren. He had tried to forget him, but the other man had a way of making an impression.

He drummed his thumbs against the steering wheel. This was it, his last chance and he still couldn't make a decision. Weeks of listening to each message until he could recite them all by heart, of rereading emails until he could do the same, had led him here and he sat, frozen in his car like an idiot. Missing Jaren's birthday celebration would be one way to end it. There was no way he'd ever speak to Cooper again. He was still trying to decide when his cell rang. He shook his head as *Love the One You're With* mocked him. Undoubtedly the work of Stef, who thought everyone should be in the mood. He'd have to smack Simon for letting her near his stuff.

"Davis," he answered, his eyes still staring at the road that would take him into the arms of another man.

"Oh thank God I caught you." Detective Linda Mathis' bubbly voice was strained. "Where are you?"

"The edge of town. What's up?" He straightened in his seat, instantly on alert. When she hesitated, a chill danced down his spine.

"We've lost Ortega."

"What!" Goddamn, sonofabitch! He forced a deep breath for control. "What happened?"

"They were transporting him and something went wrong. Still don't know what. Oscar's in the hospital." Her voice wobbled a bit and she cleared her throat. "And Clive is missing."

"How bad is it?"

"Pretty bad. Multiple bullet wounds, busted windows. Oscar's vitals are good, but the next twenty-four hours are crucial."

"So what's going on? You need me to come back and start the search?" He fired up his car, preparing to bust a U-turn back toward the city.

"No, we need you to find Jaren."

"Jaren?" His blood froze. "Why?"

She sighed. "Revenge. He can't get to any of us. Not without getting caught. But Jaren's fair game. Ortega knows he's a civvie."

"How? How could he possibly know?" Coop squeezed the bridge of his nose. He'd been against using Jaren for that exact reason, but it couldn't be helped. Simon was going to shit a brick when he was told the crime boss was now gunning for his baby brother. More importantly, the leak meant they had a rat.

"Tell me you know who did this." The steering wheel groaned beneath his grip.

"No one knows. Oscar told us he was taunting them about it before he escaped. Said he wasn't going to rest until he had one more movie of Jaren, this time begging for mercy instead of for cock."

Coop flinched at the mention of the movies. They had destroyed the ones starring him and Jaren, but nothing could erase his memories of those nights. He still woke up drenched in sweat, rock hard and rutting against the sheets thinking about it. Part of him was glad they wouldn't need the discs for evidence; the other part wished he still had them to watch over and over again. One thing was certain, if Ortega got his hands on Jaren, it'd no longer be a skin flick. It'd be a snuff film.

"We think he may know where Jaren is. We called Simon, but no one picked up. Martin is going by there. No one can reach Jaren though."

"I know where he is." He instantly wished he could call the words back. Linda's pause said more than a whole litany of words. It was starting already. He could feel her condemnation like a weight against his chest.

“Good. Take care of him, and buzz me when you’re ready for me to send in someone we can trust. I’m too far outside of the city to be much help to anyone, but I’ll keep trying Simon. Stay safe and call me. Don’t try to be a hero, because...”

Because his lover was in danger because of his work. He almost wished she’d say aloud what they both had to be thinking.

“Can do.” He disconnected and tossed his phone on the seat. Throwing on his brights, he gunned the engine, taking the turn off at gravel-spitting speed—and it still felt too slow. It no longer mattered what his heart thought. Jaren was in danger, and he was chasing the sun.

He cursed as the winding road caused him to slow down. Every second was like an eternity and he breathed a sigh of relief when he finally spotted Jaren’s SUV. He got out and felt the hood. Cold.

“Shit.” For a split second he thought about calling out, but he couldn’t be sure he was alone. His eyes scanned the woods for any movement, but nothing was visible in the waning dusk. The wind blew his hair in his eyes and jarred him into action. Jaren was long gone and he’d have to go after him.

He jogged back to his car and then assembled his gear. He might have said he wasn’t sure about meeting Jaren at the Jones’ cabin, but one look at his trunk proved him a liar. Where he’d normally just carry an emergency roadside kit and an extra pair of clothes, he now had a bottle of bourbon, a pack full of clothes—though he’d hoped to avoid wearing any—and a gift-wrapped book on origami, of which he knew nothing about. He pushed it aside and pulled on his hoodie with hands that shook.

“If Jare could see me now.” Where was his legendary calm? Now more than ever he needed focus. He shouldered his pack and then he dialed Simon.

“Tell me you’re with him,” Simon’s voice was a growl.

“Not yet, but I will be.” The words felt even more inadequate than they sounded.

"Goddammit!" He flinched at the outburst—his team leader was unflappable, *his* rock. To hear Simon so unhinged did something to his insides. "I know you and my brother have your problems, but you find him. You find him before Ortega does."

Simon left unspoken what would happen if he failed. Ortega wouldn't bother killing Jaren, at least not until he'd gotten tired of making him scream.

"Boss, regardless of what did or didn't happen with me and Jaren, I'm not going to allow that scumbag to get to him. I'll keep him safe." Or he'd die trying. "Call Linda and check in. She was worried."

"Yeah, I heard. Stop standing around with your dick in your hand, go get my brother and call me."

He bit the inside of his cheek and counted to ten slowly. Didn't help. He still wanted to punch Simon's face in. He forced a calm he didn't feel.

"Help me out. I'm at the base of the trail and it's dark here. Visibility soon to be less than three feet. I need to know where I'm going."

He could practically hear Simon shifting into Mission Mode.

"The cabin is approximately two and half miles northeast of the base camp. We've let it grow over, so there's not really a path, but there's a wear in the trees that once you're on it, you can just follow it through. It'll be rough in the dark because the trees are so dense. Primo area for an ambush if Ortega was inclined. Not a lot of wildlife—some coons and possums—so if you hear something it's human. You could probably run it in twenty, but without the light you're screwed. Move your ass, Coop."

"I'm all over it."

He shoved his phone in his pocket, pulled on a knit cap and pocketed his flashlight. He'd use it if he needed to, but not until he was deeper into the woods. Everything in him wanted to stash the cars in case he'd beaten Ortega, but there was no time. He dropped to his knees, his hands brushing over the ground. The trail or Jaren's tracks, he didn't care which he found first as long as he found something soon. His body was twitchy, ready to run to Jaren—lack of light be damned—but he forced himself to

slowly cover the area. Flattened grass in the shape of a men's tennis shoe made him smile.

"Thank God." Jaren was no dummy. If he thought he was being pursued, he would have been more careful. From the looks of his first couple of steps, he was plenty pissed, but not scared. Cooper's smile dimmed. If he was that angry at the start of the trail, a bear probably awaited him at the end of the road. He'd have to cross that bridge when he came to it. Coop followed the tracks, making sure to step lightly.

He ran several miles a day and could probably do a couple miles on his hands, but the terrain made it impossible. Every time he tried to speed up, a root or rock slowed him down. Sweat poured into his eyes and he fought the urge to howl his frustration. So much time wasted when he could have been up here hours ago.

While he didn't think Ortega could have made better time, he had no idea where the bastard was. If he'd been thinking with more than his dick, he would have asked Linda, but it was too late now. He thought he was alone, but if he wasn't, using a cell phone would be suicide. His watch showed a full half hour since his call to Simon, so he pushed on. Trying not to think of what was chasing him up the mountain. Trying not to think of what was waiting for him at the end of the trail.

* * * * *

Jaren jerked awake at the pounding on the door. His gaze darted wildly around the room before he sat up and crammed his glasses on his nose. It brought the room into sharp focus, but raised more questions. He frowned. His apartment didn't have a fireplace, or a bearskin rug. The banging persisted, the wooden door rattling in its frame. He was at the cabin. Alone. Bitter disappointment swamped him and he almost buried his head beneath the pillows except the damn thumping never slowed.

He growled. Whoever was on the other side was in for a rude awakening. The clock on the bedside showed a couple of hours had passed since he'd uncorked the last bottle

of wine, but he would have more after he got rid of the wannabe survivalist outside. He swung his legs over the bed, swaying slightly. And some food.

He grabbed the handgun his brother had given him years ago. Simon knew he didn't like them, but had made sure he was proficient. He approached the door and peeked through the peephole. The stars didn't provide enough light to see anything more than a shadowy, hulking figure on the porch. Definitely male. And bigger than Jaren's own six feet. His grip tightened on the gun by his side. He thumbed off the safety but kept his finger alongside the trigger.

"Who is it?"

"Jaren, it's me. Open the door."

Jaren closed his eyes as his stomach dropped. He didn't need Cooper here. Not when he was half dressed and nearly drunk. He hiccupped. Okay, totally drunk. He'd probably break down and ask the man to just hold him. Or he'd punch his lying, disappointing mouth in.

"Go away, Cooper. I'm not in the mood."

"I need to see you, Jare. Just open up." He curled his fingers against the door. Cooper sounded sincere and Jaren wanted to believe him more than he wanted his next breath.

"I know I've disappointed you, and I'm sorry. Just give me a moment to explain."

"Thank you, God," he whispered. His heart felt lighter than it had in days. There was only one reason for him to come all this way in the dark. Cooper was finally ready to take a chance—and Jaren looked like a train wreck. He shoved his fingers through his hair and fastened his pants. As primping went, it was a zero, but it was the best he could manage on such short notice.

Before he could think better of it, Jaren opened the door and stared slack-jawed at his dream come true. Cooper in jeans and a sweatshirt was hotter than most men naked. The clothes merely hinted at all the muscle beneath, and his breath caught as he

remembered being pinned by that weight. His blond hair was covered by his beanie, and Jaren's fingers literally itched to tunnel through those silky strands.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" Cooper's voice always sent a tingle up his spine and this time was no exception.

Jaren grinned, grabbed a handful of his shirt and hauled him inside. He pushed Cooper against the door and gave into the temptation to taste him. Cooper jerked in surprise, mouth opening beneath his assault. He groaned as Cooper's flavor exploded on his tongue. Too long. It had been too damn long.

"Stop. Jaren, we have to stop." He heard the words from a distance, but didn't process them until Cooper shoved him back. "We don't have time for this."

Jaren blinked. Maybe he'd had more to drink than he'd thought. "What day is it?"

Cooper frowned. "It's still Friday. At least for a couple more hours."

"Then we have nothing but time." Jaren reached for him, but Cooper batted his hands aside. Doubt settled, cold and hard in his stomach when Cooper shook his head.

"We have to talk."

Not the words he'd been hoping to hear. He backed up farther, putting more than an arm's length between them. Cooper's gaze traveled over Jaren's face and down his naked torso to his bare feet and back. He barely suppressed the shiver that tried to snake up his spine. Cooper's golden gaze always made him hot. Even now when he wanted to hurt the man the way he was hurting, he could feel himself growing harder.

He saw Cooper's chest rise in a deep sigh. "This isn't easy for me —"

Jaren's laughter sounded bitter to his own ears. "And we know it's all about you. Look, why I don't make this easy for both of us. I was just an easy piece, but you're done having fun, fuck what I want."

"Look, just hear me out."

"Are you here to say yes to me?" Jaren asked, his heart in his throat. He felt tears threaten at Cooper's silence. Damn him!

"You know, the time for talking was weeks ago." Jaren turned away and rubbed his eyes. "Just go away."

"I'll go away when I good and goddamn well please." Cooper's massive hands reached for him and Jaren nearly tripped to avoid contact. He wouldn't survive it if they touched.

"I can't believe I didn't know what an asshole you were."

Cooper didn't answer, too busy scanning the room in that cop way he had. Jaren waited for him to meet his gaze again. "Nothing to say?"

"Why don't you turn on a light and we can talk over coffee?"

"Oh, did you bring some? Did I miss it?"

Cooper sighed again. "Jaren, I'm trying here, but you're pushing me. We can talk like adults, or I can beat the shit out of you until you listen."

Jaren got up in his face and felt a surge of triumph when Cooper's eyes widened. Good. Let him see how changed he was. "You don't run shit up here. This is my cabin. I'll throw your ass out before you can think about laying a hand on me. Got that?"

Cooper blinked slowly. "And what are you going to do, Jaren? How you going to fight me?" His voice came in soft puffs against Jaren's lips.

Jaren's heart leapt. How was he supposed to control himself when all he could see, all he could smell was Cooper? He wanted to strangle the man. But more importantly, he wanted to reach out and kiss him again. His eyes zeroed in on the firm lips that had haunted his every waking hour. He knew they could be soft and comforting or hard and demanding. Right now he wanted both. He forced himself to take a step back.

"I want you to leave, Cooper."

"I can't, Jaren." Cooper squinted at him and then cocked his head. Jaren's stomach rolled. Nothing good came when he got that look.

"Why not?"

"Because Ortega escaped today. And he's coming to kill you."

Chapter Two

Bile rose in Jaren's throat but he forced it down. He'd finally relaxed enough to stop peeking over his shoulder, and now the man who haunted his dreams was on the loose. He placed his hand over his heart, sure it would beat right out of his chest.

"How the fuck does something like this happen?" His grip tightened on the gun at his side. He'd never shot a person before, had never wanted to until now. Ortega might be bigger, but a bullet would stop him. It had to stop him.

Cooper watched him silently, then reached for the gun.

"Think you should give this to me." He tugged but Jaren held firm. The cold metal should have felt odd in his sweaty hand, but instead it was comforting.

"You sure he's coming for me?"

"Very." His tone said more than that simple word. Anger burned in his gut. All this way and Cooper still couldn't be honest with him.

"Well, don't leave me in suspense!" Cooper's jaw tightened at his tone and Jaren shoved aside a twinge of guilt. He sounded like a petulant child, but dammit he deserved to know.

"He wants to make more movies of you."

Jaren closed his eyes. Those damnable movies. They had helped break the case as well as his spirit. What had felt so right with Cooper had been so wrong to the others. What did that say about him? What kind of sicko was he?

"So he's looking for you too?"

"Not exactly."

Jaren's eyes flew open at Cooper's tone. His mouth ran dry. Memories of Ortega with the other boys flashed in his mind. Acts of love twisted into the thing of nightmares; disembodied voices calling for help that came too late.

"This time he'll be your costar. And after he's had you in every way he wants...he plans to kill you."

"We've got to get the hell out of here."

Jaren snatched up his shirt and had the door half opened before Cooper grabbed him and wrestled the gun from his grip. His wrist stung, and he cradled it in his other hand.

"Calm down."

"I'm calm. I'm fucking calm! If I were any calmer, I'd be dead. Now let's get out of here before the sadistic son of a bitch we put away decides to come for our throats." His voice shook and he bit the inside of his cheek to stem the other words that wanted to pour out of him. He felt naked without the gun. Cold that had nothing to do with the elements seeped into him. He wrapped his arms around himself, but nothing could stop the shivers.

Cooper thumbed the safety and put the gun on the side table. He grabbed Jaren's shoulders and shook. "I know you're scared, but we can't go off half-cocked. Look at you." He gestured at Jaren's nakedness.

"We can't leave now. I barely made it up here and I'm not wasted. How far you think we'd make it with you half dressed and jumping at shadows?"

Jaren flushed and broke eye contact. Shame warred with guilt.

"I...you..." He shook his head. He remembered how he raged and drank, cursing Cooper with every other breath. Stupid, stupid, stupid. His pity party might get them both killed. He curled his hands into fists when Cooper shook him again.

"Hey! You with me?"

"Yeah." He couldn't meet his gaze.

"That's my guy." Cooper kneaded his shoulders. Jaren broke his hold and stepped away. He didn't deserve comfort. He felt Cooper's eyes on him, but he ignored it.

"I need to talk to my brother." His words sounded hollow to his own ears, and he could tell from Cooper's frown that he was worrying the other man.

"Five minutes. Then we plan." Cooper extended his phone, but Jaren ignored him and held his cell aloft. His hand shook and he fought to control it. There was no way he'd fall apart in front of Cooper.

"Jare—"

"I'm just going to call Simon. In there. From the bathroom." He knew his smile was brittle, but he was holding on by sheer force of will. If he didn't get away from Cooper soon, he was going to fall to pieces right at his feet. The last thing this situation needed was him crying and begging the man to love him. He slammed the door before Cooper could say anything, speed dialing his brother as he threw the lock. It didn't make a full ring before Simon answered.

"You okay?" He relaxed a fraction at the sound of his brother's voice. If Simon told him they'd make it out alive, he'd believe him. They never lied to each other.

"Yeah." He paused. That was a lie. He might never be okay again. "I'm not hurt."

"He's okay," he heard Simon say and was sure he was talking to Stef. It got quieter and then suddenly he heard nothing but his brother's breathing. Jaren struggled to match his breathing to it and felt slightly better.

"Jare?"

"I'm still here."

"I know you wanted Coop there for another reason. But he's the next-best thing to having me there."

Jaren scoffed. "I doubt it. You've never made me so mad I wanted to rip your balls off and cram them down your throat."

Simon laughed and Jaren could hear the relief in it. "I don't want to think about Coop's balls. But the fact you can make jokes gives me hope." He sobered. "I wish I could come and get you."

"No, no way. I'll be fine with Cooper. You stay there and take care of Stef."

"This is my fault. I never should have gotten you into this." Jaren's leg bounced and he was glad Simon couldn't see it. He didn't want to have this discussion. Not when his brother only knew part of what he'd done at Ortega's house.

"I wanted to help. Besides, it's not your fault Ortega is on the loose."

"Doesn't make me feel any less worse that you're out there while Stef and I are safe." Ortega might have escaped police custody, but there was no way he'd be able to get into the panic room his brother had built in his basement.

"You two stay safe. Cooper will take care of me." As he said the words, he realized he meant them. Cooper would take care of his body. His heart was another matter entirely.

"You do what he says. He's running the show. And I'll see you tomorrow." He could feel Simon wanted to say more, could picture his brother trying to form the words, but in the end he said nothing. And the moment was gone.

"Stef wants to talk to you." Jarren heard Simon mutter, "Make it quick."

"Honey, you okay?" Her Southern accent warmed him and he sagged with relief.

"Yeah. Didn't even know anything was wrong until Cooper showed up."

"Don't you worry about Ortega. The cops will get him soon enough. I'm talking about you and Cooper."

Jaren didn't know what panicked him more. The man who wanted to destroy him or the man who already had. Logic told him Ortega was the more dangerous of the two right now, but his heart wasn't so sure.

"There is no me and Cooper." And yet even as he said it, he wanted to be proven wrong. Nothing would make him happier than to have those strong hands stroking him or holding him in place as Cooper fucked his mouth. He grew hard thinking about it.

"He's trying. I know it doesn't look like or feel like it."

Jaren swallowed past the lump in his throat and shifted himself through his jeans. "Did he say anything to you? About me?"

He cringed at the longing in his voice. Thank God Cooper couldn't hear him now.

Stef's hesitation was his answer.

"Never mind. I don't want to know."

"It's not like that. Cooper's not a touchy-feely guy. Think how crazy this must be for him. Can you blame him if he doesn't want to discuss his involvement with his partner's brother who also happens to be my brother-in-law? It's like an episode on one of those trashy reality shows."

Jaren forced a cheerfulness he didn't feel. "I see your point."

"But don't give up. He's a different man since this case wrapped. I think he'll come around."

Jaren was equally as sure that he wouldn't. He made the appropriate noises and wrapped up the call. Talking to his family had calmed his panic, but his nerves were still stretched tight. He swigged mouthwash and then splashed water on his face. He focused on his breathing and his new mantra. *I can get through this. I can get through this.*

He wasn't sure he could.

Cooper stared at the closed door and willed it to open. Their relationship was a complication they couldn't afford, but damn if it didn't keep cropping up. His mind should be on defending the cabin, and yet all he could think about was the delicious heat of Jaren's bare shoulders against his hands. When they had been eye-to-eye, it was all he could do not to lean down and bite Jare's neck.

Jaren loved when he did it, and if Cooper was being honest, he'd admit he liked it too. A man's flavor, Jaren's flavor, was different from a woman's. Where a woman was soft and juicy like a perfectly ripe piece of fruit, men were stronger, saltier, but no less delicious. The look in Jaren's eyes had said he wanted whatever Cooper could dish out, but he recovered from that quickly.

He shook his head and then stabbed in a number.

"It's about time," Linda snapped.

"Update me."

"Oscar's holding steady. Clive is still missing. No one's spotted Ortega, and I've been waiting for you to check in. You find him?"

"Yeah. We're both at the Jones' cabin."

"You're safe, though?"

"Yeah. I've got the area secure." His mouth twisted at lying to a teammate. He silently vowed to have it secure in the next ten minutes. God knew he'd been here long enough to have done so.

"Did you check in with Simon?" he asked.

"I tried. Didn't get an answer. I'll keep trying though. The cabin's a good place to be. It's isolated, but that should make it pretty easy to defend."

"You've been here before?" Cooper's brows rose. When Jaren had invited him, he'd thought the area was a secret.

"Yeah, Simon let me borrow it when I had to take leave." An awkward silence fell as they both remembered the bust that had resulted in her mandatory leave of absence a couple of years ago. They'd lost a few other officers that day, and Linda had a permanent limp for a souvenir. Now this mission was going south as well. But Jaren wouldn't get injured. Not as long as Cooper had breath in his body.

"When are you heading back?"

He pulled off his cap and ran his fingers through his hair. It galled him to be stuck. He couldn't help but feel like a sitting duck.

"Won't be until sometime tomorrow morning. The fog's rolled in pretty thick and visibility is nonexistent."

"Stay safe."

He hung up and checked his watch. Jaren's five minutes were more than over. And Coop was going to get him out of the bathroom even if he had to drag him out bodily. Which he'd probably have to do. He sighed, removed his hoodie and tried to calm down. Now that he knew Jaren wasn't in immediate danger, his body wanted to attend to other needs.

Jaren still looked good, even with the weight loss. And the stench of booze. Simon would have told him if Jaren had developed a drinking problem, but being greeted by stubble and wino-breath made him wonder. There was something off in his eyes, an edge that hadn't been there before he'd dragged him into the depravity of Ortega's world. He was responsible for that. It had been his choice to take Jaren, his choice to let it go as far as it had.

And his own sick desires that wished it had gone further. He still wondered what it would be like to sink balls-deep into Jaren's ass. To have him completely at his mercy as he held him on the edge of coming. He took a step toward the bathroom before he realized what he was doing. He had to get a grip.

Focus on the mission. Lack of focus got people killed. He looked around. Two rooms. Bedroom. Bathroom and tiny efficiency kitchen. There was only one bed and it loomed like a giant in front of him. A gigantic sleigh bed with—he tested it with his hand—a fluffy down mattress. It was big enough for the two of them, but he knew that when it was time to sleep they'd gravitate toward each other. He closed his eyes against the image of him spooned against Jaren's tight backside. They'd slept like that a dozen of times during their time at Ortega's, and despite the pressure of the situation, he'd loved it.

The feeling of Jaren's muscles relaxed against him should have repulsed him, but that was one feeling that had never come up. His slightly smaller body tucked into him had made him feel strong. And horny. He'd thought he'd have a hard time pretending to be into guys, but something about Jaren had grabbed him.

Though the younger man had been the aggressor in their first kiss, they both knew that Coop was the dominant one of the pair. He slept curved around Jaren. It was his leg that slid between Jaren's. His hands that had pushed Jaren to his knees to suck him off. At the time he'd told himself he was doing it just in case Ortega had cameras in the room, but deep down he knew the room was clean. Just like he'd known the bathroom was clean when he'd taken Jaren into the shower. He'd felt as depraved as Ortega, using Jaren's cooperation to get his cheap thrills, but Jaren wasn't a child. He was a grown man who made his own decisions. And unlike Coop, he knew exactly how he felt about their time together.

Coop rubbed the back of his neck and breathed deeply. Now was not the time. He pounded on the bathroom door.

"Time. Come out, Jaren," he called. Another full minute passed and Coop was just about to kick the door in when Jaren came out.

"How ironic. *You* want me to come out." His eyes were dark with something Coop didn't want to name. He sidestepped the insult.

"You get Simon?"

Jaren shook his head and closed his eyes. "Just going to ignore that, huh?" He opened his eyes, completely emotionless. "Never mind. Forget I said anything. Simon and Stef are fine. They're locked down and have called in."

"Good. Linda Mathis has been trying to reach him, but is getting nowhere." Jaren made a face at him but remained silent. "Tell me what we're dealing with here."

"You're the one who lost your criminal, so why don't you tell me what we're dealing with."

“Dammit, Jaren! You think we don’t know we screwed up? We’ve got one man in ICU and another missing, presumed dead. I’m here to help you regardless of what you want. So cut the bullshit and work with me here.”

Jaren’s jaw worked and Coop nearly yelled in frustration. He fisted his hands to prevent himself from reaching for Jaren. He wasn’t sure if he would shake some sense into him or hold him down so he could nibble that fantastic jawline. Indecision was new to him and he found he didn’t like it. Jaren looked at his fists and straightened to full height before giving Coop his back.

“Not much to tell,” he said, moving a large basket onto the floor and draping it with a down jacket. “This is the only cabin in this section of woods. It’s possible to approach from the rear.” His smile looked strained. “But only an idiot would try. About half a mile behind the cabin is a rock climber’s dream. Nearly vertical cliff face that goes up for a couple hundred feet. At the top of that is another smaller, rougher cabin and yet more climbing to the fringes of a national forest preserve.”

Coop was silent, willing Jaren to turn around. When it appeared they’d stand there all night facing the same direction and not talking he caved. “How many times have you climbed it?”

“Enough,” he said, rummaging in the basket while keeping the contents hidden. He turned, holding another bottle of wine and a corkscrew. “Enough to know that I can make it up there if push came to shove, but also enough that I’d avoid it unless there was no other choice.”

“I don’t think the wine is a good idea right now. We need clear heads if we’re going to make it out of this in one piece.”

“Well I think having wine right now is the best thing I’ve heard since you got here.” He continued with the corkscrew, his navy eyes daring Coop to stop him.

“Jaren, I don’t want to do this right now.”

His laugh grated on Coop’s nerves. “You never want to do this. Unless you can do it in the course of a case. Then it’s okay because you can pretend. Pretend to just be

acting while you're coming harder than you have in your whole life. Using my body in the name of the law."

"Shut up. Just shut the fuck up."

"Why? You know I'm right."

"Just shut the fuck up, Jaren." Coop stalked to the edge of the table.

"Or what? You're going to let Ortega have me?" Jaren swigged straight from the bottle. Wine dribbled down his chin, droplets clinging to his dark whiskers. "Is that what gets you off these days? First it's pretending to be gay, now it's watching another man plow the ass you wished you'd been brave enough to take—"

Coop cut off his next words with his lips. One hand grabbed Jaren's waistband while the other held his jaw in place. Lips smashed together, Coop applied pressure until Jaren's jaw popped open and then swept his tongue inside. He dove into Jaren's mouth, his kiss meant to punish, but it got away from him. Anger turned to lust and he burned even hotter.

He backed Jaren against the counter and wanted to give a warrior's yell when his own erection pressed against Jaren's. He rocked into Jaren, grinding crudely, and was rewarded with a groan.

He heard rather than felt Jaren put down the bottle and when the other man's hands touched him, his heart stuttered. Jaren's hands were tugging at his clothes, grabbing his ass and Coop couldn't get enough. He broke off to nibble along the stubble that had upset and intrigued him since he'd seen it. It was an odd sensation, but hearing Jaren spurred him on. His lips traveled down the strong column of throat—pausing to lave at the pulse that was jumping—and ended where Jaren's throat met his shoulder. He stopped, merely breathing on Jaren's skin, heightening their anticipation. Both men knew what was coming, but the buildup was half the payoff.

"Please, Cooper." Jaren's hoarse voice was barely recognizable. "Just. Please." His head fell back, muscles calling for a taste.

Coop licked once. Twice. And then bit down. Hard enough to hurt, but not hard enough to break skin. Jaren's body bowed into his, his hands gripping Coop's ass as if he'd never let go. His own hips double-timed and the friction was delicious. Faster and harder, their jeans making it this side of painful.

A litany of "please Cooper" spilled from Jaren's throat and robbed him of all sense. It was too much. It was not enough. Coop thought he might catch fire if something didn't give, and he was ready to burn. Jaren's leg wrapped around his waist, pulling them even closer together.

"Take me, Cooper. Make me yours. I'm yours." The words were like a kick to the gut. Coop froze, gritting his teeth at the feel of Jaren still grinding against him. Shit. He'd just meant to stop him from drinking. Not attack him against the counter like an animal.

"Stop, Jaren."

"I don't want to," he moaned. His hips continued to punish them both.

Coop forced his hands to Jaren's hips and pinned him against the counter at arm's length. He tried not to get distracted by the kiss-swollen lips, tight nipples that begged to be tasted or the feel of Jaren's hips warm beneath his hands. His gaze dipped to Jaren's erection and he knew he looked hungry. He blinked hard and dragged his attention up to an accusing gaze. Guilt nearly choked him.

"Why did you stop?"

"We can't do this now." He cleared his throat. "Ortega could be here any second. We both need to concentrate on staying alive and making it back to civilization tomorrow."

"There's never going to be a time, is there?" To Coop's horror, Jaren's eyes brightened. If the other man cried he didn't know what he'd do. "You know what? Fuck it." Jaren pushed out of Coop's hold and Coop allowed it. Jaren walked to the door and threw the lock.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"Firewood," he answered without turning around. "Fireplace is going to be the only warmth. Since you'll be sleeping on the floor and I like to be comfortable, we'll need more."

Cooper pushed him out of the way. There was no way he was going to let Jaren outside. Not even if he wasn't half naked and pissed off enough to be decent in a fight.

"You stay here. I'll get the firewood since I have to secure the area anyway."

Jaren squinted and he prepared himself for a battle before the other man swore and stalked away.

"Whatever."

"Lock the door behind me, and don't open up to anyone but me."

"I'm not an idiot, Cooper. Besides, there's nothing out there that could hurt me more than what's already inside here." Coop wanted to defend himself, but knew he didn't have a leg to stand on. He left without another word. The cold air stabbed his lungs as he waited to hear the lock engage. It was nearly a minute before he stepped off the porch. He almost wished there was a problem outside. Anything to relieve some of his frustrations.

Chapter Three

Jaren fought the perverse urge to unlock the door and dance in the doorway, but despite his most recent actions, he wasn't a complete moron. His fingers speared through his hair, pulling at the roots. The pain should have eased the erection but he was still hard enough to bust his seams. What kind of glutton for punishment was he? He'd made an ass of himself again, and Cooper had rejected him. Again. Yet he still wanted the man.

He wanted to kick Cooper's ass. He'd have to kick his own ass after that. How could he just fall into Cooper's arms, ready to do anything he wanted with nothing more than a kiss? Cooper hadn't changed. His feelings for Cooper hadn't changed. He was just as screwed as he'd been before the cop had arrived. Maybe more so.

Before he could stop himself, he slowly pulled back a corner of curtain to scan the darkness. Simon was the officer in the family, but Jaren could hold his own. The full moon gave enough light for him to see a few feet beyond the cabin, though the dense fog prevented him from seeing the ground clearly. He'd spent many nights in this same position in awe of the beauty before him. Now all he could think about was the danger that could be right before his eyes. As if conjured by his thoughts, Cooper glided into frame, hugging the shadows so closely that he lost track of him a few times. Emotionally he might be a lost cause, but the man clearly knew what he was doing.

Jaren backed away before he was spotted. Cooper already thought he was a drunken idiot. The last thing he wanted was to be caught, pressed against the window, mooning over him. He was wired, his skin too tight. And now that Cooper was handling the firewood, there'd be no physical exertion to tire him out. His eyes lit on the abandoned wine.

He raised the bottle to his lips and paused. This wasn't going to solve anything. Even stinking drunk he wouldn't be able to relax with Cooper in the same room, breathing the same air. His body bathed in the flicking light from the fireplace. He could barely keep his hands to himself now. Like liquor would prevent him from touching? Kissing? Licking?

He upended the bottle and poured it down the sink before he could second-guess himself. That got rid of the booze, but where was he going to hide the rest of the items from Stef's gift? He lifted the basket crammed to the brim with lube, condoms, blindfolds and other items of kink. It seemed a shame to throw it all away, but looking at it drove home how alone he was.

That moment when Cooper had backed him against the sink had been the best thus far. Better than all the moments he'd spent pretending to be Cooper's boy-toy for the benefit of the case. Because he'd known that was real.

No one was watching and the two of them had nearly combusted. Cooper had kissed him because he'd wanted to. Not because of his job. Not because he felt he had no other choice. And it had felt good. So damn good he hadn't wanted to stop. He'd thought Cooper was there with him, until he'd pushed him away.

The quiet knock on the door broke him from his daydream and he shoved the basket under the kitchen table. Bottles and tubes went rolling and he scrambled to grab them and shove them into the basket. A second, louder knock sounded and he scowled. He wasn't ready to face Cooper again, but knew he couldn't leave him outside all night.

"Jare, it's me."

He rolled his eyes. Who else could it be? He opened the door and immediately went to look out the window. It wasn't interesting, but it beat staring at Cooper.

"Everything is quiet outside. No one anywhere close. Think we just gotta hunker down and make it through— Hey what's this?"

Jaren turned and immediately wished he could disappear. The yellow tube was dwarfed by Cooper's hand, but Jaren knew what it was.

"Give me that."

"Banana-cream-pie-flavored lube?" Cooper's voice held a hint of humor, but Jaren still cringed. "Something I should know about?"

"Stef gave it to me." He reached for it, still avoiding eye contact.

"You don't think it strange that your sister-in-law buys you lube?"

He looked up and Cooper's grin caught him like a sucker punch. Jaren had given up on seeing Cooper so carefree, his dimples flashing, his eyes alight with humor. Dammit, why did he have to be so handsome?

"It was for my birthday. Mostly wishful thinking on both our parts, but you know how she is. She was certain you'd show."

"I did."

"Yeah, but not for the right reasons." Jaren snatched the lube from Cooper's limp fingers and returned it to the basket. He shoved it under the table. "Let's not talk about it."

"Jaren, we have to."

"No we don't." Jaren put his hands on his hips. "Look, I promise, no more drinking and no more yelling at you. I'm done. We'll get through tonight and I'm sure by then someone will have seen Ortega. He's off the streets and you and I can go our separate ways. We'll run into each other occasionally at Simon's, but no big deal. We can avoid each other."

Cooper growled. "This is why I want to talk. You're missing the point."

"No, Cooper. You're missing the point. This isn't open for discussion because we can't manage to talk. We're both too raw." He walked over, his eyes drinking in the face he still wanted to wake up to in the morning. "So let's not make our last bit of time together harder than it has to be. There's a sleeping bag in the coffee table, and I'll keep the fire going tonight."

"Don't be a dick. You've had your say, now I want mine."

Jaren sighed. "It's too late, Coop." Jaren had never used his nickname before and he could tell from Cooper's grimace that it bothered him now. "Look, I'm tired. You're tired. And we might be visited by a psychopath who wants both our heads before morning. So why don't we both lie down and get some sleep so we can be fresh no matter what comes."

He could see Cooper wanted to argue, and he didn't think his heart could take it. He'd already had to say bye to him twice now. He didn't want to do it again, face-to-face. He reached out and grasped Cooper's shoulders, feeling them bunch beneath his hands.

"Please, Cooper. I just want to get through the night. You owe me this much." He had no idea what Cooper saw in his eyes, but the bigger man backed down. Jaren swallowed the lump in his throat. "You can use the bathroom and I'll set up the sleeping bag."

"You don't have to." His voice was gentle and Jaren knew they were both thinking of the times he had prepped the bed while they'd been at Ortega's. He turned away before he resorted to begging.

"I know I don't have to, but I want to." Jaren felt the weight of Cooper's stare, but didn't dare turn around. He bent at the waist to grab the sleeping bag, trying not to listen for Cooper's footsteps. Intent on ignoring the sounds around him, he stood with the bundle in his arms and found himself pressed against Cooper's chest.

"What are you doing?" He tried to step away and but Cooper's strong arms banded around him.

"Shh. You've had your say. And we're going to do it your way right now because there's not much choice." His words rumbled against Jaren's back and his heart melted. Cooper's breath against his ear made him shiver. "But I don't have to like it. And I don't. Simon knew how things would be going in, but you didn't. I wanted to protect you from that, and from anything else that Ortega might try. I failed us both. And I'm

sorry.” He brushed a featherlight kiss below Jaren’s ear, gave a tight squeeze and walked away without another word.

Jaren stood rooted to the spot, wanting to melt to the floor and arrange himself for Cooper. Wanting to bang on the bathroom door and demand entrance. While both were what he wanted, neither was good for his heart. He didn’t move until he heard the water come on, and even then his mind was racing, providing images of the two of them christening each piece of furniture in the place. Even the tub. His erection was a painful pressure, but he refused to shift the ache away. If his hands got anywhere near his cock, he’d lose control. He’d rather die than have Cooper catch him jerking off.

He piled another blanket on top of the sleeping bag and threw down one of the pillows from the bed. It didn’t look inviting, but Jaren hardened his heart. There was no way he’d survive sharing a bed with Cooper, and no way he could switch spots with him either. He’d spend all night thinking about Cooper’s bronze skin on those country-white sheets and it’d all be over. He shook his head and walked over to the bed. The cool sheets were no longer inviting when something much hotter was mere feet away. He reached for his zipper, then thought better of it. It was one thing to sleep naked when he was alone—truth be told he’d known it would probably come down to him dreaming of Cooper and relieving himself in the night—and another to tempt fate.

He climbed into bed still clad in denim. Maybe the restrictive fabric would strangle his ardor. The door to the bathroom opened and he tensed, waiting for Cooper. He gasped as Cooper walked by, shirtless, his pants barely clinging to his hips.

Jaren’s mouth ran dry. It was going to be a long night.

Cooper forced his eyes to remain straight ahead as he walked past the bed and slid inside the sleeping bag. He adjusted the bulge threatening to demolish his zipper. He wanted to take off his pants, but knew he needed to be prepared to run in case Ortega came after them in the night. If it was just him to consider, he’d stand and fight the guy.

But there was no way he was going to let Jaren get caught in the crossfire. Not again. He'd do whatever it took to keep him safe.

Jaren came first this time. It galled him that Jaren didn't realize that he was more than just a dirty secret. Hell, he meant more than all of Coop's last ten relationships combined and if that wasn't a sad commentary on his life, he didn't know what was. He could blame the job, but that would be a lie. Or at the very least, a half-truth. He wasn't built for relationships, but Jaren made him wish he were different.

He forced himself not to fidget and stared into the dancing flames. This must be what hell was like—to lie so close to your greatest temptation and still not be able to taste. He swore he could smell Jaren's scent. It had been a mistake, kissing his neck like that. Instead of satiating him, it had just made him hungry for more. And not just Jaren's body.

The jarring, disjointed feeling he'd had over the last few weeks was gone. An hour with Jaren and he no longer felt that the world was slowly strangling him. He'd missed Jaren, even more than he'd admitted to himself. Jaren had a way of making things brighter than they were without even trying.

His insomnia was back now that he no longer had Jaren's tiny snore that wasn't quite a snore to lull him to sleep. He'd eaten nearly every meal in the car to avoid sitting across from an empty seat. And he returned home later and later to escape the echo of his lonely steps through his apartment. It ate at him that he no longer got to hear that laugh that was not quite silent, but had no other sound than mirth. From the royal ass-chewing Stef had given him, he knew that Jaren wasn't doing well since their assignment had been over. But what could he do?

He'd been undercover more than not in his career. The rules were stay alive, catch the bad guy and never get involved. Two out of three wasn't good enough. He hadn't been able to think of Jaren as just another part of his assignment. Another cop would have known how to retain some distance, but every moment he'd been with Jaren, he

had known he was all in. They might have been knee-deep in an assignment, but Jaren's eyes told a different story.

He wanted to submit to Coop's touch. He loved taking Coop deep into his throat. No one was that good of an actor. Coop took another deep breath to calm his racing heart. He had loved every second of it too. To see him go from clean-cut corporate to overly done pretty boy was something he'd never forget. Jaren had gone from khakis and a polo to distressed jeans and wife-beaters seamlessly. His normally wash-and-wear hair had been subjected to a two-hundred-dollar hair cut and more product than it had seen since his teen years. They had shaved him of all facial hair, making him appear much younger than his thirty years. Even more impressive was the fact he never once complained.

He had ruthlessly drilled Jaren on their back story until the other man could answer any question thrown at him without blinking. Their drive to Ortega's had felt intimate in more ways than one, as Coop had told Jaren what might be expected of him.

"Will you be all right with what we might have to do? I know my brother told you about me, not that I make it a habit of being with strange men. But..."

Coop had rubbed his jaw, which for this job was unshaven. "I'll get through it."

"Fair enough." Jaren's eyes had burned into Coop's profile until the other man had looked at him.

"What?"

"You don't have to worry about me. I can hold my own in a fight." He smiled, showing a slight dimple in his right cheek. "You don't grow up Simon's brother without knowing how to defend yourself. And then later when I came out, there were people who thought they'd pick on me. And they soon learned I wasn't about to just lie down and take it." His smile turned wicked. "Though sometimes that is more fun than it sounds."

Coop's head jerked in surprise.

"Relax, Cooper. I was joking. At least I mostly was." He stretched his arms and stacked

them behind his head. "Is that something my character would say? Should say?"

Coop couldn't believe the newbie had gotten to him. Without looking at him, Coop reached his hand over and slid it up the inside of Jaren's leg. The younger man stiffened but didn't move away from his touch. Coop squeezed and slid his hand all the way up until he was a hairsbreadth away from Jaren's balls.

"Yes, that's exactly what you might say. And this is exactly what I might do in response to that." His voice was rougher than he'd intended. "You okay with that, Jare?" He squeezed again. "Because while it starts like this, I'm pretty sure it's going to end in a much different way."

In answer Jaren had widened his legs, causing Coop's hand to bump against his growing erection. "I can handle whatever you can dish out, Cooper." He pressed his crotch into Coop's palm. "I won't let you down."

Coop had left his hand there for a few moments longer, feeling the package under his hand grow in size and firmness. It was the first time he'd every held another man intimately and it both sickened and excited him. With one more gentle squeeze he'd let go, though he hadn't wanted to.

He'd told himself he was testing Jaren's commitment to the project, but later that night when he'd been showing Jaren off to Ortega and the other investors, he'd known it for what it was—he'd been testing himself. Testing to see if he could pretend with a man.

On the second day of their stay with Ortega, Coop had to admit he was in trouble. He wasn't pretending as much as he was running on instinct. The first time they kissed or held hands or snuggled side by side, he'd told himself that it was no different than doing so with his ex-girlfriend. By the time they were spooned into bed together he knew that for the lie it was. Being with Jaren was different, because it made him different.

For the first time that he could remember, he was relaxed in a relationship. Jaren laughed at his crude jokes and loved the way he called the shots in the bedroom. He

knew he was pushing this past the acceptable limits for an assignment, but there was something about knowing they had a ticking clock that made him throw caution to the wind. And Jaren met him every step of the way. Ortega had even talked to him about the level of affection he and Jaren had shared. It was unlike any of the other couples there and Ortega had been worried there would be an issue when it came time to shoot the footage. Coop had gone along with it, knowing in his heart he wasn't about to let anyone else touch Jaren. Though the image of Jaren on his knees servicing him was one he wouldn't mind capturing on film and watching repeatedly.

He nearly groaned aloud at the mental image. He turned his head toward the bed where all he could make out was the outline of Jaren's feet. The other man hadn't moved since he'd lain down, but he'd bet money he wasn't asleep. He'd wanted to come and see Jaren, had needed to do so to see if he could fix this ache in his gut, but he'd wanted to come here on his own terms.

He shifted in his sleeping bag. He knew he wanted Jaren in his life, but he wasn't sure how they'd manage it. How would he fit? Jaren had made it clear he was looking for more than a casual relationship, but that's all Coop knew how to do. He also knew he wasn't gay, but was tired of wanting Jaren and not allowing himself to have him. He sat up. Fuck this.

Sliding out of the sleeping bag, he walked in a crouch to the side of the bed before standing. He looked down to find Jaren staring sightlessly at the ceiling. This was his future. He'd never imagined himself having such a moment, but if he'd had, no way would he have pictured a tousle-haired, scruffy-chinned man with the bluest eyes he'd seen. He grinned. Wouldn't have it any other way.

"I'm done doing this." His voice sounded loud in the silence of the cabin. Jaren's eyes widened and he reached for the sheets. Coop almost laughed at his panic. Jaren would learn nothing could save him. Not now that he'd made up his mind.

"I'm sleeping in this bed. With you." Coop lifted the bedding and slid in.

Chapter Four

Jaren scooted across the bed as Cooper's big body edged in beside him. Common sense dictated that he leave the bed, but some perverse part of him refused.

"You can't just climb in my bed."

"Why not?" Cooper tossed a grin so smug Jaren wanted to punch his face in. "It's what we both want."

"Changed my mind." The lie tasted bitter in his mouth and he fought to keep his expression blank. Cooper rose up on one hand, watching him closely. Jaren broke into a sweat.

"Hmm. I bet I could change your mind." Cooper's finger traced over his lips before dragging a trail from his chin to his neck and back. Jaren's mouth ran dry. Such a simple touch and he was on fire. He forced a steady breath. He wouldn't just fall into Cooper's arms, he couldn't.

"In fact, I'd bet everything I own at this point." Cooper slowly lowered his mouth and brushed the barest of kisses at the corner of his eye. Jaren closed his eyes, but nothing could shut out the feel of Cooper's mouth tracing his jaw. Unconsciously he raised his chin, giving Cooper more access which the man capitalized on. His breath caught in his throat as Cooper laved his pulse.

"Your words say you don't want this, but your heart— Your heart tells the truth."

Was Jaren imagining it, or did Cooper sound as winded as he felt? He pressed his hand against Cooper's chest and felt his heart racing. His hands were hungry for the feel of this man, but he went slow. Jaren dug his fingers into that firm flesh and Cooper bit down on his neck with a moan. His pleasure ratcheted up another notch.

"That's it, baby. Give yourself to me. Let me have you." Words that should have filled him with longing cooled his arousal. He lost more than control when he gave himself to Cooper. He lost himself. He pushed him back and sat up.

Cooper sighed. "Jaren, don't act like you don't want me, don't want this."

Jaren didn't answer. He tugged his hands through his hair again. Cooper was guiding his movements, controlling him like he had at Ortega's. But Jaren wasn't that guy anymore. He needed more. He deserved more.

"Are you going to talk to me or not?"

What was there to say? *Cooper, I want to bang your brains out, but I'm pretty sure I'll come unhinged if I get that close to you and you shut me out again.* There was a mood killer if ever he heard one. His eyes lit on the basket. Maybe he had a way to get what he needed and keep his sanity. He slid from the bed, avoiding Cooper's gaze. "You stay here."

He felt Cooper's eyes like a physical caress, but kept his gait steady. He squatted and pulled out the basket. Digging in the bottom, he pulled out a deck of cards.

Naughty Notions. The card game of sexual favors.

"Thank you, Stef," he whispered. He busted the seam on the deck of cards which featured pictures of naked men on one side and sexual acts on the other. Quickly before Cooper approached, he shuffled through the cards. There was plenty here he wanted to do to Cooper, but he would only do it on his terms. If he had a strategy, he was less likely to make a complete ass of himself. He separated three cards, memorizing them. These would be enough to get him some relief and still leave his heart intact.

He stalked back to the bed. His cock jumped at the picture Cooper made sprawled across the sheets. All of that was his for the taking if he played this just right. He was about to make his move when Cooper beat him to it.

"Before you say anything, I want to say something." Jaren frowned and crossed his arms over his chest. Now was not the time for talking. Talking would lead to sharing feelings and right now the only feeling he was willing to share with Cooper was the

sensation of their skin against each other. Cooper crawled across the mattress until he was before Jaren with his legs on either side of his own.

"I don't deserve this second chance with you." Jaren's eyebrow rose and Cooper chuckled. Jaren barely contained his shiver. Cooper brooding was sexy and a bit dangerous. When he was happy, he was downright lethal. Jaren locked his knees. "Okay, more like sixth or seventh chance, but you know what I mean."

Cooper's hands grabbed his waist and pulled him closer until his legs bumped the edge of the bed. He dug his fingers into his sides so he wouldn't reach for Cooper. Cooper's hands traced slow circles over his back, each one stroking the flames higher. He needed to do something, and soon.

"I'm so grateful that I'm here, with you. So thankful that I can do this." He leaned forward and pressed a kiss against his wrist. A kiss so gentle Jaren's heart caught in his throat.

"And this." Cooper rose up and bit his nipple before kissing away the sting. Jaren swayed closer, barely remaining upright. His breaths were coming too fast. Cooper was confusing him, would continue to do so, until he overwhelmed him with sensations. Jaren had to regain control.

"But most importantly this." Cooper stood until they were pressed together from thigh to shoulders. His hands grasped Jaren's head, holding him in place as his mouth descended. Their lips met and his kiss pushed Jaren over the edge.

Cooper may have started the kiss, but Jaren took it over. His tongue rushed into Cooper's mouth and the other man jerked in surprise. This time Jaren held *his* head in place and didn't let up the pressure until he had to come up for air.

Cooper gazed at him, his eyes bright with passion and confusion. Jaren strong-armed Cooper back onto the bed and followed him down. His head was spinning, but as long as they didn't talk, he wouldn't be lost. Touch he could handle. He caged Cooper in with his arms.

"You going to say anything?"

"Pants. Take them off now." His voice was tight with lust. He put actions to words, reaching for Cooper's button before the man could get there. He had the zipper halfway down before Cooper stopped him.

"Slow down, Jare—" Jaren cut off the rest of his statement with his mouth. He'd intended the kiss to shut him up, but once again he was swept away by Cooper's taste. He leaned into the kiss, pressing Cooper back into the mattress. He straddled his lap, grinding down against Cooper's half-exposed cock. So good.

"Don't want to slow down." Truth be told, he couldn't. Cooper reached for him, but he slid from his grasp. He tugged the pants from Cooper's body, kissing every inch of him that he exposed along the way. He paused at the fresh scars on Cooper's abdomen. These were his penance for saving Jaren's life. His mouth trembled as he gently kissed around the shiny new skin. He'd come so close to losing him then, and yet he still lost him later. He forced his mind away from those thoughts. Emotion had no place here. This was meant to drive Cooper crazy, to relieve the ache he'd had since Cooper arrived and to get the man out of his system. He continued until he reached Cooper's toes.

"Want to tell me where the fire is?" Cooper's voice may have been steady, but his body gave him away. His chest rose and fell in quick gasps, his nipples stood at attention, begging to be tasted. A flush rode his cheeks and his heavy-lidded gaze was bright with lust. Dear God, he was beautiful.

"Clearly it's right here." Jaren squeezed the bulge that was straining Cooper's black boxer briefs.

"Jesus, Jaren." Cooper sat upright and Jaren met him halfway. The kiss was hot, out of control and just what he needed. It blazed every rational thought out of his brain until the only thing he could think of was Cooper. He had no idea he was murmuring the name until Cooper caught his chin and forced him to meet his gaze. "I'm here, baby. Right here."

In answer he grasped a handful of Cooper's hair and tugged until his throat was exposed. Pretty words were not what he needed right then. He started at the corner of

Cooper's mouth and took his time nibbling down the strong column of his throat. It was the first time he'd gotten to explore Cooper and reality more than surpassed fantasy. He smelled of sweat and tasted like heaven. Nothing had ever turned him on more than Cooper beneath him. By the time he reached the hollow at the base of his throat, Jaren was panting as much as Cooper was.

"Lie down." He pushed Cooper's shoulders with his hands, leaning his weight into him when he felt his resistance. This would not be like their times at Ortega's. There Cooper had guided his every move, but Jaren knew what he wanted, and Cooper needed to know that. "Trust me."

It took several moments, but Cooper finally relaxed beneath his hands. Jaren wasted no time pulling his boxer briefs down. His cock sprang up and Jaren's mouth watered. The ways in which he'd missed Cooper's body. He sat on his heels and stared, heightening both of their anticipation.

"Well don't just stare at it."

Jaren grinned slowly. He liked having this sort of power over Cooper. The power of control was nearly as seductive as all of that naked flesh.

"I don't tell you how to do your job, so don't tell me how to do mine."

"So now I'm your job, huh?" He ignored Cooper's cocky grin and crawled up his body. He sealed his lips over Cooper's, unwilling to hear anything more from the man. Everything in him was pushing for harder, faster, more, but Jaren forced himself to slow down. He explored Cooper's mouth as if he had all the time in the world when he was a hairsbreadth away from losing control. Not until Cooper was clutching his back and pulling him down did he end the kiss. His mouth licked, nipped and kissed down Cooper's neck and on to the nipples that had been taunting him all night. He paused, allowing his breaths to puff against the distended skin which tightened as he watched. This was new territory for them and he wanted to savor it.

"For fuck's sake, do something already." He didn't have to look up to know Cooper was glaring at him—he could hear the heat in every syllable. Perfect. As long as Cooper

was suffering, he could hold out a little bit longer. He traced the areola with his tongue, but never came close to touching what they both wanted the most. When Cooper would have sat up, he pinched the other nipple to the point of pain.

“Jesus!”

“I said trust me.” He kept the pressure up and blew on the other nipple. Cooper’s skin broke into goose bumps. Jaren wanted to rub against him, to bask in the changes he’d brought to Cooper’s body, but he didn’t dare.

“I do, but you’re taking too long.”

Jaren smiled against his skin. Mr. Still Waters himself wasn’t too steady. He wondered if he could unhinge him completely. “I’ll get where I’m going in my own sweet time.”

He released Cooper’s nipple and felt a surge of triumph at his tortured groan. Jaren bit the other nipple and Cooper bucked into him. Jaren did it again and then froze when their cocks met. His hand encircled both their girths, hot pre-come dribbling on his fingers. He squeezed, smashing their cocks together and both of them groaned. Cooper writhed beneath him. They were both so close and yet, he wanted more.

Jaren placed nipping kisses down Cooper’s belly, his pleasure heightened at each muttered expletive that was ripped from Cooper. He hovered over the nest of curls and inhaled. The scent of musk and man combined to make him lightheaded. His gaze met Cooper’s.

“Suck me, baby. Just do it already.” Cooper’s voice shook in a way Jaren had never heard before. His hands white-knuckled the sheets on either side of his hips. This was what he’d been waiting for.

Jaren gripped the base of Cooper’s cock. Cooper would come when Jaren allowed it. He gave a long lick from the edge of his fingers all the way to the tip. His tongue held the position both to torment Cooper and because the taste of this man was all he craved.

“Jaren.” He shuddered at the rawness of his name on Cooper’s lips. This was as close as he would come to begging, and it would have to be enough. With a groan he

couldn't contain, Jaren engulfed the head of Cooper's cock. He licked in varying strokes, some sharp and quick, others long and slow, until Cooper's hand grabbed his head. For one second, he thought about letting Cooper guide him, but decided he wanted to finish this his way. When Cooper tried to push him closer, he resisted. Jaren slowly allowed Cooper's cock to slide from between his lips.

"I said trust me." He could hear Cooper gritting his teeth and almost grinned. His always-in-control lover was coming undone and he relished it. He squeezed Cooper's erection and loved the way his hips moved into the action. Right now he, *this*, was the center of Cooper's world.

"Dammit, Jare. You know what I want—" Jaren cupped his balls and Cooper's words stopped. He massaged the tight sac and grinned when Cooper's eyes squeezed shut.

"I promise to give you what you want, but I'm in control, understood?" Cooper nodded, his eyes still firmly closed. Jaren gave another squeeze of his sac and watched the flush spread from the middle of his chest to his cheeks. He fought for breath. Seeing Cooper like this wreaked havoc with his emotions. He wanted to comfort his lover, nearly as much as he wanted him to suffer. He stroked his cock from root to tip.

"Please, Jaren." Those two words shattered his control. He opened his throat and took Cooper until his mouth met his hand. His throat constricted, and Cooper shuddered beneath him. His hands were again in Jaren's hair, holding on rather than demanding control. Jaren set a fast pace, his hand and mouth working Cooper until he could feel the heat of Cooper's come. He relaxed his grip and took Cooper deep into his throat. Hot liquid shot down his throat and he greedily accepted it. He had missed Cooper's taste and at the end of their night, it was even sweeter. He eased back, pressing gentle kisses against the softening cock. Cooper's hands still gripped him tight though the tension had left the rest of his body.

Jaren closed his eyes at the rush of emotion. He alone had been able to do that. He had driven Cooper that crazy—had made him completely lose control—and then

brought him such peace. This was supposed to be about physical release, nothing more. He quickly sat up, his back to Cooper. His body ached, but he had to get away from Cooper before he did something stupid. He stood, only to be pulled back by Cooper's grip on his jeans.

"Where do you think you're going?" His sex-roughened voice made Jaren shiver. He didn't get a chance to answer before he found himself flat on his back with Cooper kneeling over him. Though he knew he'd regret it, he forced himself to look at Cooper head-on. His grin and the flush of release combined to make him look younger and carefree. And infinitely more dangerous to Jaren's heart.

"I'm not done with you just yet."

Cooper's mouth descended, his tongue demanding entrance. Jaren was helpless to stop it, helpless to stop his own response. All the fight drained from him, and he melted against the strong body pressing his into the mattress.

Cooper's heart raced as Jaren finally relaxed beneath him. Here was the guy he was used to, the one he had missed, though this new side of him had merit too. He lifted his head, glad to see that Jaren's blank look was gone. He preferred Jare to look passion-drunk and rumpled. It made him even hotter to know that he'd been the one to make him that way. If his coworkers could see their mild-mannered buddy now, they'd definitely have a different opinion of him.

"As I was saying, I'm not done with you."

"It's late, Cooper." Jaren's breathless voice belied his words. He would have slithered out from under him, but Cooper sat on him. The heat of his erection seared Cooper. It was a new sensation, but he liked it. He moved his hips against Jaren and grinned when his lover's breath caught.

"We clearly have some unfinished business to handle. And I intend to get my hands all over it." Jaren's eyes widened at his statement and that gave Cooper the strength to continue. This was all new to him, and it felt so odd to be out of his depth. His chest felt

tight and he would have rubbed the spot if Jaren hadn't been watching him so closely. This was important and he didn't want to screw it up. Unlike the times at Ortega's, there was nothing here to guide him. Nothing to dictate his every move.

Cooper's gaze went from the top of Jaren's messy hair down his bare chest and the trail of hair that disappeared into his waistband. If he did this, if he took this final step, then his path was set. Shame, confusion and uncertainty warred until he met Jaren's gaze. Every feeling save excitement fled. How could he doubt this was right when Jaren looked at him like that? Jaren belonged to him. And it was time he started acting like it.

He kissed Jaren before anything could derail him. This was something he understood. The taste of Jaren made him hungry and it wasn't long before he trailed kisses down his jaw and along his neck. It felt odd to feel such strength beneath him, but the more he touched, the more he craved it. He wanted to explore Jaren's body, but now was not the time. He had to keep going before the other man tried to change his mind again. He hesitated for a moment, his mouth hovering over Jaren's bellybutton, his erection a heavy heat against his chest.

"Decide you're done for the night?" Jaren's voice was both a plea and a dare. Cooper swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry.

"Not a chance." Faking a calm he didn't feel, he nibbled down the trail of hair that disappeared into Jaren's waistband. His hands fumbled as he unbuttoned Jaren's fly, but he kept at it. He tugged, but Jaren remained stubbornly still beneath him. He rose up on his knees, until his gaze clashed with Jaren's.

"Lift up, babe." He could tell by the tilt of his jaw that Jaren wanted to be difficult. He palmed his cock and squeezed until Jaren lost that mulish expression. Cooper forced himself to just hold him there. This is what he wanted, what both of them needed. "I'm getting this one way or another. You can help me or you can fight me." Cooper grinned. "Hell, I might like it if you fight me."

Jaren's brows lowered and Cooper nearly laughed. He was even cuter when he was pissed off. How he'd resisted him this long, was a miracle. The two of them had never

sparred, but the thought of it, the two of them rolling around, grappling for position, gave him all sorts of ideas. He filed it away for later as Jaren finally raised his hips. Cooper made short work of his jeans and boxers before he could give himself time to think. He pulled in a deep breath and focused on the exposed flesh before him.

Cooper had touched Jaren, but he'd never just looked at him before. Nerves had him gripping the sheets instead of reaching for what he wanted. Everything was before him and still he hesitated. Why was taking what he wanted so hard?

"It won't bite." Jaren's voice was a challenge that Cooper couldn't deny. Shoving aside his anxiety, he took Jaren into his hands. Jaren was thicker than he was and not as long. He pulsed in his grip and Cooper slowly stroked him, his eyes focused on the bead of moisture that appeared at the tip. He wanted to taste Jaren more than he wanted his next breath, and he didn't know which one was more necessary for his survival. He looked up to find Jaren's dark gaze boring into him.

Never breaking eye contact, he tentatively licked. Jaren remained silent, but his nostrils flared. Cooper did it a second time, taking in Jaren's flavor. He was salty, earthy and utterly delicious. Cooper licked him again, spurred on by his taste and the sounds Jaren couldn't contain. Soon the licks were not enough to sate him and he took the head into his mouth and sucked. He was actually sucking cock, and the thought that should have shamed him, inflamed him instead. He moaned and closed his eyes. Instinct guided him and he took Jaren deeper, allowing the man to thrust into his mouth.

One ill-timed thrust and Cooper froze on the verge of gagging. Panting, he slowly released Jaren from his mouth, reluctant to give up his prize. He bit back a curse as reality slammed into him hard. He'd nearly choked on his lover's dick.

"Sorry about that." He sat up and gave Jaren a grin he didn't feel. His lover stared back, all flushed face and bright eyes, and it burned him that he couldn't satisfy Jaren. "Just give me a minute—"

Jaren sat up and would have swung his legs from the bed if Cooper hadn't stopped him. "It's okay. This wasn't exactly the best idea in the world."

His pride stung and he swallowed the bitter words that were his first thought. It was odd to be this awkward in the bedroom and to have it thrown in his face. But if he was going to go through with this, if he was going to make this work, he was going to have to admit he didn't always have the answer. There were some things that Jaren would have to teach him.

He grabbed Jaren's jaw and forced him to meet his gaze. "I'm not done with you yet."

Cooper leaned in and captured Jaren's lips once again, but kept the kiss light until he felt all resistance melt. He wanted to devour Jaren but forced himself to go slower. This was bigger than just making Jaren come, and he'd be damned if he failed. His hands roamed over sweat-damp skin, his touch growing rougher, more possessive with each pass.

And still they kissed. When Jaren would have pulled away he grabbed the nape of his neck and nibbled at his lips until the other man relaxed in his embrace. It was a seduction, but damn if Cooper wasn't being seduced as well. By the time he allowed his hand to touch Jaren's cock, he knew he had won. Jaren whimpered into his mouth as he started a strong, steady pace. When his hips would have sped up the action, Cooper squeezed until Jaren let him once again take control.

"Please, Cooper." Jaren's voice shook and Cooper hoped like hell it was more than just lust talking.

"Anything you want, babe. Anything." He spoke the words into Jaren's mouth as his lover came, bathing them both in warm ropes of seed. Jaren groaned and Cooper felt it all the way to his soul. Nothing had looked so beautiful as Jaren undone beneath him. Nothing had ever felt more real. This was worth any shit he might catch later. He feathered kisses over Jaren's jaw and throat and eased out of bed. He returned with a warm cloth and cleaned them both before sliding in next to Jaren.

It wasn't as perfect as he'd wanted it to be, but it was a start. He curled around Jaren, rubbing his face against his cheek. "I think I like the stubble," he whispered.

Jaren grunted, but didn't open his eyes. Cooper grinned. He'd worn him out, and unlike the time at Ortega's, he allowed himself to savor this. He slid his leg between Jaren's and drew him farther into his embrace.

"We have a little time before dawn, so let's use it. Sweet dreams, babe." He whispered his words against Jaren's nape and grinned at his shiver.

Chapter Five

Jaren lay in Cooper's arms, feigning sleep. It hadn't taken long for Cooper to fall asleep, but it had felt like an eternity. He could tell from Cooper's kung fu grip that the man was exhausted, but no one would ever use that as a reason to suck another man off. Or at least try to. Cooper had probably never been awkward in the bedroom, and it had to mean something that he was willing to risk it. But what? Jaren's mind spun, still not sure what had happened. There was no one watching, no one to mislead, but Cooper had come after him like there was nothing he wanted more in the world. And he had fallen for it.

Was still falling for it. Even though he knew it would only leave him open for more heartache, he couldn't regret the feel of Cooper naked against him. Not when his body still ached for what he'd felt before. If this was all there ever was, he wanted to imprint it on his soul so he could pull it out whenever he needed to. Nothing was settled between the two of them, but this moment was what he'd always envisioned they could have. Well, part of it. Getting off had never been their problem but eventually he would need more. Much more than what Cooper would be able to give.

He frowned. Could he settle for just this between them? They'd each go back to their separate lives and he would be Cooper's...dirty little secret. Jaren forced himself to put some distance between them, but couldn't make himself leave those arms completely. He held still until Cooper's breathing evened out. This...whatever it was, wouldn't be repeated. Only a fool would believe this could turn into anything more. Once they were away from the high-pressure situation, they'd go their separate ways and that would be the end of it.

His heart wouldn't hurt so much if he could think of Cooper as an insensitive asshole. The man had put him through hell, but deep down, he wasn't a bad guy. Just

confused about something that had been second nature to Jaren all his life. It might have worked if Cooper could unbend, just a little, but he couldn't. Jaren closed his eyes and willed himself not to cry. His dream man lay wrapped around him, and he'd never felt more alone.

He needed to think, but there was no chance of that with Cooper's sweat-sticky body plastered against him. Slowly he separated their limbs and slid from the bed. Without Cooper's warmth, Jaren was hard-pressed not to shiver. If he were honest, he could admit the cold was coming from the inside out. He walked to the bathroom, intent on scrubbing the smell of Cooper from his body.

Jaren paused in the doorway to make sure Cooper was still asleep and wished he hadn't. He'd only thought Cooper was irresistible when he smiled. Asleep his face went soft, almost boyish. His long—almost too long—lashes shielded his hard eyes and gave him a vulnerable air. That combined with all of his bare flesh, and Jaren knew he was in trouble. He rubbed his chest as he waited for the water to heat.

He'd been on an emotional roller coaster in the last twelve hours and he just wanted to get off. His lips quirked at the thought of how Cooper would answer that one. Quietly he closed the door and allowed the room to steam. He didn't bother turning on the lights, allowing the starlight from the high window to bathe the room in a shadowy glow. If he was into lying he'd say he did it save his eyes, but he knew he didn't want to face himself. Or the marks on his body that would show what they had done. There was no way Cooper hadn't left bruises, though those would fade much quicker than the ones he'd left on Jaren's heart.

He climbed in, water heating him as hot as he'd been before, but not on the inside where he needed it. He leaned against the tile, wanting the stream to pound out his worry and his heartache. He'd almost rather be alone than suffer through this mishmash of feelings. He wanted to go out there and snuggle against Cooper or maybe ask him to shower with him. They'd done that once at Ortega's. Cooper had been imparting information but Jaren hadn't been able to concentrate with all that skin

within licking distance. His cock twitched at the memory, but he forced himself to remain in the shower. Jaren couldn't blame Cooper for shredding his heart when he just kept handing it to the man.

He lathered in angry swipes, punishing his body for reacting to the man who was driving him crazy. How nuts was he that surviving the next few hours with Cooper worried him more than trying to get home? Or that he was still trying to reason his way back into Cooper's arms?

Both his family and his office were comfortable with who he was. No one would think twice about Cooper in Jaren's world. But Jaren knew it wasn't the same for Cooper. Assuming the other man felt even half as much as he did, people in his day-to-day life would have noticed. And inattention in his line of work was deadly. He wondered if Cooper had admitted to anyone what was really on his mind. Or if he'd been on his mind at all.

Jaren growled.

"You know, Simon told me there weren't any bears in this area."

Jaren jumped when Cooper's voice floated over the curtain. He closed his eyes and prayed for strength. Cooper's scent enveloped him like a lover's embrace in the night. It was almost anticlimactic when Cooper's actual arms twined around him and pulled him flush against his body. The water felt cold on his stomach in contrast to the hot length pressed into the small of his back. He wanted to turn and press into Cooper, but he also wanted to run. In the end, he stayed just as he was. Neither decision was the right one. Not for the first time he wished he was alone to think; or at least in the city where there'd be noise to help him escape the thoughts. Despite his best intentions, he stiffened. Cooper's arms tightened.

"What are you thinking?" His whispered words against Jaren's ear caused goose bumps.

"Nothing. You surprised me."

"Who else would sneak into the shower with you?" His words were punctuated by kisses that melted Jaren's resolve. In the dark it was easier to just accept what little Cooper would allow him to have. He didn't stop the hands that slid over his chest and grabbed his hipbones. "I love your body, but this is too much."

Cooper traced the protrusions. "We're going to have to do something about this. Can't have you looking this hungry when I can feed you."

Jaren grew harder with every word. By the time Cooper's hands had followed the crease in his leg and reached his cock, he was already dripping pre-come.

"I wish I could see you. You're so hot right now in my hands. I want to touch you like this, and you're going to take it. Give me your hands." Cooper didn't wait for Jaren to cooperate, but found his wrists in the dark. Jaren's heart double-timed as Cooper extended his arms until his palms were flat against the tile beneath the showerhead. When he would have pulled them down, Cooper returned them to their original spot.

"No, I want you to keep them there. No matter what I do, I want you to keep those hands right there." He slowly trailed his hands down Jaren's forearms and then to his shoulders. Neither spoke as Cooper massaged Jaren's shoulders, and despite his best efforts, Jaren relaxed.

"See, I can make you feel good, baby." Jaren's cock, already tormented by the steady stream of the water, jerked. "You just have to trust me."

Again, he tensed, and Cooper dug his fingers in harder. Whether in warning or not, Jaren wasn't sure. Cooper's sigh ruffled the tiny hairs on Jaren's neck. "I know you don't believe me, but we can get past this."

"Cooper."

"Not another word." Jaren shivered at the anger in those three words.

"I'll prove it to you. How's that?"

Everything sane told him to put his arms down, but Jaren was curious to see what came next. His nerves stretched tight as he waited. Seconds, maybe hours later, Cooper

jerked back on his hips, pulling them farther away from the wall, leaving his body in a sharp lean. Cooper edged his feet apart and Jaren swallowed hard. Cooper leaned over him, his body caging him in, his dick fitting in the crevice of Jaren's ass. Cooper had always been in control, but he'd never been this aggressive. Jaren wanted to ram back and impale himself on the hot length that pulsed just inside of him, but it was something they'd never tried before. If they were going to take that step, he wanted Cooper to make the decision.

"I know you're thinking again. I can practically feel you doing it and I want you to stop it." Cooper shifted his hips, his cock rubbing his hole, but just barely. Jaren reared off the wall, but hadn't straightened to his full height before Cooper's hands once again caught his own and pinned them.

"Oh no you don't. I said I want those arms right here." Cooper slapped his hands on top of his, the action causing more friction in Jaren's ass. "They stay right here. Until I'm done with you. Until you see I can take care of you." His words held an edge to them, a roughness that Jaren hoped would be unleashed on him soon before he dissolved into a puddle at his feet.

"And what if that takes a while? It's not like this hot water tank is bottomless." Jaren barely recognized that raspy voice as his own.

"I'll keep you hot long after it's empty." Cooper bit down on his shoulder and Jaren arched, his ass grinding back on Cooper's dick. Cooper's fingers dug into Jaren's hips, holding him in place. Jaren kept his hands on the wall, thrilled at being out of control, and having Cooper equally as gone.

"You don't deny me. You don't deny this." The smell of bananas surrounded them and then a cool finger probed his entrance before quickly delving inside. Jaren bowed his head, hoping Cooper would continue and equally terrified that he would. This was something he wouldn't be able to walk away from. Cooper pumped in and out a few times before coming back with a second finger, then a third. He couldn't hold back his moan.

"You feel me? Feel how deep I am? And I'm just getting started." Jaren trembled both at the words and the delicious friction in his ass. In that moment Ortega and a parade of assassins could have arrived and he wouldn't have cared. Nothing mattered more than this moment right now.

Please, please, please. Jaren bit the inside of his cheek to prevent himself from saying out loud what his body needed. He broke when Cooper grasped his erection. "Please, Cooper."

"I will. I'll please you and I'll please me." Each word was punctuated by a harsh tug on his dick, or a rough pass through his ass. Jaren tried to break his rhythm, but Cooper seemed to relish the additional gyrations. Truth be told, Jaren loved it too, but if his balls got any tighter, his head might explode.

"Please, Cooper." Jaren didn't care if it sounded like the begging it was. His body was on fire and yet there was no relief. The stinging bites across his back and shoulders were killing him.

"Tell me what you want. Tell me what you need."

"You, Cooper. Just you." Jaren was mindless with the need to come and yet his hands remained on the wall. He wanted Cooper to take him, needed it more than he'd ever needed anything else. He cried out when Cooper removed his fingers.

"Shh, baby. I'm going to take care of you." Cooper's hands slicked over his torso and shoulders, but did nothing to soothe him. Awash in sensation, everything inflamed him. The water, Cooper's touch, the fact they were finally going to be together in every way.

Jaren held his breath as he felt the heat of Cooper's cock stretching him slowly. Too slowly. The man was killing by inches and it was all he could do to remain in position. His took a shuddery breath and he forced his muscles to relax. He needed Cooper to know he could take whatever he wanted to give.

"My God, your ass." Cooper's words were growled against his neck as he made yet another excruciatingly slow pass. And another. Each stroke burrowed him so deep that

Jaren swore Cooper would reach his heart. There was no way Jaren was going to survive this. Cooper gripped him hard enough to hurt, but Jaren didn't care.

"More. Give me more, take more." Jaren sounded crazed to his own ears, but he was beyond caring. He just *needed*.

Cooper grunted and his careful rhythm was shot to hell. Jaren could do nothing more than take it and love every rough caress, every pounding thrust that hit the right spot. By the time Cooper gripped his cock and began to stroke, Jaren was babbling, begging, dying from the inside out.

"Come for me." As if his body was waiting for that singular command, Jaren came undone. Over the roaring in his ears, he heard Cooper's groan and felt him pulse and release inside of him. The feeling of him, so hot and wet, shamed the water that still splashed them both and branded him Cooper's.

Jaren hung his head and panted for breath. His hands had remained on the wall, and now he fought the urge to start scrubbing his body. They were no closer to resolution than they had been five minutes ago except he was coated in Cooper's seed. His breath caught as Cooper slid from his body.

Cooper groaned against his neck. "You're doing it again."

Jaren licked his lips. He was not ready for this. "What?"

"Thinking too hard."

Jaren straightened, but didn't get far before Cooper had turned and pinned him against the wall. He could only hope his expression was as blank as he needed it to be.

"One of us should be thinking about safety."

Cooper's gaze narrowed. "It's that your way of asking me if I'm clean? Because I am. I used protection with—"

Jaren's guts turned to ice. How stupid could he be? Forget a broken heart; Cooper might have given him an STD and he'd been too caught up, too swept away to even think that far. The need to scrub intensified and his face must have showed it.

"It's not like there were a lot of them. Just a couple of women, who didn't mean anything because they weren't you."

He closed his eyes and prayed for strength. "I meant it's not safe for us to be holed up in the shower together. If Ortega had been outside, we both would have been done for."

"I doubt that he's going to be able to find us in the dark and fog." Cooper's hands framed his face and Jaren flinched. He forced himself to meet Cooper's gaze. The other man seemed to be searching for something, but Jaren doubted Cooper would find it.

The water had grown cold, but was nowhere near as cold as his insides. "So you think he'll wait and ambush us in the morning?"

Any other time, Cooper's exasperated sigh would have made him smile, but now it only made him want to puke. "You're going to insist on ruining this, aren't you? What just happened was damn good." The hands on the sides of his face tightened and Jaren wondered if Cooper wanted to bash his skull in.

"There's nothing to ruin, Cooper." Jaren stepped forward, ready to exit the shower, but he didn't expect to get far.

Cooper pushed him, and the sound of his back slapping the wall shocked him more than the feel of it. Cooper rushed forward, caging Jaren between hot body and freezing tile. Gone was the meager distance between them that had allowed him to think. Now Cooper's breath painted his cheeks as he appeared to struggle for control.

"Cut it out, dammit. I'm not going to let you walk away from me, from us. I'm trying to make this right. The least you can do is give me a chance."

Jaren snorted though his heart was cracking open wide. He had to get away before he did something stupid. Well, stupider. "It's not that big of a deal. We fooled around a bit, no need to dissect it."

Cooper's jaw worked and Jaren braced himself for a punch. If the look on Cooper's face was any indication, he'd soon be picking up pieces of his jaw. They faced each

other under the spray of water and he could practically taste the tension rising. "Do you even know what you're saying? Or why you're saying it?"

The muscle in Cooper's cheek was flexing at an alarming rate and Jaren could hear the crunch of him grinding his teeth. Cooper's deep breath pressed their chests even closer together and Jaren ignored the thrill of excitement that tried to rise.

"I don't think either one of wants to say something that can't be taken back."

"Like you haven't already done that."

"I said I'm trying to make it right and you just keep harping on the same damn thing."

"Cooper, let's be honest. If there wasn't a chance I'd be eating a bullet any minute now, you wouldn't be here. I'd be here. Alone. After you let me down yet again. So do me a favor and don't stand there and act like I'm out of hand here."

Jaren leaned forward and got in Cooper's face. It felt good to see the other man look uncertain for once. He took another step forward but Cooper held his ground.

"Deny it." Cooper stayed silent and Jaren grinned, though the victory was bitter. Despite everything that had happened, he still wanted to be proven wrong. The guilty look on Cooper's face was too much to stomach.

"That's what I thought. You can't. So forgive me if I can't get all excited over what amounts to a pity fuck." He pushed Cooper and was surprised when the other man fell back.

Jaren left the shower, grabbed a towel off the rack and exited to the main room. He stood in front of the fire, toweling himself with jerky movements. His hands nearly ached with the need to hit Cooper or hug him or...

If he were honest with himself, he didn't know what he wanted to do with Cooper at this moment. Anger and hurt warred with desire and love. He needed to get the hell away from him. The fresh air couldn't hurt either. He yanked on his jeans as Cooper finally exited the bathroom wearing nothing but a towel.

Jaren's mouth watered despite the anger burning in his belly. Cooper was still the hottest guy he'd seen in years and it wasn't fair for him to look that delectable when he was ripping Jaren's heart out. Again. His hand threw the lock before he consciously thought about it.

"Going somewhere?" Jaren barely fought the urge to flip Cooper off.

"Thought I'd get some fresh air."

"Not a good idea for you to go outside." Jaren wanted to throw something at him. How could he be this calm when Jaren was barely holding it together? If Cooper cared even a fifth as much as he claimed, there would be some evidence. Instead he stood there as if he were discussing ball scores.

"We only have a few hours left. Why don't you take the bed and I'll take the floor? I promise I'll be hands off."

Jaren clenched his jaw to trap in the "fuck you!" that was dying to come out. He almost wished Cooper would try. The slightest touch and he would do his damndest to break Cooper's face. He flopped on the bed and stacked his hands behind his head. Morning couldn't come soon enough.

Cooper sneaked glances at Jaren as he dried off and dressed. The man practically vibrated with anger and Cooper couldn't blame him. A perfect moment and he had failed them both yet again. He stretched on top of the sleeping bag and gritted his teeth. How was it possible to feel this satisfied and still be this on edge?

His mind replayed each scene. Instinct had guided him from the moment he'd entered Jaren's bed to the moment he'd come in the shower and it hadn't steered him wrong. He grimaced. The blowjob could have gone better but just to know the taste of Jaren made his own embarrassment worth it. He'd do it again if given the chance.

Assuming Jaren ever let him get that close again. A real danger if he couldn't say what was in his heart. Just the thought of life without Jaren had Cooper ready to bogart his way back into his bed but he forced his muscles to relax. There would be time in the

morning. First he would get them safely down the trail. Then he would convince Jaren to give him another chance. And nothing would tear them apart.

Chapter Six

The beep of his alarm jarred him awake and Jaren jackknifed in bed. A quick scan told him he was alone for which he was glad. He scrubbed his hands over his face and forced himself to get up when all he wanted to do was burrow his head beneath the pillows. Surprisingly, he'd lulled himself asleep after imaging the different ways he could torture Cooper.

None of them would work though. As much as Cooper had hurt him, he didn't have the heart to hurt him back. Even now, if there was even the slightest evidence that Cooper was sincere, he'd forgive him all the hurt and take him back. It was pathetic. He was pathetic. The only way this could possibly get any worse is if Cooper tried to make another pity pass at him. The thought left a sour taste in his mouth and he brushed his teeth until his gums ached. Somehow he had to make it through the next couple of hours without mentioning their non-relationship. He splashed water on his face but that didn't seem to help. He still looked like day-old shit warmed over.

By the time he exited the bathroom, Cooper was back. Dressed in a retread of yesterday's clothes with stubble on his chin, he should have looked a mess. The loaded holster over his shirt should have further detracted from his appeal. Jaren thought he looked like everything he'd ever wanted.

"Morning." Cooper's voice held a hint of gravel that played havoc with Jaren's resolve. He could feel Cooper's gaze on him and forced himself to move as normally as he could.

"Morning." He walked over and began shoving things into his pack. "I'll be ready to leave in a few."

The silence stretched on to the point of awkward and Cooper spoke a second before Jaren had decided to break the silence. He closed his eyes, thankful that Cooper couldn't see his face.

"Ortega could be anywhere between us and the road, and I want to be prepared. If anything goes down, you get down as low as possible and haul ass toward the road. My SUV is next to yours. They might disable both, but if you can get to the road, you can get to help. Anything happens, you get out."

Jaren shook his head, but didn't turn. No way. "Cooper, you can't expect me to just leave you if something happens."

"I can and do. I'm the professional here. I know what Ortega is capable of. He only wants to hurt you because he knows you're important to me." His words slowed on the last part of the sentence and Jaren's heart fluttered. What he wouldn't give for those words to be true.

"Look at me, Jare." He thought he'd steeled himself, but the look on Cooper's face stole his breath.

"I've managed to keep you safe for this long, and I'll be damned if I'll let it go to shit now. So I want your word. Anything happens, anything at all, and you get out."

There was no way in hell he'd bail on Cooper, and no way they'd leave if he didn't agree. He gave a slow nod and felt a tiny tendril of guilt at Cooper's sigh of relief at his lie.

"Okay, straight to the vehicles. Any trouble, you break camp. I'll get out and catch up with you later." Jaren made sure the fire was doused and then joined Cooper at the door. For several moments neither of them said a word, then Cooper leaned in and brushed a kiss across his mouth. Unlike all their other kisses this one was all gentle, no fire. Jaren swallowed the lump in his throat at the look in Cooper's eyes. A look that he'd never seen before. He cared. It might not be love, but Cooper *cared*.

"Listen, Cooper —" Another kiss stopped his words. This one felt like a promise.

"Save it, Jare. We'll have time to discuss this later." His thumb stroked Jaren's lip. "Let's roll."

Jaren literally saw his expression drop like a curtain over his features. Cooper the Cop was back in control. Cooper opened the door and Jaren tried to ignore the thundering of his heart. At this rate he wouldn't be able to hear an elephant stampede. He wished he still had the gun. Then he wouldn't be a complete liability to Cooper. Silence reigned for several tense moments before Cooper cleared the stairs and gestured him to follow. His mind was a mixture of fear and hope, but he forced himself to step exactly where Cooper stepped.

They had traveled less than half a mile when Cooper jerked to a halt and pushed him down. Jaren wasn't sure what set him off but he didn't argue as Cooper's weight bore him into the grass. Cooper half dragged, half pushed him several feet off the path. Jaren's heartbeat was so loud that it took several tries before he could hear Cooper's whisper.

"We've got company."

"Ortega?" Jaren hoped he whispered back, but couldn't be sure. Cooper remained on top of him, his eyes tracking something. He stiffened and Jaren knew they were in trouble.

"Son of a bitch! This just went from bad to goatfuck in less than twenty seconds. Change of plans. You get out of here and hide. Don't talk to anyone but Simon."

"And tell him what? That I left you to die in the middle of the woods alone?"

"Dammit, Jaren. We don't have time for this. Mathis is here with Ortega and she's not holding him prisoner. We've got a leak and I don't know who we can trust outside of your brother. So no heroics. If I don't make it out, you'll be the only one who knows the truth. Because if Mathis is involved, there's no telling who else is in Ortega's pocket."

"Cooper." Jaren's throat closed on the thought of Cooper not making it out alive. While he'd been worried about Ortega finding them, he'd never doubted Cooper's

ability to keep them both safe. Now it looked like he might not have one more chance to say what needed to be said.

"I know." Cooper pressed his lips against Jaren's neck.

"Let's take this off now. It will make it easier for you to run." Cooper allowed him to sit up and he eased the pack from Jaren's shoulders. Jaren got a good look at him and nearly vomited. Cooper was bleeding, the shoulder of his shirt covered in a spreading maroon stain. How could he have missed Cooper getting shot?

"Oh God, your arm."

"Hey, don't look at me like that. It's a flesh wound, promise. I've had worse." He smiled but his eyes had gone back to tracking in the woods.

"I'm going to cause a distraction and you're going to get the hell out of here. No buts."

Jaren didn't have time to answer before Cooper crouched and hurried to a group of trees several feet to the right of his hiding spot. Cooper spared one last glance his way and Jaren knew goodbye when he saw it. He willed Cooper to look at him again, but Cooper just fired off two shots in quick succession. The gun popping sounded loud in the clearing and Jaren jumped despite himself.

"Go!" Cooper stage whispered, shooing Jaren with his hands but keeping his eyes on the forest. Jaren still didn't hear the return fire, but saw bark explode off a tree not far from Cooper.

"I love you," Jaren whispered back, and the recoil through Cooper's body let him know the other man had heard. He waited for Cooper's next volley and then darted into the trees to his left. He knew they would be watching for him so he stayed as low as possible, ducking in and out of the trees, trying to sprint when he heard the gunshots going. He could hear yelling but no actual words. As the voices got fainter and fainter, he broke into a flat-out run. Letting his fear carry him away from the man he loved.

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Cooper leaned against a tree, panting. It was foolish to rest, but he didn't have much choice. It was rest now, or fall down and stay there. His gunshot was much worse than he'd let on and continued to gush with every heartbeat. He tried wiggling his fingers and wasn't surprised at the lack of response. If he made it out of this alive, he would definitely need therapy, maybe even surgery to get the use back. He patted his pocket—down to one clip and seeing double. Not good odds. If he didn't get some pressure on his wound soon, he was going to pass out. Worse, Mathis would know it and press her advantage. It was a bitter irony that the skills he'd personally taught her would be used to hunt him down.

He hadn't hit either of them. At first it had been intentional so that Jaren had enough time to get the hell out of Dodge. Now he didn't know if he had the coordination to hit a moving target. Both of them were still stalking him, and it was getting harder to elude them. Any moment now they would discover that Jaren was no longer with him and then he was screwed. Movement off to his left had him sliding down to his butt.

Ortega was less than thirty feet away, but facing the wrong direction. Cooper held his breath and lifted his gun. There was no way Ortega would miss him if he turned around and shaky aim was better than nothing. Sweat dripped into his eyes, but he refused to blink. Just when he didn't think he could hold position any longer, Mathis called out and Ortega abruptly darted the other way.

Cooper collapsed in relief. So close, and yet he needed to draw both of them even closer if he was going to save Jaren's life. There was no way he could go forward. Between the terrain and his blood loss, he'd be a sitting duck.

He backtracked toward the cabin, leaning on trees along the way. Twice his hand slipped and he fell to his knees, but forced himself to get back up. He'd been concentrating so hard on putting one foot in front of the other that he was surprised to find himself back at the cabin. The cabin he didn't have the keys to.

He used the butt of his gun on the window, cursing when it took several tries to break through. It took even longer before he was able to leverage himself up and through the waist-high window. The jagged shards scratched his face and blood joined the sweat stinging his eyes.

Cooper landed hard on the living room floor and stayed there until his vision cleared. He found the first-aid kit next to a toolbox under the kitchen sink. He stripped out of his shirt and got his first look at his wound.

Definitely a large-caliber gun. He felt his shoulder but found no exit wound. The bullet was likely still causing damage, but there was nothing he could do about it now. There was no time. He duct-taped a washcloth over it. It was the best he could do until someone came. If someone came. Ruthlessly he pushed his fear for Jaren aside. It might be too late for him, but Jaren would be okay. He had to be.

Gritting his teeth, he regained his feet and shuffled to the window, dragging a kitchen chair behind him. He fired two shots out of the broken window and then pulled the curtain back in place. When they came, he wanted the place to look as normal as possible.

Cooper angled the chair and slumped into it. He sent up a prayer that Jaren had made it out of the woods and had hidden. And called for backup. With the curtains drawn and the door locked he had a fighting chance that he'd see them before they saw him, though it was anybody's guess if he could take them out. He lifted his gun to rest on the window ledge, but even that didn't help him hold it for long. He leaned it against his chest, hoping he'd be able to lift it when the time came. Backup had to come. His life depended on it.

Chapter Seven

Jaren skidded to a stop and forced himself to walk the next few feet. Everything in him urged him to go, go, go, but Ortega could have more people. Jaren shivered as he thought about the thugs he'd barely managed to avoid the last time he'd tangled with this guy. Cooper wouldn't be able to save him this time. Jaren fought his own panic. Both Simon and Cooper would kill him if he lost it now. If one of Ortega's men didn't get him first.

Though it would take even longer, he walked the perimeter until he was on the opposite side of the vehicles. The stitch in his side was more pronounced and he could barely see with the sweat pouring into his eyes, but he could see they had flattened the tires on both vehicles. Didn't matter. Jaren would drive down the road on the rims themselves if it would get Cooper help. What he didn't see were any more people.

Jaren eased from his hiding place, still expecting a hand to yank him backward. He tugged the handle of his truck. Locked. He patted his pockets, but he already knew he wouldn't find the keys. They would be back on the trail in his pack. With his cell. He hurriedly tried Cooper's truck and got the same.

"Shit!" No weapon, no vehicle, and the love of his life was single-handedly trying to take on two killers while shot. There was no hope but to keep running.

His feet were moving before he'd completed the thought. The next sign of civilization was another two miles away, but he'd be damned if he failed Cooper. Holding his side, he forced one foot in front of the other, moving as quickly as his jellied legs would allow. Every footfall said "Cooper", and it was both a comfort and a torment to him.

A wave of nausea flowed through him, but he refused to slow down or stop. Who knew how much time Cooper had left?

* * * * *

Cooper came to as his head slammed against the wall. He saw stars. Literally saw those suckers exploding in his vision. He propped himself up, surprised he'd drifted. A quick look around showed he was still alone in the cabin. He shivered. Not sure if that was the cold or if this was *it*.

He checked his makeshift bandage. The blood had seeped through to the outside layer of the washcloth, but nothing else beyond that. His gun felt heavy, but he could still lift it. He peeked through the curtain. The sun was in the same position, so he hadn't been out for long. Neither Ortega or Mathis was visible. He needed to check the other window and the bathroom, but his body was reluctant to leave the chair.

Gritting his teeth, he shuffled over to the other window. Leaning against the wall, he waited until his hand was nearly steady before slowly inching the curtain to the side. Again, he saw no one and this time he allowed himself a sigh of relief. He wasn't sure what he would have done if someone had been on the other side of the glass.

Cooper leaned against the wall, letting it take most of his weight. He was bathed in sweat, and he'd barely walked fifteen feet. If someone didn't come soon he was going to have to chance leaving the safety of the cabin. He could only hope Jaren had made it to safety.

With a barely suppressed groan, he forced himself to straighten and head to the bathroom to check to make sure it was secure. It took him longer than he expected and by the time he was in the doorway his legs were shaking. His mind knew that his body was in trouble, but he forced himself to shuffle over to the toilet and stand on the lid. Cautiously he peeked through the window and nearly threw up with relief when the empty clearing was all he saw. He leaned against the wall and slid down until his butt rested on the seat. His breath was sawing in and out of his lungs like he'd run a marathon. There was no way he was going to make it down the mountain.

Cooper would have to stay here and defend himself the best he could with one arm and less than ten bullets. He'd faced worse odds, but never alone. Simon would have to

console Jaren. Cooper grimaced at the thought of causing the other man yet more pain. Funny how he was as close to death as he had ever been and the only thing he could think of was how Jaren would feel.

Regret burned like acid in his guts. He'd never be able to tell Jaren what was truly in his heart. Simple words that for some reason he couldn't, or wouldn't, have given him before. And now it was too late. He'd gladly give his left nut for five more minutes with the man he loved. There. He had admitted it and the sky hadn't fallen. The earth hadn't stopped turning. He was still an idiot who was dying alone, never having told the man who could have been his world that he loved him.

It would be hollow, but it was the only way he could give Jaren the words. He forced himself up, not pausing even when the floor tilted at an angle that meant he was close to landing on his face. He arrived at the table, bathed in sweat, shaking like an old man. He pressed his face against the smooth wooden surface hoping the feel would wake him up.

He came to moments later with his head still on the table and the throb in his arm missing. Shock. He was going into shock and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. He needed paper, but couldn't find anything but those damn sex cards. He grabbed the one on top, squinted and then began to write. It was short, and the most important thing he'd ever written – a love letter to the man who would bury him.

* * * * *

Jaren had long since passed both their vehicles and Ortega's locked SUV. His steps had slowed but with no cars in sight, he was forced to keep going. He tripped up the stairs of the first house he saw and banged on the door. He wanted to yell as well, but didn't have the air for it.

"What the hell?"

Jaren barely registered the words coming from the older woman behind the screen door. He was too thankful there was help. "Need...your phone."

"Are you on drugs? Henry I think he might be on drugs!"

"Dammit, Ida. Get out of the way. You, put your hands where I can see them."

Jaren responded to the command he heard in the voice. Ida was pushed aside and in her place stood an older man holding a shotgun on him. He didn't blame the guy, but he was getting damn tired of guns.

"You in some sort of trouble, son?"

Jaren knew he looked like some sort of druggie, so thin his clothes were falling off his body and drenched in sweat. He closed his eyes and forced a few deep breaths.

"Don't ask him that, Henry. He must be crazy. You saw him trying to break down the door. I mean, what is he even doing out here? No one visits this early."

"Hush, woman. You go in there and call the police."

"No! No police." Jaren could have swallowed his tongue as suspicion took root on Henry's face as well. His gaze darted to Ida to see her already dialing.

"Listen. I'm Timothy Jones' youngest son. We have a cabin—"

"Hold on, Ida." Henry squinted at him and Jaren could only hope his family resemblance helped him out. "I know Timothy."

"Then you know my brother, Simon, is a cop. I-I'm in trouble. I need you to call my brother. Not just any cop."

Henry was silent for several moments and it was all Jaren could do not to reach through the door and shake the man into action. It'd probably be the last thing he ever did, but it'd be one way to get an ambulance out here. He was willing to risk it if it would save Cooper.

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

He stopped his hands. Maybe Henry was finally getting the picture. "I'm saying we can't trust anyone other than my brother. I'm saying that we were attacked by someone who should have been a friend. I'm saying my...friend's been shot and I'm afraid what else might have happened to him while I've been trying to get help."

Jaren could tell by the tightening around Henry's eyes that his use of the word *friend* hadn't been nearly as neutral as he'd hoped. Screw him. He didn't need approval, only help. He was ready to force the screen door open and dial the damn phone himself when Henry relented.

"Turn around. Keep your hands where I can see them, and I'll put the phone outside."

Jaren was already in action before Henry had finished his sentence. He tensed when he heard the screen open but forced himself to remain motionless. So close and he'd be damned if he blew it. The door banged and Jaren was on his knees dialing his brother without another glance at Henry. Not even a full ring and his brother picked up.

"Simon. I need your help—"

"Jaren, where the fuck have you been?"

Jaren held the phone away from his ear, but could hear his brother clearly. For several moments the air was filled with his brother's tirade, moments that Cooper might not have.

"Shut up!" Jaren was sure it was shock more than anything that made his brother silent. "We're in trouble. Ortega showed up and Linda Mathis was with him. And Cooper's been sh-shot."

He would not cry. Nor would he allow himself to think of how bad it might be. Help was on the way, and now that he'd told Simon, he was going back.

"Son of a bitch," said Simon. "Where are you guys?"

"I'm at a house down the road." Jaren rattled off the address and then said the words that made his guts twist.

"Don't know where Cooper is. He made me leave him to call for help. He wanted me to hide, but I can't. I'm going back."

"No, wait for me."

"You'll never get here in time." Jaren's eyes strained back the way he came, but there was no one.

"I've been driving since Cooper called me this morning. I'm fifteen minutes out."

Jaren shook his head, knowing this was yet another promise he'd have to break.

"Can't wait. I've left him too long as it is."

"Dammit, you could be running back to your death. Coop might shoot you. Ortega or Mathis might shoot you. In the state you're in, you might shoot yourself."

Jaren gave a hollow laugh. "Not a chance of that. Cooper took my gun."

Simon swore a blue streak, but Jaren had stopped listening. He'd already wasted too much time.

"Listen. If this goes badly, and I don't make it, tell Cooper I loved him, okay?" He didn't wait to hear Simon's reply before he disconnected. He wasn't an idiot. It was basically suicide to run back into a situation he knew nothing about, completely unarmed, but he couldn't, wouldn't leave Cooper out there alone.

"Thank you." He placed the phone on the porch and jumped down the stairs.

"Maybe you'd better wait for your brother, son."

Jaren walked backward. "I know you heard what I told my brother. I can't leave him up there. Not if I can help it."

Jaren turned and started jogging back the way he came. His legs protested and he already wanted to collapse.

"Hey, at least let me drive you down the road!"

Jaren agreed, surprised that he hadn't thought of it himself. He was too worried to think straight. It took Henry less than a minute to travel the distance that had taken Jaren nearly ten. The car had barely rolled to a stop before Jaren jumped out.

"Son?"

Jaren turned back in irritation. He didn't want to seem ungrateful, but he couldn't wait any longer.

"Take this." Henry held out a bat. "I won't give you a gun, but it doesn't feel right to send you off defenseless."

Jaren took it, glad to have any weapon even if it would make his run back more cumbersome. He thanked him again before diving back into foliage that separated him from his heart.

* * * * *

Cooper heard them before he saw them. He stayed propped against the wall between the fireplace and the window. They were going to have to come in and get him because there was no way he would be able to take them out before they got inside. He was so weak at this point that any more movements from his chair were going to involve him face-planting on the floor. From the sounds of things, both of them had shown up at the cabin to take him on.

He shifted the gun to point toward the bathroom. Mathis wouldn't come through the front door. And if she was guiding Ortega, he'd follow suit. Tense seconds passed before he heard the tinkling of glass falling onto the toilet tank. He tightened his grip and tried for deep breath. He felt an eerie calm when Mathis finally entered the room, barrel first.

"Where is he?" Her eyes darted around the room, staying on nothing more than a second or two. She would be able to see the blood soaking through his shirt, but she'd seen him in worse situations. Hell, the two of them had worked through worse.

"Who?"

"Cut the bull, Coop. I know you and your little lover were holed up here last night. Simon's still bitching, which means he hasn't turned up yet. After the way you two got so cozy, I know if Jaren isn't with his brother, he's with you. Now you can tell me and I can put a bullet in him and make it quick. Or you can make me find him and then when I do, I'm going to hurt him. Badly."

Cooper's face gave nothing away but inwardly he celebrated. Jaren had made it! Now all he had to do is buy him enough time to get safely away. He looked at the woman he'd worked side-by-side with for years.

"Instead of talking about Jaren, let's talk about what you're doing here holding a gun on me."

She shook her head. "There's really nothing to discuss here, Coop. I went to the dark side. They have cookies. Isn't that what you expected to hear?"

"I don't know what to expect. I've never had a teammate betray me. The least you could do is give me a straight answer. You owe me that much."

"I don't owe you squat." Her voice was cold but her face showed uncertainty. She could probably kill Jaren without batting an eye, but Coop had brought her into the unit. No matter her bond with Ortega, that had to mean something.

"We both know you don't intend for me to make it out of here alive. Hell, I'm probably on my way into shock from the bullet you put in me earlier. The least you can do is tell me why. Why after years of working right beside me, helping me clean up the streets, why would you sell me out?"

"It's not always black and white, Coop." She sighed and lowered her gun, though it still pointed at his midsection. "I never would have let you get involved with this if I hadn't been on leave. I would have gotten McIntyre or Webs assigned. Anyone but you."

"Why?" He let his weariness cloud his voice. He wasn't as incapacitated as she thought, but if it got her to let her guard down, he'd play the invalid.

"I met Ortega about five years ago while I was working on the Helvet case. He wasn't our primary, so we let him go. He bought someone who knew who I was. One night I came home to find him in my bedroom waiting for me."

She seemed to be waiting for a reaction from him, so he waved for her to continue. There was still no sign of Ortega and he needed to play this out as long as he could.

"He said he wanted to kill me for deceiving him, but he liked how I had brought down Helvet. In addition to drug trafficking, Helvet had started to dabble in porn. His specialty being young boys who were desperate for money."

Coop inwardly flinched at the knowing look Mathis tossed him, but remained aloof.

"And?"

"He wanted to repay my kindness."

"By doing what?"

"He gave me money, Coop. I didn't want to take it. I actually gave it back that first night. But then he continued to show up at my house, somehow getting beyond the security system and the dogs, night after night, offering me money. Every night I resisted. Then I got turned down for that promotion. My brother needed money, a lot of money. He was in too deep with some bookies. My mother was worrying herself to death. And I wondered why I was resisting? So I took it." She looked at him, her eyes beseeching him to understand, but all Coop could think of was all the times she'd lied to his face.

"And you thought it wouldn't come with strings?"

She gave a bitter laugh. "Of course I knew there would be strings. But as I was no longer in danger of having the director's position, there wasn't much he could squeeze me for. I was just a lowly member of the team. Someone on a 'need to know basis', and so often I wouldn't need to know."

Her eyes grew distant. "He didn't come around for a while after that. So much time passed that I thought maybe he'd forgotten about me. I thought that by the time he came for his favor, I might even be retired and wouldn't have anything to offer him."

"And then?"

"He was one of the players in the Booth case."

Cooper winced at the name of the bust that haunted his team to this day. They'd almost been shut down permanently. So many things had gone wrong with the Booth case that it had nearly made their entire undercover squad national celebrities.

"He pretended to fall for me, which helped solidify my cover. Everyone bought it, but then Traverse got suspicious."

Cold dread knotted in Coop's stomach. Traverse had not walked away from the Booth case. He had a feeling he wasn't going to like what was coming next. His fingers tightened on the butt of the gun, but he forced the rest of his body to stay motionless.

"Which one of you killed him?"

"It wasn't like that. He found me talking to Ortega and wouldn't let me explain. At that point I hadn't done anything wrong."

Except take the money. The words went unsaid, but both of them heard it.

"So how did Traverse end up dead?"

"We argued, I tried to get him to stop and listen to me, but he wouldn't. Ortega heard us arguing. The three of us got in a fight for the gun, and...it was an accident."

Coop wanted to ask if she would claim his death was an accident as well, but he didn't bother asking. He had a feeling Mathis would find some way to justify what had happened. Didn't matter if Traverse had gone postal and tried to do her with a jagged piece of glass. In the end she'd sided with a criminal versus one of their own.

"And after he was shot?"

"What could I do? Those people understand one thing, and that's power. I couldn't look weak after Traverse went down. We made it look like someone else had been involved and it went away. In the end we got our guy."

"And you let Ortega go again."

"He wasn't the primary. We play it by the book." His eyebrows shot toward his hairline.

"And is this by the book? You've come out here, shot me and you plan on doing God knows what with a civilian, and this is after you've been in it how deep?"

"It's not like that."

"Then explain it to me, because from over here I'm looking at what used to be a good cop who is in bed with the dirtiest of bastards."

"You weren't supposed to be on this case! You weren't supposed to be a cocksucker!"

The word sat between them, ugly and hot. Coop waited for a flush of shame to come, but it didn't. What he and Jaren did wasn't shameful. It didn't get people killed and ruin careers. It wasn't what he thought he wanted in life, but it might have been what he needed.

"Anything is better than a dirty cop."

She shook her head. "Everything is still so black and white with you. It doesn't matter. Ortega wasn't talking, but that's because he wanted to see what I would do next. He was counting on me to get him out."

"And you wouldn't have been able to." Though somehow she had. Which meant she either had more accomplices, or she'd willingly shot more of their team.

"It was like a death clock. If I couldn't get him out, do you honestly think he'd keep quiet? I'd be in jail within an hour."

And there was his answer. He was thoroughly disgusted but forced his face to remain neutral. The second she realized what he thought of her, she would end him.

"So now what's your plan? Killing me won't keep either of you out of jail."

"You're right, it won't. But it will buy me some time."

"And you're just going to keep killing people to make him happy?"

"Not to make him happy, but to live. As long as I keep him and his friends happy, I stay alive."

Coop didn't mention it but he wasn't so sure that the other members of the team wouldn't kill her.

She opened her mouth, but whatever she had been about to say was lost in the noise of something crashing onto the bathroom floor. The stream of swearing let him know Ortega had finally made it inside and he was screwed. He might be able to talk Mathis into not shooting him until he could shoot her first, but Ortega was another kind of slimeball.

Mathis rolled her eyes and a glimmer of an idea came to Cooper. Maybe he didn't have to worry about taking them both out. Ortega appeared in the doorway, grass stains on his clothes and leaves in his hair.

"What the fuck are you waiting for? Shoot him!"

"Jaren's not here."

"I don't care. Cooper's right here and we can put a bullet in this bastard and then go cap the faggot."

"Listen, you put me in charge—"

"Well maybe I wouldn't have if I knew you were going to balk at getting your hands dirty."

She laughed, an ugly, grating sound. "I got pretty damn dirty busting you out of jail."

"Anyone could have taken that shot. You're useless to me."

Coop watched the fight like a tennis match, knowing it could only end badly. He was fading fast and hoped his reflexes wouldn't fail him. Though the danger to him increased by the second, it meant that Jaren was safe.

"I've had about enough of you threatening me. Just shut up."

"Dumb bitch. I'll handle this myself." Coop saw it happen in slow motion. Ortega pushed Mathis, then turned and leveled the gun at him. This close and it would be a kill shot. Coop swung up his gun knowing he'd never make it in time. He heard a gunshot

and waited for the burning impact but it never came. Ortega pitched forward, a shocked look on his face.

Neither of them said anything for several long moments. Mathis seemed transfixed by the body on the floor between them. He could almost believe she didn't know how it had come to this. "Now what?"

Her head wobbled as if pulled by an imaginary puppet master, and Coop literally saw her shake it off. The woman facing him was no longer anywhere near the one he trained with all those years. Dread settled, cold and heavy in his stomach.

"Don't be cute. We both know it had to come to this."

He straightened in his chair slightly. Her voice was totally flat and he knew it was all over. She was still trying to salvage her career. "It doesn't have to end like this. If you just tell them what happened, they'd go easy on you. We can both walk away from this."

She shook her head. "Much too late for that now. I liked you, Coop. I really did but you know too much. With you dead, I can spin this. The department will think you killed each other, and I can go back to Ortega's people with your blood on my hands."

Cooper could see her gathering resolve and knew he was out of time. He dove for the floor as he squeezed off two shots as fast as his shaky grip would allow. Mathis cried out and fell to the floor. Cooper swore as fire burned across his gut. He needed to get up and make sure she wasn't able to put a bullet in his brain, but his body wouldn't cooperate. He could only lie there in the widening puddle of his own blood.

* * * * *

Jaren charged the rest of the way up the path, certain his lungs were going to explode from his chest at any moment. He kept pushing and nearly fell to his knees when the cabin came in sight. Again he forced himself to slow down and observe. He didn't see anyone, which could have been good or bad. The sound of gunshots had him dropping to the ground where he stayed for several tense moments.

“Cooper!” He rushed up the cabin steps, staying low to the ground, and leaned against the door straining for any sound inside. When no shots were fired, he quickly stood and swiped the key from the doorjamb.

He unlocked the door open and crawled inside. It took his eyes a few moments to adjust to the interior and what he saw nearly made his heart stop. Cooper was sprawled on the floor, bleeding from yet another bullet wound. Both Mathis and Ortega were slumped in their own pools of blood. Though he wanted to run right to Cooper, he had to make sure it was safe.

The bullet wound on Ortega’s head would surely give him nightmares later, but for now it filled him with nothing but relief. Mathis was still alive, but he wasn’t sure for how long. Her breathing sounded oddly wet and the skin around her lips was turning blue. He pushed the gun farther from her reach and rushed to Cooper.

“Cooper. Can you hear me? Help is coming, baby.” He lightly smacked the face he wanted to wake up to every day for the rest of his life.

Jaren stripped off his shirt and balled it up over the oozing wound. He applied pressure while keeping up a constant stream of chatter, both to keep Cooper with him and to drown out the noise of Mathis’ breathing.

“I’ve been thinking about it a lot Cooper and I’ve decided you can’t be trusted to know what’s best for both of us. I mean you took that brilliant mind of yours and purposely went into a career where you might get shot. It’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. But if you tell Simon, I’ll have to kill you. He’ll think I think you’re smarter than he is – which I do, but you can’t tell my big brother that.”

“Just hold on, Cooper.” The tears he’d denied since they’d first separated welled up and rained down on the face of the man he loved. Jaren didn’t care who saw him cry. He was just relieved to see Cooper’s face react to the contact. He’d take a flinch over nothing any day.

“Cooper, it’s okay. It’s all going to be okay. I know you can’t see, but you got the bitch. Even injured, you were the better shot.”

Jaren straightened at the sound of footsteps pounding up the stairs. He grabbed Cooper's gun, holding it steady on the door. He hated to release Cooper, but he was the only defense they had. A shrill bird-call ripped the air and he almost vomited in relief. It was Simon.

He responded with a piercing whistle that was soon answered by an equally high-pitched tone from outside. He'd barely released the gun before Simon pushed through the door. His brother's gaze swept the room before he joined him next to Cooper.

"How bad is it?"

"Pretty bad. He's bleeding all over the place. If we don't get him some help soon—" Jaren forced the words to stop tumbling from his mouth. The cabin was now crawling with cops and he refused to go into hysterics. Simon might be his brother, but the other men there were Cooper's coworkers. He wouldn't embarrass the man.

"Chopper is landing any second now."

He nodded to Simon. Jaren knew everything in his brother's training meant he should take over Cooper's treatment, and it was a testament to how bad things were that Simon allowed him this. He swallowed more tears and ignored the bustle around him. The only thing that mattered was keeping pressure on the wound.

It seemed to take forever, but finally paramedics nudged him aside and began to work on Cooper. He was strapped to a gurney and out the door almost before Jaren could process it. He followed closely, not caring who saw him chasing down the love of his life. Around the back of the house, several leads hung down from a chopper that was suspended over the sheer rock face.

As he watched, they attached the leads to Cooper's gurney and air lifted him away. Left behind, with Cooper's blood slowly cooling on his skin, Jaren had never felt more alone.

Chapter Eight

Jaren hated hospitals. Logically he knew Cooper was in the best hands, but that couldn't calm the thudding of his heart. Even this far away, the beeps and whirrs of machinery were still present. Jaren couldn't see the large clock over his head, but he could hear it ticking. Every second was agony, each thunk another moment he could only think the worst. The doctors had taken Cooper immediately into surgery and after questioning, Simon and Stef had brought him here.

Jaren looked up as yet another person entered the private waiting room. Yet another officer he didn't know whose eyes he couldn't meet. He shifted in his seat, hyperaware he was the only civilian in the room. And the only one covered in blood. He took a deep breath and instantly wished he hadn't. The combination of antiseptic and the coppery stench of blood rose up to choke him and he gagged. He had to get out of here.

"You okay?" Stef's voice was loud in the tense silence and he felt all eyes turn to him. Their dead-cop stares made his skin crawl. He wanted to shrink into the cushions, unsure of who was friend and who would be implicated in the conspiracy.

"Yeah. Just need some air." He could tell she didn't believe him, and he nearly thanked her when she let it go.

"I'm sure Cooper will be fine."

His eye twitched and he fought for air, swallowing the words he wanted to scream. He was covered in Cooper's blood and still hadn't heard whether he would live or die. No amount of platitudes would make that right. Without another word he left before he could embarrass Cooper in front of his colleagues.

In the bathroom he scrubbed at his hands though the worst of the blood had been removed the first time he'd done this. The washing made him feel less useless, gave his pain an outside focus.

"You going to hide out in here all day?"

He met Simon's gaze in the mirror but kept scrubbing. His brother looked worried, but he wasn't sure if it was for Cooper or himself.

"You keep that up and you won't have any skin left."

He lowered his gaze. Simon didn't understand that the only thing keeping him together was this. He'd scrubbed but it was still there. He could still feel the sticky warmth of Cooper's lifeblood as he had fought to staunch the flow. Maybe by the time his hands were finally clean, there'd be news. He reached for more soap, but Simon slapped his hands and turned off the water.

"Enough." Simon scowled at him. He tried to reach around him, but Simon pushed him away. Jaren stumbled back and finally met his gaze.

"Feel better now?"

"I'll feel better when you stop acting like an ass." Simon was silent for a few moments, searching his face. Whatever he saw made him cross his arms over his chest. "Never figured you for a quitter."

"Where the hell—"

"Look at you. First bump in the road and you're ready to run."

"A bullet's a little more than a bump."

Simon shrugged. "If you're going to be with a cop, it comes with the territory. What happened to 'I'd do anything for him. I love him.'? Isn't that what you told Stef? Yet when he needs you the most? You bail."

Jaren trembled. Every word brought back the horror of the morning. The fear he'd be too late and the bitter moment when he realized he was. The moment Cooper had

needed him most had passed hours ago and he had failed him. The man he loved had been bleeding to death and he'd been too busy running.

"He could have died! And for what? Protecting me from some sicko? I can't—" Jaren bit his lip to keep from yelling anything more. His gripped his midsection trying to hold in his terror, his rage. Cooper was the only thing that could make him feel sane, and Jaren might shake apart before he made it out of surgery.

Simon looked at him with what could only be pity. Jaren dropped his gaze as two tears fell. His chest rattled with suppressed sobs. He would not cry.

"It's his job, Jare." Simon's voice was soft. "He's damn good at it. And if he died protecting you, I think he would have been happy with that."

Jaren cleared his throat and his voice wobbled just a bit. "But what if I can't?" he whispered.

"That's your call." Simon walked up to him and grasped his shoulders. "You have to decide if he's worth the fight. If so, then I know two guys who could be very happy together. If not, well... I guess what doesn't kill you makes you stronger." His heart squeezed at the thought of anything else hurting Cooper. Simon slapped him on the back and left.

It was as affectionate as the two of them got, and he knew he must look like hell for his brother to do it in public. He slid to the floor and pulled his knees to his chest. So much had changed in the past forty-eight hours, and yet so much hadn't. He was bruised and bleeding, but he still loved Cooper, still wanted him madly.

Was it that simple? Could he just reach out and take what he wanted? Love required a leap of faith, but you could only crash land so many times before you shattered completely. He'd laid it all on the line, and in the end Cooper had come through. Albeit in a way neither of them had ever expected, but that hadn't made their time together any less sweet. If the pain of unrequited love had nearly stolen his will to live, how would he ever survive if Cooper pushed him aside? Or worse, grew to resent how his life would change if they were together?

Cooper said he was ready for it, was willing to change, but how did someone prepare for something like this? What would the officers think? The rumors alone might ruin Cooper's career. Could he go back into that room with Cooper's coworkers and stare them down? He knew how he'd answer every question, but Cooper was another matter entirely.

The door banged open and Stef ran in.

"What are you doing down here? He's awake and asking for you!"

Jaren blinked stupidly at her.

"How long has he been awake?"

She tugged until he stood and then began towing him down the hall. "He just came out of the anesthesia. You were the first person he asked for."

Jaren's heart lifted and he knew he had to be grinning like an idiot. Of all the people here, Cooper had asked for him. First. Maybe that was Cooper's answer to all of his questions. They passed the waiting room where all the cops were now on their feet. He gave a jaunty salute as they jogged by. Let them wonder why he was going in first. Cooper had asked for him and damn if he wasn't going to give the man what he wanted.

Some of his joy faded as he stood in the doorway of the ICU room. Cooper lay on the bed, looking like an imitation of himself. His skin had a grayish cast and he seemed dwarfed by the beeping machines which took up a good portion of the room. Bandages covered almost all his torso and bruises covered the rest. Jaren had never seen a more beautiful sight in his life. He took his first full breath since finding Cooper lying in a pool of blood. This just might work.

"Hey, you." He wanted to slap himself for inanity. "Hey, you" were the words that were supposed to start the rest of his life?

"Took you...long enough." Cooper's mouth worked to speak more, but Stef shushed him.

"I know you want to talk to him, but the doctors said to rest." Cooper looked like he wanted to argue, but Stef went nose-to-nose with him. "Just keep it up and they'll throw him out." She kissed his cheek and stood. "Besides, I think this will say everything he needs to know."

She handed Jaren one of the Naughty Notions cards from the deck she'd given him for his birthday.

"Don't screw this up," she whispered. He heard more than saw her pull his brother from the room. He didn't want to take his eyes from Cooper, but the other man nodded at the card and raised his eyebrow.

He looked down and smiled. It was the blowjob card.

"I think we'll have to wait on this until you're feeling better."

Cooper frowned at him and mimicked the "turn it over" action. Jaren did and found a message in his chicken-scratch handwriting.

The deck doesn't have a card for what I really want, so I made this one. I owe you the rest of our lives. Be that the next two hours or the next sixty years. This offer comes with your choice of me, you and happiness. Or you, me and bliss. Redeemable any time between now and the day the world ends.

He looked up to see Cooper struggling to push down the sheet. There on his abdomen was a squashed bow. With shaky hands he placed it over his heart.

"Happy birthday." His voice was more gravelly than it usually was, but Jaren was so happy to hear it he didn't care.

He leaned down until he was eye level with Cooper. "Are you my present?"

Cooper grinned and nodded.

"And this card means I can open it whenever I want? Any time I want?"

Again Cooper nodded. He reached out his hand and Jaren took it, grateful for any contact with the man who owned him heart and soul. The man he'd almost lost. Unconsciously he squeezed and Cooper grimaced.

"I'm sorry. I always seem to do the wrong thing and —"

"I love you." The words stopped him in his tracks. He blinked a few times, certain he'd heard wrong. Cooper squeezed his hand.

"I said I love you." He grabbed the card and waved it.

Just like at the cabin, Jaren bit his cheek to make sure he wasn't dreaming. This time he was glad to feel that sting of pain. This was real and nothing could make him happier. He smiled and knew it reached his eyes.

"I love you too." He took the card back. "And I plan to redeem this card now." He lowered his head and gently kissed Cooper's mouth. "And I plan to claim this."

He tapped the blowjob side. "As soon as the doctor clears you."

The End

About the Author

Sasha discovered erotic romance a few years ago and has been addicted ever since. Her first read was an Ellora's Cave title (*The Changeling*, if you're curious) and she was blown away. Here were the stories she'd been imagining but not finding anywhere. She's thrilled to have found a home for the stories that were cluttering up her head.

Though she spends her days elbows-deep in computers, Sasha's mind is never far from some creative endeavor. If she's not writing or reading, she's knitting or singing (albeit poorly). No matter what she's doing, she loves email! Feel free to contact her.

Sasha welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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