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A Promise Given

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A PROMISE GIVEN

By

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Chapter One

Detective Cooper Thomas slowly climbed the stairs to his apartment. He was tired, so tired his bones ached. Every step he took up the narrow stairwell took effort. His feet felt like lead weights. It was all he could do just to lift his foot for the next step.

It seemed like forever before he finally reached the top step of the three-story apartment building he lived in. What he wouldn't give for an apartment with an elevator. But moving took energy, too, and right now, Cooper was all tapped out.

It wasn't just the long, grueling workday but the entire past six months. Between being kidnapped by that maniac serial killer, Daryl Wallace, Cooper's time recovering from his injuries, and having his long-lost love back in his life, Cooper felt exhausted.

Cooper chuckled to himself and shook his head. Correction, having his long-lost love reappear and harass him every chance the man got. Alec couldn't be considered back in Cooper's life. That implied that they were actually working on a relationship together.

As far as Cooper was concerned, Alec could take a long walk off a short pier. Alec drove Cooper out of his mind. Every time Cooper turned around, Alec appeared. He seemed to magically know when Cooper went out with friends, went to dinner at Jack and Mason's new house, or even some get-together at Janet and Bob's.

Cooper felt pretty sure that it was a conspiracy. He knew he had been instrumental in getting Jack and Mason together, and they felt that they were just returning the favor. They weren't. They were just making Cooper's life a living hell.

Sliding his key into the lock, Cooper unlocked the door and pushed it open. The moment the lights in the room shone into his eyes, Cooper reached for the gun holstered at his waist. He knew he hadn't left the lights on when he left that morning.

Pushing the door open a little more, Cooper took a hesitant step into his apartment. Even though he had moved to a new apartment a few months ago, he still got the willies sometimes when he came home. Cooper wasn't sure he'd ever get the memory of Daryl Wallace attacking him in his old apartment out of his mind.

"It's just me, Coop."

Cooper let out the deep breath he held as he recognized Alec's voice coming from his living room. He dropped his hand from his gun and brought it up to rub over his face. Fuck! He so didn't need this right now.

Lifting his head, Cooper glared across the room at Alec. "Breaking and entering is illegal, you know."

Cooper wanted to scream in frustration as Alec raised one dark blond eyebrow. "I didn't break anything," Alec replied.

Sarcastic son of a bitch, Cooper thought. *Breathtakingly beautiful, sarcastic son of a bitch*. He wanted to hit something.

He stepped into his apartment and closed the door behind him. He dropped his jacket over the back of the couch and walked to the fridge. Opening the door, Cooper grabbed a beer and twisted the cap off, drinking down nearly half of it at once.

Setting the beer on the counter, Cooper glared across the small space to where Alec sat. "What do you want, Alec?"

"You know what I want, Coop."

Cooper shook his head. "I'm not going to have this conversation with you." No way, no how! He finished off the beer in his hand and reached back into the fridge for another one. This would need a lot of alcohol.

He twisted off the cap and tossed it into the garbage bin before taking another swig. Walking back into the living room, Cooper loosened his tie and pulled it free. He tossed it over his jacket. He could feel Alec's eyes on him.

"You need to leave, Alec." Cooper sat down in a chair across from where Alec sat on the couch. He had to admit, with Alec's blond hair and bronze skin, the man looked fantastic sitting back against the black leather of Cooper's couch. Alec had always looked good in black leather.

"Not until we talk."

Cooper rolled his eyes. Alec pressed the issue every time they ran into each other. He wanted to talk about their past, the things that had pulled them apart. Cooper just wanted to forget it like he had been trying to do for the last ten years.

"There's nothing to discuss, Alec. You made your choice. You left me without a word, a note, nothing. You just left. I think that pretty much said it all," Cooper said. If Cooper believed that Alec would drop everything if they discussed their past, he'd do it. But he didn't.

Alec stared at him a little too hard; his eyes swept over Cooper's body a little too long. Cooper knew that Alec was still interested. Cooper was, too. Alec had been the love of his life. Still was. Cooper just didn't know if he could allow his heart to be torn apart a second time when Alec decided he wasn't worth it again. The first time had nearly destroyed him.

"Damn it, Cooper, we need to talk about this," Alec said forcefully. He stood up and pushed his hands deep into his pockets as he paced the length of the room. The tensing of Alec's jaw betrayed his frustration.

Cooper watched Alec move around the room, reaching out to touch a book here, a lamp there, some little knick knack that Cooper had sitting around, his collection of agate rocks, a box of incense, a statue of a wolf that Mason gave him for his birthday. If Cooper didn't know better, he would think that Alec was trying to learn about him.

But he did know better. Alec Whitley was a fantastic lover, but he was a lousy love interest. If the only thing Alec wanted from him was a quick romp in the sack, Cooper would be all over Alec like white on rice.

Cooper knew Alec better than that. Alec wanted to rehash one of the hardest times in Cooper's life. Dealing with Daryl Wallace, serial killer and complete psycho, had been hard. Losing Alec had been harder.

"Why, Alec? It's been ten years. What's it matter now?" Cooper finally asked. "You've moved on. I've moved on. It's ancient history. Let it stay ancient history."

Alec twirled around to stare at Cooper. His jaw clenched; his blue eyes narrowed slightly. He looked almost stunned. "Coop..."

Cooper watched, fascinated, as Alec's mouth opened and closed, then opened again. Alec actually seemed to be at a loss for words. Cooper wasn't sure he had ever seen Alec Whitley at a loss for words.

"Coop, please," Alec finally said, looking almost desperate. Cooper couldn't tell if he was imagining it. He was honest enough with himself to know that he wanted Alec to be desperate. That didn't mean he wanted to talk about their past, though.

"Why the hell is this so important to you, Alec? It's over. It was over a long time ago. Why do we need to dredge it up again?" Cooper asked. Nervously, he ran his hand through his hair.

Alec sighed deeply then replied. "Because we both need closure."

Cooper's mouth was the one dropping open this time. "Closure? Are you serious?" Cooper laughed bitterly. He slammed his hand down on the arm of his chair. "What are you? A fucking shrink?"

"How can we get past this if we don't talk about it?" Alec asked.

"Who says I want to get past it?" Cooper asked. He felt like he was in a reality TV show. Next thing, Alec was going to tell him he had a sexual obsession with his mother. Maybe Alec should have gone to school to be a psychologist instead of Mason.

"Coop, I--"

Cooper held up his hand to stop Alec. "Alec, I really can't do this. Not right now."

Alec walked over and sat down on the edge of the couch. His elbows rested on his knees, his hands folded together. "So, when can we talk about it?"

Cooper shrugged matter of factly. "Why don't you come see me in another ten years?"

Alec's eye roll was so dramatic, it moved his entire head. "Cooper, I swear to God, you are such an asshole."

"Yeah, but I'm a sexy asshole." Cooper was relieved when Alec chuckled.

"Yeah, you are at that." Alec glanced down at the beer Cooper held in his hand. "You have another one of those?" he asked, pointing to the beer.

"Look in the fridge," Cooper replied. He watched Alec stand up and walk into the kitchen. Hell, Alec still had the nicest ass Cooper had ever seen. Cooper could have bounced a quarter off the damn thing.

Cooper stood up and walked to the table by the door. He unhooked his gun holster, checked to make sure the gun was on safety, and placed the holster and gun both in the drawer before closing it.

As he walked toward the kitchen, he could see Alec look at him curiously. Cooper pulled a twenty-dollar bill out of his wallet and handed it to Alec. "Would you order a pizza? The number's on the notepad by the phone. Just tell Tommy I want my usual. He'll know what to make. I need to jump in the shower real quick."

"Does that mean I can stay for dinner?" Alec asked. A small smile moved across his lips. It was a very inviting smile, one Cooper hadn't seen in a long time, and it made his heart ache just a little.

"You can stay for pizza. It's not exactly dinner."

Alec nodded. "Still can't cook, huh?"

"I can cook," Cooper protested, laughing.

Cooper was still chuckling a few minutes later as he pulled his clothes off and climbed into the shower. He really couldn't cook. His culinary skills involved a phone book and the closest take-out place. No matter how many people had tried to teach him how to cook, it was totally lost on Cooper.

As he soaped up his body, Cooper thought about his invitation for Alec to stay for dinner. He must be out of his ever-loving mind. He knew he just asked for trouble. Alec was bad news for Cooper.

Oh, Alec was a great guy, just not for Cooper. He had very little resistance against Alec's considerable charms. He would have thought that ten years would have lessened the effect Alec had on him. He was dead wrong, and that scared Cooper a lot.

Cooper leaned back against the shower wall and closed his eyes. Alec had the ability to hurt him in ways he hadn't been hurt in many, many years. The first time Alec left him with no word had been bad enough. He wasn't sure he could open himself up to that kind of pain again, no matter how much he wanted Alec.

Cooper turned the shower off and climbed out to dry off. He walked into his bedroom and pulled on a pair of blue jogging pants. He thought about going without a shirt as he normally did, but decided against it when he heard Alec cough in the other room. No sense tempting fate. Being half naked around Alec would be a temptation Cooper wasn't sure he could ignore.

Coming back into the living room, the breath caught in Cooper's throat when he spotted Alec leaning against the wall by the window, gazing out over the city. The moonlight shining through the window highlighted the hard angles of Alec's tense face, the dark shadows under his eyes.

Cooper realized that Alec looked weary, maybe as weary as Cooper felt. It was hard to tell. Cooper felt pretty worn out. Still, Cooper knew that the situation between the two of them wore on Alec just as much as it did on him.

He just wasn't ready to deal with it. He wasn't sure he ever would be. He found it hard enough dealing with having Alec back in his life after ten years. Dealing with the past and the mistakes they had made were out of the realm of what Cooper could handle right now. He was still trying to function normally despite his trauma with Wallace.

"Alec," Cooper asked softly, "why are you here? I mean, *really* here?"

Alec turned to look over at Cooper. There was a hint of some indefinable emotion in his blue eyes. He shrugged his shoulders. "I wish I could tell you, Coop, but I'm not sure I know myself. I just know I have to be here."

Cooper straightened, sighing loudly. "Alec, what we had together was over a long time ago," he insisted in a broken whisper. He didn't know whether to encourage Alec to continue talking or yell at him to stop. Both seemed to have merit.

"Was it?" Alec countered. His mellow baritone was edged with tight control. He dropped his arms from his chest and walked over to stand in front of Cooper. His eyes were gentle and contemplative when he gazed at Cooper. "Was it really over, Cooper, or did we just lose our way?"

Cooper's eyes fluttered closed as Alec caressed the side of his face. Oh, he had missed Alec's touch, the feel of Alec's skin brushing against his, the soft masculine scent that was uniquely Alec's.

A moment later, Cooper's eyes flew open when he felt Alec's lips press against his. Blood pounded in Cooper's head, leapt from his heart, and made his knees weak. He briefly wondered how he had lived so long without this.

"We were good together, Coop," Alec whispered against Cooper's lips. "We could be good together again."

Before Cooper could protest, if he was going to protest, Alec's lips claimed his again. Cooper felt like he was being devoured. Alec's lips plundered, explored, demanded. Cooper was helpless to stop him. Cooper didn't want to stop him.

Instead, he felt his body melt against Alec's solid form. His hands gripped Alec's waist. Cooper wasn't sure who made the first move, but suddenly Alec's entire body pressed against Cooper's.

Cooper could feel every inch of Alec's body like a brand. A broad chest crushed against his. Tight abdomen met tight abdomen. Solid muscular thighs pressed against trembling ones. Hard cock thrust against hard cock.

"Alec," Cooper moaned. His voice felt thick and unsteady. As he looked into Alec's eyes, the smoldering fire shining in their depths stunned him. That was for him, for Cooper Thomas.

"Alec, I--" Cooper's words were interrupted by the ring of his house phone. Cooper hesitated. Should he answer it?

"Let it ring, Coop," Alec whispered.

Cooper's eyes closed. He let his head drop forward to rest on Alec's shoulder. He felt flustered, out of control. His heart beat erratically in his chest. He was right where he had been dreaming about for the last ten years... in Alec's arms.

When the house phone stopped ringing, Cooper let the breath he had been holding out of his chest. He wasn't sure if he was relieved or not. He had almost given in to his heart's demand to tell Alec he still cared, and that would have been disastrous.

"What were you going to say, Coop?" Alec asked. Cooper heard a tremor in Alec's voice as though some emotion had touched him.

Cooper shook his head in dismay. He felt caught up in the emotions Alec evoked. He wanted Alec's touch, yearned for it even. But he could do without the entanglements that would come with it. He just wasn't ready for that.

"Cooper?" Alec asked. He tilted Cooper's chin up.

When Cooper's cell phone rang from inside of his jacket, Cooper jumped over to it, thankful for the reprieve, anything to get away from the question in Alec's eyes. Cooper pulled the cell phone out of his jacket and turned back to Alec.

"I have to answer this. It could be work," Cooper justified when Alec gave him a disapproving glare. Cooper flipped the phone open and held it to his ear. He took a deep breath. "This is Coop."

As he listened to the person on the other end, Cooper watched Alec stalk over to the window to stare out it again. Alec's posture was stiff. Cooper frowned. He hadn't meant to make Alec angry, but he wasn't ready. He just wasn't. Why couldn't Alec understand that? Alec seemed to want to pick up right where they had left off ten years ago like the past had never happened.

Life didn't happen that way. For one, they had too much history between them, bad history. Cooper couldn't allow Alec to hurt him again by leaving the way he had ten years ago. For two, Cooper wasn't sure he was ready to get involved with anyone, even Alec.

He still woke up nearly every night in a cold sweat. Sometimes he was screaming when he woke up. Daryl Wallace had certainly done a number on him. The physical scars had nearly faded. The mental ones still lingered.

"Coop, are you listening to me, man?"

"Yeah, Jordan, I'm listening. What's up?" Cooper tried to get his mind out of the past and concentrate on what his partner, Jordan Bennett, said to him.

"I don't know how the son of a bitch did it, but he's back."

"Who's back?" Cooper asked in confusion.

"Daryl Wallace."

Cooper felt a shiver of cold strike down his spine. His hands trembled as he held the phone closer to his ear. "What do you mean, he's back?" he choked out. "That psycho is locked up. How could he be back?"

"I checked before I called you just to be sure," Jordan replied. "He's still locked up, Coop, but I swear to God he's back. Or we have ourselves a copycat psycho serial killer."

Chapter Two

Alec's head snapped around to look at Cooper when he heard the alarm in the man's voice. It hadn't been often that Alec had heard that particular tone. And never to the degree that he heard it now.

"What do you mean a copycat killer?"

Alec took a few steps closer to Cooper. He could see Cooper's hands tremble. The man's face paled, all the blood draining away. Cooper was terrified. Well, that just wouldn't do. It wouldn't do at all.

Alec had his fill of seeing Cooper terrified six months ago. After Daryl Wallace kidnapped Cooper, Alec went with Jordan to rescue the man only to find him naked, bound, and beaten. That had been Alec's first sight of his lover in ten years.

To this day, Cooper refused to discuss with Alec what exactly Wallace did to him. Alec used his connection with the police and his private security company to obtain the police report on Cooper's kidnapping and assault, both the official one and the unofficial one. He'd read them but always suspected that parts were missing. Cooper wouldn't discuss it, though, leaving Alec to image all sorts of horrible scenarios.

Stepping up to Cooper, Alec wrapped his arms around him. Relief filled Alec when Cooper didn't push him away. Instead, Cooper leaned into Alec's embrace. His free hand gripped Alec's arm with such force, Cooper's hands turned white.

"A dead body was discovered in an abandoned warehouse down on First Avenue, about three blocks from the warehouse where we found Mason," Alec heard Jordan say. "The victim has all of the earmarks of Daryl Wallace, right down to the damn whip marks."

Alec could feel Cooper sag against him. "Whip marks? The victim was whipped?" Cooper asked. His voice sounded stifled and unnatural.

"Yeah, and it was pretty bad, too, even worse than yours." Alec wasn't sure that was possible. Wallace had whipped Cooper so badly that it had taken weeks for the marks to fade. Some of them never had and would always be with Cooper.

"Did the victim fit the same profile?" Cooper asked.

"Young, about five foot ten, one hundred and sixty pounds," Jordan replied. "Hell, Coop, he even had brown hair, blue eyes, and glasses."

"Was he..." Cooper's voice faded away as if it was too hard to finish his question. Alec squeezed his arm around Cooper. Alec wished he could give Cooper the strength he knew was an inherent part of the man's character. It just seemed to be a little subdued currently.

"Now, that's the weird part, Coop," Jordan said. "He wasn't. Oh, he was beaten bad enough that I'm sure he wished he was dead, but he wasn't sexually assaulted. Whoever killed this guy did him a favor, though. With the damage the medical examiner says was done, the guy would have bled out before the paramedics could have gotten to him."

"How did he die?" Cooper asked.

"Stabbed as far as we can tell. The medical examiner counted at least fifteen stab wounds in the guy's chest alone. She'll know more once she gets the body back to the morgue and does an autopsy, though."

Alec felt Cooper take a deep breath and let it out slowly. "So, what makes you think this is a copycat killer, then?" Cooper asked.

"You mean besides the physical description and location of the vic?"

Cooper let out a strained chuckle. "Yeah."

"Oh, hell, Coop, it's nothing I can put my finger on exactly, but I know there's a connection," Jordan said. "I can feel it."

Cooper nodded. "You've always had a pretty good gut, Jordan."

"If another serial killer hits with the same MO as Wallace, and just when Wallace is getting ready to go to trial, what do you think will happen to the prosecutor's case, Coop?" Jordan asked. The tone of his voice told Alec that Jordan already knew the answer to his question.

Alec felt Cooper cringe. He wanted to do the same thing. If there was another string of murders like Wallace had perpetrated, it could put doubt into the minds of the jury hearing Wallace's case. He might not get free but he wouldn't get what he deserved, either.

"Hey," Cooper protested when Alec pulled the cell phone away from him.

"Jordan?" Alec asked.

"Alec?"

"Yeah," Alec said as he dodged Cooper's hands. Cooper was trying to get the phone back from him. Alec wasn't having it. He needed to talk to Jordan. He wasn't going to let Cooper go through this alone, not like last time.

"What are you doing at Cooper's place?" Jordan asked.

"Never mind that, Jordan," Alec answered. "Can you get me a copy of the ME's report and the police report? I'd like to work this case with you and Coop. I may be able to look into a few leads that you can't."

"Man, you're going to make me talk to the chief, aren't you?" Jordan groaned.

"No, I'll call him. I'm sure he doesn't want to report to the media that he has another serial killer on his hands right after catching Wallace. It would be better if we solve this before anyone is the wiser."

"Yeah, I hear you. I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks, Jordan." Alec started to hand the phone back to Cooper when Jordan's voice stopped him.

"Hey, Alec," Jordan began, "I'm not sure what's going on between you and Coop, but you'd better not hurt him again. I don't think he can take it right now."

Alec glanced over at Cooper. He had no intention of hurting Cooper again. If he had his way, well, Cooper would be a very happy man. He just had to convince Cooper of it. That might be harder than finding a serial killer.

"I hear you," Alec said. "You just take care of things on your end. I'll take care of things here."

"Keep an eye on him, will you?" Jordan asked. "I don't care what he tells you, this is going to hit him hard."

"Consider it done," Alec said. He handed the phone back to Cooper, then pulled Cooper's body closer to his. He was a little stunned when Cooper seemed to lean against him, even wrapping an arm around Alec's waist.

He listened in as Cooper and Jordan spoke for a few more moments, waiting for Cooper to be done so that he could hold Cooper closer. There were a lot of other things Alec wanted to do with Cooper besides hold him.

Unfortunately, those dreams might have to wait for awhile. Cooper didn't seem to be in any condition to fulfill the fantasies Alec had. There was always tomorrow. And Alec planned on them having a lot of tomorrows together.

For now, he needed to be supportive of Cooper. Alec knew that hearing another serial killer was on the loose would shake Cooper. There wasn't any way that it couldn't. Wallace had terrified Cooper. It looked like someone else was trying to do it again.

Cooper flipped his phone closed and set it on the nearby black end table. He turned back to Alec and rested his head on Alec's shoulder. Alec held Cooper, rubbing his hand up and down Cooper's back.

Alec wanted to reassure Cooper that he wouldn't let anyone hurt him again, that he would be there to protect Cooper. But Alec knew if he said that, Cooper would most likely punch him right in the face. Cooper was nothing if not self assured and very masculine.

Which was why Alec was so surprised that Cooper had turned to him for comfort. Cooper must really be upset. Alec knew Cooper would never seek comfort if the man were thinking clearly. Alec wished he could do something to make Cooper feel better but what could he say? Almost anything he said would sound like a platitude.

Alec kept his mouth shut. It just seemed better that way. Besides, if Alec said anything, Cooper might realize that Alec was holding him and that would be bad. Alec didn't want to let Cooper go. The man felt too good in Alec's arms.

Alec had a hard time letting Cooper go when he left his head and pushed away. With a great deal of disappointment, Alec let his arms fall to his side as Cooper stepped away. He stood there watching Cooper carefully, waiting for him to say something.

Cooper looked flustered. His hand shook as he pushed it through his dark brown hair, then rubbed it down over his face. His expressive eyes had darkened until they were almost dusky brown.

"Coop? You want me to spend the night?" Alec asked. At Cooper's anxious look, Alec tried to assure him. "I could sleep out here on the couch. That way you won't be alone tonight. In the morning, we could both go down and talk to the chief together."

Cooper nodded his head. Alec was thrilled, even if Cooper did look reluctant. "Yeah, I guess that would be okay," Cooper said.

Alec nodded. This was good. Alec could keep an eye on Cooper and, hopefully, Cooper could get a good night's sleep knowing that someone else was in the apartment to help keep him safe.

The doorbell rang. Cooper's body jerked then his face flushed. Alec turned away and went to the door. He ignored Cooper's embarrassment as if it had never happened. Alec looked through the keyhole then opened the door.

He paid the pizza deliveryman, took the pizza, then shut and locked the door. He carried the pizza into the small dining room nook and set it down on the table. He turned to Cooper, raising an eyebrow.

"Plates? Napkins?" Alec inquired. "Bibs?"

Cooper rolled his eyes and let out a small chuckle as he went into the kitchen. It was just the reaction Alec wanted from Cooper. They needed to lighten the mood. Cooper needed to relax. Cooper needed a good orgasm, but Alec didn't think he'd go for that idea.

Alec sat down at the table and opened the large white box. The smell was overwhelming: hot pizza, pepperoni, sausage, onions, olives, and lots of cheese. Alec could hear his stomach growl.

Cooper walked over and sat down. He placed another beer in front of Alec and one in front of himself. As soon as Cooper grabbed a slice, Alec did, too. The first bite was always the best. It just sank into Alec and let him know that he was eating something delicious. Silence reigned in the room for several minutes as both men ate.

Finally, Cooper sat back. Alec could feel Cooper watching him and looked up, one eyebrow arched in query. "What?" Alec asked.

"Jack says you two went to school together, that you got your degree in criminology." It wasn't a question. Alec waited for more. "Why criminology?" Cooper asked.

Alec shrugged. How could he tell Cooper he went into criminology because Cooper had? He had fantasized that they would become the great next private detective duo. They would work together, live together, and love together. It all seemed stupid now, but he had been young and had dreamed of things that never came to be.

"I like puzzles. I like solving them," Alec replied. He smiled. "I'm good at it."

"And the security company?" Cooper asked. "How did that come about?"

"The usual way, I guess."

"The usual way?" Cooper chuckled. "There's a usual way to get into private security?"

Alec laughed. "Yeah, pretty much. After I graduated from college I applied to the Bureau. I was going to be an F.B.I. agent, save the world."

"Why didn't you?"

"Too many rules."

"You never did like to follow the rules," Cooper laughed. "Something about schmucks in suits telling you what to do?"

Alec chuckled. No, he didn't like following rules. If things didn't go his way, he made them go his way. Hard work wasn't an issue. He liked working. It was someone telling him he couldn't do something that irritated him.

"Sam and Mitch, my partners in the security company, were still trying to figure out what they wanted to be when they grew up. We shared an apartment, so, one thing led to another and Triad Security was born." Alec smiled when Cooper nodded. "What about you? Why become a police detective?"

Cooper shrugged. "Guess I wanted to save the world, too."

"Have you? Saved the world, I mean?"

Cooper leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table and clasping his hands together. He looked thoughtful. "I don't know. Sometimes I think we're making a difference. Others..." Cooper waved his hand a little. "Other times I feel like the bad guys are winning."

"You may not save the entire world, Coop, but you can save one person at a time," Alec said. "You saved Mason and Ben when Wallace had them. You saved yourself. You saved countless others that would have gone through hell if Wallace wasn't locked up."

Cooper grimaced. His eyes dropped down to the table. "I didn't exactly save myself. Wallace still got to me. If you and Jordan hadn't come to my rescue when you did, well, I don't think I'd be sitting here right now. Not sure I'd want to."

"You would have found a way to escape."

Cooper snorted. It was a bitter sound. "Before or after he raped me?"

"Did he? Rape you, I mean?" Alec asked hesitantly. He wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer. Alec looked down at his fingers wrapped around his beer bottle. "I know what the police report says. I've read it. I don't know what was left out of it."

Cooper was silent. Alec wondered if he had pushed too much too soon. Cooper might not be ready to answer questions like the one he had asked. It wasn't easy for a man to admit that someone had overpowered him, assaulted him, especially a man like Cooper.

"Technically? No, he didn't rape me," Cooper finally replied. His voice was cool, distant.

"Technically?" Alec's heart pounded. He braced himself because he knew there was more. He watched Cooper swallow, his prominent Adam's apple moving up and down. Cooper's hands twisted together.

"Sometimes I can still feel his hands touching me," Cooper whispered. "I wake up in the middle of the night and I can feel him in the room and... and I can't get away from him. I can't make him stop."

"He's locked up, Coop. He's not going to get out, ever." Alec started to reach across the table to give Cooper's hand a reassuring pat when Cooper suddenly looked up. The anguish in Cooper's eyes was almost more than Alec's heart could take.

"Then why do we have a new serial killer on our hands? Who's going around killing young men again? Who's going to be next?" Cooper was nearly shouting by the time he was done speaking.

"Cooper!" Alec barked. "He's not going to get to you. I'll kill him first, and don't think I can't get away with it, either, because I can. We'll catch this son of a bitch and put him in a cell right along with Wallace."

"And what if we don't? What then, Alec?" Cooper jumped to his feet and started pacing the space between the table and the couch. He looked like he was about to lose it. His face was still pale, but it had taken on a desperate look.

Alec rose to his feet and crossed the space between them. He grabbed Cooper by the arms and gave him a little shake. "Cooper, Wallace will not get to you again." It was obvious to Alec that Cooper never dealt with the trauma he experienced at the hands of Daryl Wallace.

Cooper's face suddenly stilled. The next thing Alec felt was Cooper's body pressing against him, Cooper's lips covering his. Cooper's fingers trembled as they pulled at the buttons of Alec's shirt.

"Fuck me, Alec," Cooper pleaded. "Take me to bed and fuck me. Let me feel your hands on my body instead of *his*."

Alec groaned. He wanted to do nothing less. The very thought of feeling Cooper wrapped around his aching cock made Alec's knees weak. Still, Alec didn't want to be with Cooper to erase some maniac. He wanted to be with Cooper because that was what Cooper wanted.

"Ask me again in a week and I'll say yes. Hell, I'll shout it from the rooftops," Alec said. "Right now, however, sex is the last thing you need."

Cooper suddenly pulled away. "You think I don't know what I need?"

Alec shook his head. "No, I'm sure you know exactly what you need. I just think that right now you're upset and--"

"Fuck you, Alec. If you don't want me, you just had to say so," Cooper said before he turned away and stomped toward his bedroom.

Alec was a step behind Cooper. Alec grabbed Cooper by his shoulders, spun him around, and pushed his body up against the wall. He leaned into him, pressing against Cooper, trapping the man against the wall.

"Don't ever think I don't want you, Cooper," Alec growled from low in his throat. "I've wanted you from the moment I saw you fifteen years ago, and it's never gone away. And as much as I want to fuck you right this minute, I will not take advantage of you when you're vulnerable. You want to fuck? Fine, we'll fuck... in a week."

Alec could feel a small tic in his jaw as he clenched his teeth together, waiting for Cooper's response. He watched Cooper's eyes widen, the hazel brown darken. Little puffs of air rapidly exited from Cooper's mouth.

"A week?"

"Seven days, Coop," Alec stated.

Cooper stared at Alec for another moment. His hands flexed against Alec's chest. Cooper nodded his head. Alec stepped back, releasing Cooper. He didn't exactly know what Cooper's nod meant, but he could always hope, dream.

"I'll get you a blanket and pillow," Cooper said quietly as he walked into his bedroom. A moment later he was back, handing a blue blanket and a pillow to Alec. "I'll, uh, I'll see you in the morning."

Alec nodded. "I'll be out on the couch if you need me, Coop."

The only response Alec got was the soft click of the bedroom door closing. Alec drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. He turned and made his way over to the couch. It sucked to be out here on the couch when he really wanted to be in the other room with Cooper.

Alec knew this was for the best. He wanted Cooper. Wanted him in the worst way. He had dreamed of finding Cooper for years, of the two of them getting back together and creating a life together that they should have had years ago.

Ten years didn't take away the guilt Alec felt about leaving Cooper with no word or explanation. But, sometimes, a man had to do what he had to do to protect the people he cared about. Alec hoped that, once Cooper learned of Alec's reasons for leaving, Cooper might forgive him or at least understand.

Alec had to hold onto that hope. It had been the main, driving force that kept him going for the last ten years. He knew that he and Cooper still belonged together. They always had. They were perfect together. Ten years apart couldn't erase that.

That had been one of the reasons Alec had convinced Sam and Mitch to transfer their business to Portland. This was where Cooper lived. The minute that Alec learned that fact three years ago, he'd made plans.

It had taken Alec six months to move, another two years to get up the nerve to approach Cooper. He had no idea when Jack had asked for his help that Cooper would be involved. But it had solved the issue of approaching Cooper.

Still, Alec wished he had just been able to walk up to Cooper on the street and say hello. He would never get the picture of Cooper tied down spread-eagled, naked on a bed, and beaten out of his mind. It was something that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Alec unbuttoned his shirt and laid it over one of Cooper's black leather chairs. He unzipped his pants and pulled off his shoes and socks off. He set them all on the chair then sat on the couch.

He lay back on the couch and pulled the blanket over his body. He doubted he would get any sleep tonight. His mind, and several hard parts of his body, couldn't stop thinking about the fact that the man of their dreams was just a few feet away.

It was going to be a long night.

Something woke Alec up. He opened his eyes and glanced around the room. Nothing seemed to be out of place, not as far as he could see. It wasn't his house. For all he knew, everything could be out of place.

Hearing a noise, Alec sat up, his eyes going to the door that led to Cooper's room. There it was again. What was it? A cry? A whimper? Alec got to his feet and walked over to lean his ear against the door, listening.

Hearing the small whimper again, Alec quietly opened the bedroom door. A shaft of moonlight shone through a small slit in the curtains, bathing Cooper's restless body. Alec could see him toss and turn in the bed.

Alec walked closer. His breath caught in his throat; Cooper was naked, the cream-colored sheet pushed down to the bottom of the bed. Cooper's long, muscular legs were all tangled up in the sheet.

Another whimper came from Cooper. Alec realized that Cooper was in the middle of a nightmare. The way Cooper seemed to struggle, Alec was pretty sure he knew what the nightmare was about.

Alec sat on the side of the bed and reached over to shake Cooper's shoulder. Alec wasn't prepared for the response to his touch. Cooper started to thrash, his arms swinging around in the air as he fought off an invisible opponent.

Grunting at the impact, Alec reached over and tried to hold Cooper's hands down. "Coop," he said loudly. When Cooper continued to fight him, Alec moved over to straddle Cooper's body. Alec held Cooper's wrists down beside his head and leaned in close to his face.

"Cooper, wake the fuck up!" Alec said, louder this time. He still didn't get the response he wanted. Cooper stopped fighting him, but his whimpers grew louder, more heart wrenching.

Frustrated, Alec let go of Cooper's wrists and cupped the man's face. He leaned in and claimed Cooper's lips, demanding a response from him. For a moment, Cooper's body stilled then strong hands wrapped around Alec's neck and pulled him closer.

Alec grunted when Cooper pulled him close and the man's tongue brushed against his. Alec stroked back. He could feel his cock hardening against Cooper's abdomen. An answering hardness grew and pushed between Alec's legs.

He wanted to squeeze his legs together, to feel Cooper's cock pressed tight against his balls. Alec began moving his hips. He pressed himself down on Cooper's body. Except for the thin cotton of Alec's boxers, nothing separated them, and Alec could feel every contour of Cooper's cock against his body.

"Alec," Cooper groaned.

Alec experienced such relief at Cooper's words that he felt lightheaded for a moment. Cooper kissed Alec back and rubbed on him as if he were no longer having a nightmare. Alec was overjoyed.

"Coop," Alec whispered back as his lips moved away from Cooper's and down the man's neck. Alec licked, nibbled, and bit the flesh under Cooper's lips. His hands caressed, stroked, and rubbed as hot skin met hot skin.

Pleasure radiated from Alec. Alec's senses reeled as if short-circuited when Cooper's hands slid under the elastic waistband of his boxers and grabbed his ass. Cooper's legs parted, then wrapped around Alec's hips, bringing their cocks together.

Reclaiming Cooper's lips, Alec crushed Cooper to him. Alec's large hands took Cooper's face and held it gently. His tongue explored the recesses of Cooper's mouth. Cooper kissed Alec back, sending shivers of delight burning through him.

Alec could feel the pressure building up inside of him. A warm tingle shot down his spine and settled at the base of his cock. His balls drew up tight against his body. Alec knew he was moments away from coming.

He wanted Cooper to come with him, to feel Cooper's release against his body. Reaching between them, Alec pushed his boxers down and grabbed both their cocks in his hand. His mind swirling, Alec heard Cooper groan beneath him.

"Alec, soon," Cooper whispered.

"Yeah, soon, Coop," Alec murmured back. He stroked them both with his hand, his thumb moving over each head, each little slit. He could feel Cooper's fingers digging into his hips. He knew he'd have marks from it, but he didn't care. The pleasure he experienced with Cooper was worth it.

"Now, Alec," Cooper groaned.

"Yes, yes, now, Coop." Alec stroked faster. His lips latched onto Cooper's again. Alec opened his eyes and watched Cooper as he let out a loud groan. Oh, damn, Cooper was breathtaking. Cooper's eyes were wide, his breathing rapid, his face flushed.

He could feel Cooper's release spew over him. He stroked faster. A moment later, Alec let out a loud cry as he followed Cooper over the edge. Lightning shot through his body, hitting every nerve ending until his entire body trembled.

Dropping his head into the crook of Cooper's neck, Alec tried to catch his breath. He could feel Cooper's chest rising and falling rapidly under him. The only sound in the room came from their breathing.

Finally, Alec lifted his head and looked down at Cooper. It took a moment for Cooper to look up. When he did, his eyes were filled with uncertainty as if he felt confused. Alec wasn't. Alec knew exactly where he was and what he wanted.

Bringing his hand up, Alec licked their combined seed away. Cooper's eyes widened and his tongue came out to wet his lips as he watched. Alec cleaned his hand off then grinned at Cooper before leaning down to kiss Cooper, sharing their combined taste.

Cooper grinned when Alec lifted his head. "I thought you said we couldn't fuck for a week?"

"That wasn't fucking," Alec chuckled. "That was just a rub off. Big difference."

Cooper laughed. "Okay, you go with that."

Chapter Three

Cooper opened his eyes slowly. He was reluctant to wake up, to move. He could feel Alec's body pressed against him. One muscular arm was thrown over Cooper's waist. Alec's breath blew softly against the back of Cooper's neck.

Cooper couldn't remember the last time he had woken up to another person in his bed. Well, anyone besides Mason, and Mason didn't count. There wasn't anything sexual between them. Mason's world revolved around Jack and only Jack.

Cooper glanced over at the clock, surprised to see that it was nearly eight o'clock in the morning. Cooper hadn't slept past six since his attack. He realized that he had slept soundly since Alec had come into the room, not a single nightmare.

He hadn't been without a nightmare since the attack. Cooper didn't know if not having a nightmare after Alec joined him in bed was because Alec slept with him or because of the sex. And despite what Alec said, Cooper knew what happened between them had been sex.

Cooper also knew that he felt great. He was energized, invigorated, and deeply aroused. The body pressed against him was solid, the cock between his ass cheeks hard. And the lips that had suddenly kissed Cooper on the neck were warm.

"Morning, baby," Alec whispered into Cooper's ear.

"Morning, Alec," Cooper chuckled. Hands grabbed and rolled Cooper onto his back until he was looking up at Alec. Alec caressed the side of Cooper's face.

"How did you sleep?" he asked. "Any more nightmares?"

"No," Cooper said. "Not a one. I slept like a baby, didn't even wet the bed. I just might have to keep you around." The words came out of Cooper's mouth before he could stop them.

"I just might let you," Alec replied playfully, glancing at Cooper before leaning down to kiss him.

Cooper groaned. He loved the feeling of Alec's lips against his. In the last ten years, Cooper had never found anyone that kissed as well as Alec did. Alec didn't just kiss. Alec consumed.

When the alarm suddenly started going off, Cooper reluctantly pulled away from Alec. He couldn't decide if he wanted to ignore the alarm clock and keep on kissing Alec or get his lazy ass up and get ready for work.

Alec took the decision out of Cooper's hands when he slapped Cooper on the hip and rolled to the side of the bed to get up. "Come on, lazy bones, time to get up. We have to go meet with the chief, remember?"

Cooper rolled over and buried his face in his pillow. He groaned loudly. He didn't want to get out of bed and face the light of day. Reality sucked. It was much nicer staying bed with a very naked Alec and pretending that the outside world didn't exist.

"Come on, baby," Alec said. "If you hurry, we can take a shower together before we have to leave for work."

That got Cooper's attention. Hot water, soap, and Alec? Yeah, Cooper could do that. Cooper dropped the pillow and rolled to the side of the bed. He looked up just in time to see Alec's sweet ass walk into the bathroom. Hot damn! He'd follow that ass anywhere.

Cooper jumped up and hurried into the bathroom just as Alec stepped into the shower. Cooper took a moment to appraise Alec. He'd always been a very handsome man, and he had just grown sexier over the last ten years.

His body was thicker, his shoulders were broader, and his arms more muscled. More hair sprinkled across his chest. His abdomen was rippled and very lick-worthy. Long legs grew out of lean, muscular hips. A nice, thick cock hung from Alec's groin.

As Cooper watched, it started to harden right before his eyes, filling until it jutted out from Alec's body. Cooper's eyes flew up in surprise to find Alec watching him. A sexy little grin played across Alec's lips.

Cooper felt his face heat up. He'd gotten caught admiring Alec's gorgeous body fair and square. There wasn't anything he could do about it. He was just grateful that he didn't have drool on his chin.

With a slight tilt of his head and a shrug of his shoulders, Cooper joined Alec in the shower. He quickly stepped under the hot spray of water and got wet, then moved to the side, grabbing the body wash and a washcloth.

Cooper had just gotten the washcloth soapy when Alec grabbed it from him. "Let me." Cooper's eyes nearly rolled back in his head when Alec started running it over his body.

"You've changed, Coop," Alec commented as he ran the washcloth over Cooper's chest. The cloth moved down over taut abdomen muscles to encircle Cooper's aching cock. "You've gotten bigger, too."

Cooper could feel his face heating up again. As Alec continued to clean him, Cooper's head fell back against the shower tiles and his eyes dropped closed. Alec had magical hands... large, magical hands.

"I didn't think it was possible," Alec whispered into Cooper's ear, "but you've grown sexier over the years, Coop. When we were younger, you were beautiful. Now, you're stunning."

There was a wistful lilt to Alec's voice. That, and Alec's words, made Cooper deeply grateful that they were in the shower. He could feel the flush working up his body, and it wasn't just from his embarrassment. The feeling of Alec's hands on his body was stirring Cooper to a fever pitch of arousal.

"Alec," Cooper groaned as Alec turned him to face the other way. He spread his legs and braced his hands on the shower tiles in front of him, pushing his butt out toward Alec. Cooper knew he was shamelessly begging for Alec's touch. He just didn't care.

A hand stroked down the small of Cooper's back, then over his butt cheek. "You can still bounce a quarter off this damn thing," Alec said, giving each of Cooper's cheeks a good squeeze.

"Alec, please, yo-- oh, fuck!" Cooper exclaimed when Alec's fingers moved in between his cheeks. Fingertips stroked over his sensitive hole, reminding Cooper that no one had been there since before he had been assaulted. It had been so long, and it felt so good.

"Alec, more, I need more," Cooper pleaded.

"Anything you want, baby," Alec whispered. "Just tell me where the lube and condoms are."

"Bathroom drawer," Cooper whispered. "Le—left side."

Alec was gone for a moment then back. Cooper felt Alec's body press against his, pushing him against the shower tiles. Alec's hands gripped his butt cheeks and pulled them apart. Then Cooper felt Alec's hard cock nudge between his cheeks.

Cooper's breath caught in his throat. His eyes squeezed tight as he tried to remember that the dick sliding against his ass was Alec's. That this was something he wanted, something he had asked for.

The sensation of hands gripping his hips dulled. The lips on his neck faded away. The only thing Cooper could register was the body holding him prisoner against the shower wall and the hard cock pressing against him.

Cooper's hands clenched into fists as cold, hard fear shot up his body. He pushed his body closer to the wall to try to escape the body pressed against his, but it just followed. The ache forming in Cooper's chest began to build until he was close to hyperventilating.

"Stop," Cooper murmured. "Stop, please stop."

The hands holding his hips suddenly grabbed Cooper and spun him around. Cooper kept his eyes closed even when Alec cradled his face. His breathing came in rapid gasps, his heart pounding. He was so embarrassed, so ashamed.

He knew becoming involved with Alec was a bad idea. He wasn't ready for this. He wasn't ready for any of it, not the relationship part and, apparently, not the sex part either. Maybe he never would be. Maybe he was destined to be celibate for the rest of his life. At least he had the memory of last night with Alec to sustain him in the long, lonely years to come.

"Coop, open your eyes and look at me."

Cooper shook his head. He heard a chuckle, felt soft breath blow across his face. Cooper tried to turn away but Alec's hands around his face prevented that.

"Please, baby, look at me," Alec asked again.

Giving in to the gentle tone of Alec's voice, Cooper opened his eyes and looked at him. He wasn't sure what he expected from Alec; disgust, maybe, or disappointment. He certainly didn't expect to see tears glistening in Alec's eyes, but that's what he found.

"I will never hurt you, not like that, and we will never do anything that makes you uncomfortable." Alec gave Cooper a small smile. "I want you. I won't hide that from you, but we'll do this at your pace, okay?"

"Alec, I--" Cooper whispered.

"As much as I want to feel you wrapped around me as I push my cock into your tight little ass, if that's something we never do, I can live with that."

Cooper's eyebrows drew together in confusion as he processed Alec's words. When Alec's meaning sank in, Cooper felt his face heat up. He chuckled nervously, his eyes dropping down to Alec's chest.

"It's not... that's not the problem," Cooper said quietly, feeling like an idiot until he felt Alec's hand caress the side of his face before grasping his chin and lifting his head.

"Then what is, baby?" Alec asked quietly. "What did I do that made you uncomfortable?"

Cooper almost didn't answer Alec. He didn't want to. He had never discussed this stuff with anyone. It had all been too embarrassing, too personal. But the look in Alec's blue eyes, the anguish he could see in their depths, changed his mind.

"It was when you--" Cooper dropped his eyes again and cleared his throat. "When you pushed me against the wall and pushed your dick between my... I... I couldn't see you."

Cooper peeked up through his lashes to see Alec's reaction. He didn't know what Alec would do, what the man would say. It was hard to expect someone to put up with Cooper's emotional baggage. He was asking a lot of Alec. He just wondered if Alec was willing to try. It wasn't that he wanted a commitment from Alec, but he sure wouldn't mind fooling around with the man.

"Then we'll do this so you can see me at all times," Alec said before he dropped to his knees and reached for Cooper's cock.

"Aaahhh," Cooper cried when Alec's lips wrapped around his semi-hard cock. His hands gripped Alec's shoulders as his cock hardened right back up, leaping in response to Alec's touch. Cooper had thought Alec's hands were magic, but his mouth was heaven.

Alec licked up the side of Cooper's cock. His tongue swirled around the top, paying special attention to the small slit dripping pre-come. After a few more licks, he took the head of Cooper's cock into his mouth and started sucking in earnest.

Cooper felt like his head might collapse from lack of blood. His eyesight grew fuzzy, his hands clenched in Alec's hair, and his legs shook. Cooper could feel the pressure building, the tingle at the base of his spine waiting to explode through his body.

"Fuck, Alec, just like that," Cooper groaned as Alec began to deep-throat his cock. He couldn't remember that last time someone had sucked his cock like Alec did. Maybe not since the last time he had been with Alec.

Cooper peered down at Alec through his half-closed eyes. Cobalt blue eyes filled with desire stared back up at him, a spark of some unknown emotion showing in Alec's eyes.

Cooper wanted to explore that emotion, to identify what it was, but he was too busy crying out as he erupted inside of Alec's mouth. His entire body shuddered, and he filled Alec's mouth with his seed.

Alec's arms around his body were the only thing that kept Cooper from collapsing. Instead, Alec slowly lowered Cooper to the shower stall floor. Cooper's breath came out in a rapid rush. His heart pounded in his chest. He could feel his entire body tremble with aftershocks.

Cooper glanced up as Alec stood up. His eyes widened. Alec stood over him, one hand braced on the tile wall Cooper leaned against. The other hand was wrapped around his cock as he stroked his cock fiercely.

Alec's lower lip was caught between his teeth. His brows were drawn together as if he were concentrating hard. His eyes looked down at Cooper, devouring him. His entire body was taut. Cooper thought Alec had never looked as beautiful as he did right then.

Cooper stroked Alec's thighs, moving up slowly toward Alec's groin. Cooper's thumbs brushed over Alec's nut sac, gently massaging them. Cooper's gaze flew up to meet Alec's when he heard a moan.

"Alec," Cooper murmured, "come for me. I want you to come for me, come all over me."

Alec's eyes squeezed shut. His low groan grew into a loud roar as white-hot seed spurted from his cock, landing on Cooper's neck and chest. Alec continued to stroke his cock for several moments, his body trembling.

Alec placed his hands on the wall, Cooper leaned forward and licked the last drops of come off him. Cooper felt Alec's body shudder beneath his hands, a small hiss breaking from Alec's lips.

Cooper smiled. He liked knowing he could affect Alec to that point. It made him feel powerful, masculine. It also sent a shiver of fear through Cooper. The need to pleasure Alec could become an obsession if he wasn't careful.

Cooper climbed to his feet and stepped under the hot spray of shower water. He let his head fall forward, the water drenching him, hiding him from Alec's inquisitive eyes. He couldn't face Alec right now. Too many emotions, too many doubts, filled his head.

Cooper knew he had to be completely out of his mind to get involved with Alec again after all of these years. Alec had left him with no explanation, not a single word. One day, Alec was there, loving on Cooper and promising him forever. The next day, he was just gone.

Alec hadn't called. He didn't leave a message or even write a letter. Cooper had been devastated. It had taken him years to start to trust again, not that he ever completely did. He was always waiting for the other shoe to drop, and he knew it.

Cooper didn't think he could wait around for Alec to leave him again. He knew it would happen. He wasn't sure if it was something about him or just what Alec did. Cooper didn't know if he wanted to find out.

"Cooper?"

Cooper jerked. He opened his eyes and glanced over his shoulder at Alec. He could see the uncertain look in Alec's face, but he had no way to reassure him, not when he didn't even know how to reassure himself.

Cooper reached for the shampoo and poured some into his hand. "We need to step this up if we're going to go see the chief." Cooper didn't watch for Alec's reaction. He just started working the shampoo into his hair.

"Yeah," Alec said after a moment, "I guess we should. We wouldn't want to keep the chief waiting."

Cooper could hear the sarcasm in Alec's voice. It was tinged with a bit of disappointment and hurt. Cooper felt a little guilty about what he had said to Alec but not enough to turn and face the man.

Cooper quickly rinsed off and stepped out of the shower. He tried to ignore the sexy body he could just make out through the shower door as he dried off. It wasn't easy. Hard muscles and naked skin practically glowed through the smoky glass.

Tossing his towel in the laundry hamper, Cooper cast one more look at Alec. He was just rinsing his hair off, his head tilted back under the shower spray. His body was arched, chest pushed out, buttocks scrunched tight.

Cooper groaned and walked away. Ignoring his attraction to Alec was going to be harder than he thought. Alec Whitley had always been the sexiest man Cooper knew. Every man he had ever been with since Alec left paled in comparison.

He didn't know how he was going to close his eyes to Alec's beauty. Especially since Alec seemed determined to make his presence known not matter what Cooper wanted.

Cooper pulled clean underwear out of his dresser and pulled them on. He heard the shower turn off as he pulled his white dress shirt on and buttoned it up. By the time he was pulling his crisp black slacks up, Alec walked back into the bedroom, a towel wrapped around his lean hips.

Cooper didn't say anything as he grabbed a tie and wrapped it around his neck. He walked over to the mirror and began tying it. His eyes strayed to the man across the room, watching intently as Alec dropped the towel on the bed and dressed.

Biting his lip to keep the groan building in his throat under wraps, Cooper turned his attention back to his tie. He growled when he realized he had tied it on backward. Yanking the tie from around his neck, Cooper started again.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when Alec's arms suddenly wrapped around him and grabbed the two ends of the tie. Cooper's eyes flew up to the mirror, meeting blue eyes filled with amusement.

"Need some help there, handsome?"

Cooper's hands dropped from his tie even as he nodded. Alec grinned at him and began fixing Cooper's tie. Within moments, Cooper had a perfectly knotted tie around his neck, and Alec was folding the edges of his shirt collar down over the black fabric.

Alec's hand patted at the tie, his eyes rising up to look at Cooper in the mirror. "There, all done. You look perfect."

Cooper swallowed hard past the lump in his throat. They could have been any couple, one helping the other get ready for work. Cooper wanted to say something to keep Alec standing behind him, his body pressed close.

Then he remembered that they could have been that couple if Alec hadn't left him. Cooper dropped his eyes and pushed his way past Alec's arms. "Thank you," he said quietly as he grabbed the black suit coat that matched his slacks.

"Coop--"

"We need to get going," he said. Alec's deep sigh followed him from the room. Cooper picked up his gun holster and put it on, then placed the gun in the holder. He pulled the suit jacket on over his shoulders then checked to make sure he had his wallet and keys.

"Alec?" Cooper called out a few minutes later as he buttoned his jacket. "You ready to go?" He looked up when Alec walked into the room, noting that the suit Alec wore looked vaguely familiar. It was charcoal gray, the shirt a pristine white. It also wasn't what Alec had been wearing the night before. Cooper frowned. Alec was wearing his suit.

"Nice suit," he commented, one eyebrow raised.

Alec glanced up from where he was fixing his tie. Cooper was surprised at the little flush that filled Alec's cheeks. Cooper rolled his eyes when Alec grinned. He turned back toward the door.

"We need to talk, Coop," Alec said. The amusement that had been on Alec's face a moment before seemed to have left. He looked very serious.

Cooper shook his head. "No, we don't."

"Coop--"

Cooper turned and held his hand up, stopping Alec. "No, Alec."

Alec stared at him for several moments then nodded. But Cooper knew Alec, and he knew it wouldn't be that easy. He was certain of that when Alec spoke again. "You can't avoid this forever, Cooper. We will talk."

Cooper yanked his apartment door open and stepped through it. "Want to bet?"

Chapter Four

Alec tried to keep from drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair as he waited for the chief of police to see him and Cooper. He was anxious, and maybe just a bit nervous. Not because he was meeting with the police chief, but because he wasn't sure he could hide his feelings for Cooper from the man.

Chief John Rydal knew that Alec was gay. Hell, the chief was gay himself. That was how they had become friends after meeting through some acquaintances at a party a couple of years ago. Alec just didn't know if the chief knew Cooper was gay. He didn't want to *out* Cooper if his boss didn't know.

Alec glanced over at Cooper sitting next to him. Cooper could be dressed in a gunnysack and still look stunning. Slacks, jeans, shorts, a bathroom towel, it didn't seem to matter what the man wore. Alec was aroused every time he looked at Cooper.

That didn't bode well when he was about to have a very serious meeting with the chief of police about a murder investigation. Still, Alec couldn't stop thinking about the things that had happened between him and Cooper since last night.

He had tried to get close to Cooper for years, more so during the last six months. Once he actually came face to face with Cooper, denying his feelings for the man was out of the question. He was still in love with the son of a bitch.

Alec grimaced. Cooper seemed to be doing his level best to pretend Alec wasn't there. Alec knew that Cooper had a lot to deal with right now; this new murder, Wallace's upcoming trial, and Alec himself being back in Cooper's life.

He just didn't want Cooper thinking he was going to go away, because he wasn't. Alec had fought long and hard and planned for years to be back in Cooper's life. He wasn't about to give up now, not when he could just start to see the light at the end of the tunnel. He just hoped that light wasn't an oncoming train.

Cooper could easily decide he didn't want anything to do with Alec. He could wash his hands of the whole thing and tell Alec to go to hell. Somehow, though, Alec didn't think Cooper would. At least, Alec hoped Cooper wouldn't.

Last night and this morning had shown Alec that Cooper remained interested and in more ways than one. Sure, Cooper wanted him sexually and that thrilled Alec, but Cooper also wanted Alec emotionally, even if Cooper didn't know it.

Cooper's denial of their developing relationship, his uncertainty, even his refusal to talk about the past, all told Alec that Cooper was still emotionally involved. Alec just hoped that he could turn that emotion into something they could build on.

Alec glanced up when the door opened and the chief walked out with two other men in suits. He stood when he saw Cooper get up, waiting for the chief to acknowledge them.

The chief walked the men to the door, talking briefly with them before turning to look at Cooper and Alec. "Detective, Mr. Whitley, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

Alec frowned. He had hoped that the chief would know of the situation with the new murders before they arrived. Guess not.

"Is there somewhere private we can speak, Chief Rydal?" Cooper asked.

"Of course." Rydal gestured to his office. Just as they started in, Alec saw Jordan come rushing into the room.

"Jordan," Alec said. "I wasn't sure you were going to make it."

"I wanted to get the ME's preliminary report." Jordan held up the file in his hand.

Alec nodded and followed Jordan, Cooper, and Rydal into the office. Alec sat down next to Cooper across from Rydal and waited. Jordan stood at the end of the desk, flipping through the file he brought with him.

Alec wasn't sure he should be the one to start the conversation. He knew Rydal pretty well, having worked with the man in the past, but he wasn't sure how well the chief was going to take Alec's sticking his nose into police business.

"So, gentlemen, what can I do for you?" Rydal asked.

Cooper glanced at his watch, then back up to the Rydal. "Has Jordan talked with you concerning the murder he's been investigating?"

"He mentioned a murder on the phone last night, said he would be in to talk with me this morning. That he had a theory he wanted to pass by you first. Why? Is that what this is about?" Rydal glanced over at Jordan.

Cooper nodded. "This new murder has all of the earmarks of being one of Wallace's victims."

"Wallace? But he's behind bars until his trial," Rydal said, confusion showing on his face as well as filling his voice.

Alec saw Cooper swallow hard then take a deep breath. "The vic fits the profile for one of Wallace's victims in every way. He was male, young, about five foot ten, one hundred and sixty pounds, brown hair, blue eyes, and glasses."

"Except that he wasn't sexually assaulted," Cooper added.

"How was he killed?" Rydal asked.

Jordan waved a piece of paper in his hand. "The medical examiner says he was stabbed to death and bled out, but she said it looked like it was almost an afterthought. The victim was beaten and whipped, just as Wallace's other victims."

Rydal whistled. "Anything else?"

"Just one thing," Jordan replied. "This victim was drugged. The ME is running tests to nail down the exact drug, but she's pretty sure that it was flunitrazepam."

"Flunitrazepam?" Rydal asked.

"It's basically a date rape drug, a roofie." Jordan glanced down at the paper in his hand. "It causes anterograde amnesia and hallucinations, confusion. Most victims don't remember receiving the drug or even what happened to them while under the influence."

"And this young man had this drug in his system?"

Jordan nodded.

"If the medical examiner has to run more tests to be sure this drug was in his system, how does she know it's there now? Could it be something else?" Alec asked. He didn't like the sound of this. Date rape drugs made it almost impossible to have victim testimony, which was why Alec assumed they were used.

"I don't understand all of the medical terminology, but she told me that there was damage to the victim's temporal lobe, which indicates long-term drug use of this type," Jordan said. "Further testing should tell us what drug was used."

"So, this young man who fits Wallace's profile was drugged with a date rape drug. Anything else?" Rydal asked.

"Look, Chief, after seeing the victim, I called lockup just to be sure that Wallace was still in custody. I'm telling you, these two cases are connected." Jordan shook his head. "There's just too much coincidence for them not to be."

"And if we end up with another body," Cooper added, "and we have another serial killer on the loose that fits Wallace's MO, where do you think the prosecution's case is going to be?"

"Do you think we're going to have another body?" the chief asked.

Cooper and Jordan both nodded their heads.

The chief looked over at Alec. "And you?"

"I have a theory on all of this, but it's just a theory," Alec replied.

"And that would be?"

"I think Wallace is still killing young gay men." Alec heard Cooper inhale sharply at his words but kept his eyes on the chief. He just moved his leg over to brush against Cooper's. Cooper pressed back.

"Wallace is locked up," Jordan argued. "I told you, I checked."

Alec glanced over at Jordan. "Yes, you did, but I still think Wallace is doing this."

"From behind bars?" Jordan laughed roughly.

"Yes." Alec pushed his hand through his hair. He took a deep breath. He knew he was going out on a limb here, but he really didn't have any other choice. Cooper's safety, and maybe his sanity, were at stake here.

"I know it doesn't make sense," Alec said. "Hell, I can barely believe it myself and it's my theory, but I still think Wallace is doing this. Maybe he's working through someone else or has a partner we don't know about, but his hands are all over this."

The room was silent for several moments after Alec finished speaking. He was sure they were all going to start laughing at him. But if there was one thing Alec knew, it was investigation and security.

Alec's business partners teased him that he had a sixth sense, his gut instincts, and right now his instincts were telling him that Wallace was somehow involved in this latest murder, even if he didn't personally commit the murder.

"Okay, so maybe he has an accomplice that we didn't know about," Cooper finally said. Alec saw a small shudder shoot through Cooper's body at the thought. "That's definitely an avenue to investigate. In the meantime, we still have a murder on our hands."

Alec wanted to comfort Cooper; this had to be hard for him. Alec was basically telling Cooper that Alec believed that there was another killer out there who was either as sick and twisted as Wallace, or that Wallace was controlling the killer. It was a sobering thought.

"There's something else," Alec said. He cast Cooper a regretful look but knew that he had to lay all of his cards on the table. "If this killer is connected to Wallace, I don't think Mason, Jack, or Cooper will be safe until we catch him."

"Oh, my God, Mason," Cooper exclaimed, his face paling as he reached inside of his jacket for his cell phone, "I have to call Mason and warn him."

Before Cooper could dial Mason's phone number, Alec grabbed his hand to stop him. "Coop, do you really think you should tell Mason over the phone? Wouldn't it be better if we went to see him and told him in person?"

Cooper looked like he was about to argue, then dropped his head to his hand. "God, this shit is so fucking crazy." He looked up at Alec. "That son of a bitch was caught. He's behind bars. How in the hell is he doing this?"

Alec shook his head. "I don't know, but we're going to find out," he promised.

"We?" the chief questioned.

Alec turned to look at Rydal intently. "Yes, *we*. I've worked with you before, Rydal. You know what I can do. Let me help. Let me use my resources to catch this guy. I'll work hand in hand with Cooper and Jordan. I'll turn everything over to them. But I need to work this case."

Rydal folded his hands together on the desk and stared at Alec for several moments. He glanced up at Cooper and Jordan. "Can I have a few minutes alone with Mr. Whitley? I'll call you back in when I'm done."

Cooper and Jordan looked confused as they stood and left the room. Alec just stared at Rydal and waited.

"You're putting me in a tough spot, Alec," Rydal began. "There are only a few people who know that we've worked together, that we even know each other outside of social circles. If my superiors find out, I could lose my job."

Alec knew that Rydal was talking about more than everyone finding out they had worked together. Rydal was the police chief of a major west coast city. He was not out of the closet except to a few select friends, Alec included.

Alec knew it wasn't the coming out of the closet part Rydal had issue with. It was the scandal that would follow, and it would. It wouldn't matter how many years Rydal had given to the police force or how good he was at his job. Once people found out he was gay, that would be all they talked about.

"They won't find out, John," Alec assured him.

"Can you guarantee that?"

"Who's going to tell them?" Alec asked, waving his hands around the room. "I won't, and I know Cooper and Jordan can be trusted to keep their mouths shut. Besides, I helped on the last case, and no one was the wiser."

"How can you be sure Cooper and Jordan won't say anything?" Rydal asked skeptically.

"I've known Cooper for more than fifteen years, and I know he'd never say anything if I asked him not to. Cooper trusts Jordan, and I trust Cooper. End of story."

"Why do you have such a hard on for this damn case, Alec? Don't you have a company to run or something?"

Alec shrugged his shoulder. He still didn't want to *out* Cooper. It wasn't his place. "Coop's a friend, and Wallace messed with him enough that Cooper still has nightmares. I want to catch whoever is doing this and stop them before they do to someone else what Wallace did to Coop and Mason."

The chief stared at Alec for a moment. The silence in the room was thick. Then Rydal chuckled. "I haven't quite pinned down why you're so interested in this case, but whatever you want to tell yourself so you can sleep at night."

"Do you really think you can catch this guy?"

Alec shrugged. "I don't know, but I have to try, John. I saw what that maniac Wallace did to Cooper and Mason. God only knows what Wallace did to Ben Glassine while he had him. I'm just glad Ben had the courage to call us after Wallace kidnapped Mason. We might never have found either of them."

Rydal nodded. His face was solemn. "I read the report, Alec. It wasn't pretty. No one should have to go through what that young man went through, no one. The things Wallace did to him... he's one sick bastard."

"Wa-- was it worse than what he did to Cooper and Mason?" Alec asked, even though he couldn't imagine anything worse than how he had found Cooper.

Rydal nodded again. "You saw what Wallace did to Cooper and Mason in just a few hours, Alec. Well, Wallace held Ben captive for four months. How much damage do you think he could do in that amount of time?"

"Do you think Ben could be doing this?"

"Ben Glassine?" Rydal asked in astonishment.

"If Wallace had him long enough, he could have brainwashed him. Ben was pretty scared to go against Wallace. Mason said it was all he could do to convince the guy to call Jack when he was being held prisoner in that warehouse."

"You're talking about some form of Stockholm Syndrome, right?"

"Something like that, yes," Alec admitted.

"No, I don't think so, but I suppose anything is possible."

"Maybe that's a lead I should look into then, just to be sure."

"Well, shit," Rydal snapped as he ran his hand through his dark brown hair. "All right, look, you can assist Cooper and Jordan on this case, but you report only to them or to me. I don't want anyone else finding out about your involvement. Clear?"

"Crystal," Alec replied. He watched Rydal buzz his secretary and tell her to let his detectives come back in. A moment later, the door opened and Cooper and Jordan walked back into the room. Neither of them looked happy.

"Mr. Whitley is going to be working with the two of you on this case. His involvement is to be kept strictly between us. He will report directly to me, as will you. I expect the two of you to give him every courtesy. Is that understood?"

Alec could see the confused looks on both Cooper and Jordan's faces. He would love to know what they were thinking. Their boss, the chief of police, had basically just told them that Alec was their partner in this investigation, and he only had to answer to the chief.

"Yes, sir," both Cooper and Jordan replied.

"Good, now get the hell out of my office," Rydal said. He waved his hand toward the door, dismissing them. "I don't want to see you back here until you have something good to tell me."

Alec stood up. As Cooper and Jordan walked toward the door, Alec glanced at Rydal and winked. Rydal folded his hands over his lap and chuckled, shaking his head. Alec followed Cooper and Jordan out of the office.

"What did you say to him?" Cooper asked the moment Alec stepped up beside him.

Alec shrugged. "I impressed upon him the fact that I could look into places that he couldn't, and I wanted to help."

"That's all?" Cooper looked skeptical.

"Yeah, pretty much."

"So," Jordan said, stopping Cooper from further questioning, "what's our first step?"

"Well, I think the first thing we should do is go talk to Mason and Jack. They need to know what's going on. I'd feel better if Sam or Mitch joined us and kept an eye on them." Alec grinned. "They have a lot of experience protecting people."

Cooper rolled his eyes.

"And then we need to have a little conversation with Ben Glassine and find out if he knows anything."

"Ben Glassine?" Jordan asked. "Do you think he's involved with this somehow?"

"I don't kn--" Alec began.

"No, Ben didn't do this, so stop thinking he did," Cooper insisted.

"Would you bet your life on it? Or Mason's?" Alec asked. He wasn't so sure.

Cooper nodded without hesitation. "Yes, I would. I'd even bet your life on it. Ben would no more help Wallace than he would, well, I don't know, top someone, I guess."

Alec stopped walking to stare at Cooper in surprise. His mouth dropped open. "You're using that as an analogy? Topping someone?"

Cooper shrugged. "You met the guy, Alec. Ben is about as timid as they get. And I'm pretty sure he was that way before Wallace got to him."

"That doesn't mean he wasn't involved, Coop," Alec argued. "In fact, it just makes me suspect him even more."

Cooper frowned at Alec. "You can't be serious."

"Coop, if he's as submissive as you say, and you add that to the fact that he was under Wallace's thumb for four months, what makes you so positive that he isn't still working for Wallace?"

"Because I know what Ben went through when that maniac had him," Cooper nearly shouted as he turned to glare at Alec, his hands bunching on his hips. "I know how much Ben hates Wallace. I know he would never do anything to help that sick freak."

"I want to believe you, Cooper, I really do, but how can you be so sure?" Alec had to be sure. "Look at it from my point of view. Wallace kept Ben for four months while he got rid of all his other victims within days. Why? Why would he keep Ben? And as much as Wallace abused him, Ben never escaped, even when he had the chance."

"He tried to escape, you know that," Cooper said. "Even Mason said that in his statement."

"All Mason said was that Ben told him he had tried to escape. He never saw Ben escaping. All we have is Ben's word that he tried to escape. Ben said he went to the police, too, but we never found a report. Explain that."

"That's because he never made it to the police," Cooper explained. "Wallace always found him before he could."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I just am, Alec, and you're just going to have to take my word for it," Cooper said. "Ben Glassine did not do this."

Alec took a deep breath and let it out slowly as Cooper turned on his heel and stalked down the hallway. He trusted Cooper, really he did, but until Alec was positive Ben wasn't involved, Ben was still a suspect in Alec's book.

"That went well," Jordan said as he looked down the hallway after Cooper's retreating form. Cooper's body was stiff, his hands still fisted at his sides. Cooper looked pissed.

"Coop always did have a temper."

"Yeah, I've kind of noticed that over the years." Jordan chuckled. "Come on, we need to catch up with Coop before he runs off without us and gets his ass in trouble."

Alec glanced over at Jordan as they began to follow after Cooper. He wondered exactly what their relationship was. As far as Alec knew, Jordan was as straight as they came, but he sure seemed to be chummy with Cooper.

"How long have you been partnered with Coop?" Alec asked, trying to sound casual while his heart pounded in his chest as he waited for the answer.

"About five years, I guess. I was a beat cop up in Seattle for a few years before I moved down here. I worked as a beat cop down here for a couple of years too, then applied for detective. They made Cooper my partner."

"Why the move? Didn't you like Seattle?"

"Yeah, I guess." Jordan shrugged. "My parents are down here, and they wanted me closer. I had just broken up with yet another girlfriend, and I wasn't too happy with my current partner. The move down here seemed like the thing to do at the time."

"And now?" Alec asked.

"I haven't regretted it yet. I get to see my family whenever I want, and I get along a lot better with Cooper than I ever did with my old partner. The girlfriend thing seems to still be a little thin, but Jack keeps promising to introduce me to some lady friend of his."

"It doesn't bother you that Cooper's gay?"

"Hell, no." Jordan laughed. "You've met Cooper and Mason's friends, Neil and Patrick, right? Neil's my cousin which makes Patrick, Neil's lover, related as well. With family like them, why in the hell should I mind if the people I work with are gay?"

Alec was silent as he digested Jordan's words. The man seemed to be on the up and up. Alec didn't read any ulterior motives in his words about Coop. He didn't feel threatened by the man for Cooper's affections. Alec smiled. Guess they could be friends.

"Look, Jordan, until I'm as positive as Cooper seems to be, I'm not taking Ben Glassine off my suspect list. He--"

Jordan held up his hand. "Say no more. Cooper means a lot to you, and you're worried about his safety. You won't be happy until every possible threat against Cooper is removed. I get it."

Alec's brows drew together. "Yeah, how'd you know?"

"Dude, seriously? Your eyes devour him every time you look at him."

Alec could feel his face heat up as he blushed. He hadn't realized that his desire for Cooper had been so obvious. He wondered what else had been obvious. Had he given away anything else, and had anyone noticed?

"Jordan--"

"No, I don't think Cooper has a clue. And the only other person that noticed your feelings for Cooper is Mason, but Mason sees everything, so don't even try to hide it from him. You'd just be wasting energy that could better-utilized convincing Cooper to give you a second chance."

A second chance? "How much do you know?"

"About you and Coop?" Jordan asked.

Alec nodded, swallowing hard.

"I know you two used to be together and that something happened and you left. I know that Coop has never let anyone close enough to him to really establish a relationship since you left him, and I know that if you fuck this up, you'll never have another chance with Coop again."

Alec grimaced. "Guess you know pretty much everything."

"I don't know why you left and neither does Cooper. That's the one thing that has always... bugged him, I guess. He doesn't know if it was something he did or something else that made you leave."

"It was him but not the way he thinks. It had nothing to do with anything he did or said. Things happened that Cooper doesn't know about, things that could have hurt Cooper. I had to leave for his sake."

"Did you stop loving him?" Jordan asked.

Alec pushed the main doors open and stepped outside. He pushed his hands into the pockets of his slacks as he gazed down the stone steps to where Cooper stood waiting beside his car.

Cooper had a small, impatient smirk on his face as he waited for Alec and Jordan. The wind blew his soft, dark brown curls across his forehead. The black suit he wore fitted his body in such a way that it showcased every muscle Cooper had. He was so gorgeous that he made Alec's heart ache.

"No, I never stopped loving Cooper."

Chapter Five

Cooper drummed his finger impatiently against the steering wheel and swerved around another car as he drove toward Jack and Mason's house. He needed to assure himself that his friends were safe. He'd called Jack and Mason and told them to head home, that he needed to speak with them concerning the Wallace case, so they knew he was coming.

He cringed when he tried to think of how Mason was going to take his news. Mason's assault had been far worse physically than Cooper's. Wallace had beaten and whipped Mason so badly that it had taken weeks for him to fully recover.

While Cooper had sustained a lot of physical abuse at the hands of Daryl Wallace, the bulk of his assault had been psychological. Wallace had liked to taunt Cooper with what he would do to him.

His words were often accompanied by a stroke of Wallace's hand over Cooper's bound and naked body. When Cooper had refused to take the bait and play the game the way Wallace wanted, the whipping started. Cooper still had marks on his back. He always would.

Still, Wallace had done worse to Mason. Cooper just hoped Mason was strong enough to take the news that another murder had taken place. Jack was sure to go through the roof. Cooper knew he would if he was in Jack's position.

Cooper glanced over at Alec sitting in the passenger seat. Would he be pissed if someone threatened Alec? Undoubtedly. And Cooper wasn't sure that it mattered that they weren't even together. He'd still be upset.

Cooper gripped the steering wheel a little harder and let out a slow breath. He hadn't realized he still had possessive feelings for Alec until that moment. He didn't like where that thought led him. If he was feeling possessive of Alec, that meant his feelings were involved, and that could be a bad thing, a very bad thing.

Cooper pushed his maudlin thoughts away as he pulled in front of Mason and Jack's little white bungalow, noting that both of their vehicles were in the driveway. He needed to have his mind in the game and not on Alec.

Cooper turned off the car and climbed out. As Alec passed in front of him, Cooper's eyes followed. Would Alec and Cooper be happy in a little bungalow like this? Cooper chuckled. He didn't think so. They weren't... well, Cooper wasn't the bungalow type. He had no idea what type Alec was.

With a resigned frown, Cooper closed the car door and crossed the lawn to Jack and Mason's house. He knocked softly, the door opening almost immediately. Cooper smiled, trying to reassure the pale face that greeted him.

"Hey, Jack."

"Coop," Jack replied. He stood back, holding the door open. "Why don't you go get Mason and I'll get these guys settled in the living room? He's pretty frazzled right now."

Cooper walked in and headed directly for the kitchen, where he knew he'd find Mason. He was right. Mason sat at the table, a glass of juice cradled in his shaking hands.

"Hey, Mason," Cooper said. "How are you doing, babe?"

"Hey, Coop," Mason replied, his voice low. He sounded nervous and he looked frightened. His face was pale, his sea-blue eyes huge on his pale face. His light brown hair looked mussed as if Mason had been dragging his fingers through it.

Cooper walked across the floor and squatted down in front of smaller man's chair. "I want you to listen to me, Mason. I won't let anything happen to you. Wallace is still locked up. Jordan checked. He's not going to get out."

"Wha-- what do you need to talk to me about, then?" Mason choked out.

Cooper patted Mason's leg then stood up. He held his hand out for Mason. "Come into the living room where you can cuddle with Jack, and I'll tell you."

Mason took Cooper's hand and stood, a small, uneasy chuckle escaping his lips. "It must be pretty bad if I need to cuddle with Jack."

"It's not the end of the world, certainly, but just to give you an idea? I'm working with Alec on this... voluntarily."

"Oh." Mason tried to hide his surprise but Cooper saw it anyway when the man's eyes widened. "That must mean its real bad."

"He, uh, spent the night last night," Cooper admitted. If there was anyone Cooper could talk to, it was Mason. In the time they had known each other, they had become the best of friends. Cooper trusted Mason more than almost anyone in his life.

"Ooohhh." Mason smirked. "Did you have hot monkey sex?"

Cooper could feel his face flush.

"Oh, you did!" Mason exclaimed. "I want all the details, so spill!"

Cooper cringed. He should have kept his mouth shut. Now Mason was really going to put on the pressure. He couldn't really blame Mason. Cooper had been instrumental in getting Jack and Mason together. Payback was a bitch.

"There's nothing to tell." Cooper pushed his hands into the pockets of his slacks. "Alec spent the night. We fooled around a little, nothing big. We got up this morning and went to work. End of story."

Mason raised one light brown eyebrow. "End of story? Are you serious? You didn't talk about things? Make a date for later? Cry out each other's names in the heat of passion?"

Cooper rolled his eyes. "Mason!"

"Oh, please!" The hand Mason waved at Cooper still shook a little despite his curiosity. "You've been fantasizing about getting into Alec's pants again as long as I've known you and here you tell me that you did? And you really expect me not to ask about it? Are you crazy?"

"Mason, nothing happened," Cooper insisted. "We just fooled around a bit. Hell, I tried to get him to fuck me but he wouldn't. He said we had to wait a week."

Mason's brows drew together in confusion. "Wait a week? Why?"

Cooper shrugged. "I kind of freaked out a little last night after Jordan called." Cooper took a deep breath, looking anywhere but at his best friend. "I might have tried to get Alec to fuck me. He said no. He didn't want to have sex when I was freaking out, so we had to wait a week."

"Are you?" Mason asked. "Going to wait a week, I mean?"

Cooper shrugged again. "I don't know. If it was just a quick fuck, yeah, I'd probably go for it, but Alec keeps trying to talk to me about the things that happened ten years ago. He just won't let it go, Mason."

"Why don't you just talk to him about it then?"

Cooper looked at Mason in astonishment. "Seriously? I've got enough shit on my plate without bringing the past into it. Besides, what excuse could Alec have for leaving me the way he did?"

"You won't know until you discuss it, Coop."

"Mason," Cooper said as he rubbed his hand down his chin and throat, "he left me with no word, just left. Why would I want to put myself through that again? Give me one damn reason."

Mason crossed his arms over his chest and looked intently at Cooper. "Because you still love him?"

Cooper glared at Mason. "Low blow, Mason."

"But it's the truth." Mason took a couple of steps toward Cooper. He laid his hand on Cooper's arm. Mason's voice was quiet when he spoke. "You still love him, Cooper. That's a good enough reason to talk to him."

"Mason, what if... what if he just wants to rehash everything so he can feel less guilty?" Cooper looked down at his feet as he whispered his biggest fear. "What if he's just trying to clear his conscience and wants nothing to do with me?"

"I can't promise that Alec wants something with you again, Cooper. I barely know the man. But I'm pretty sure he does if he spent the night with you last night. You'll never know unless you talk to him. Are you willing to give up this chance to have him again because you're afraid?"

Cooper raised his head to look at Mason. He didn't know how to answer. If talking to Alec meant they might have a chance together, would it be worth it? What if Alec still left him after that? Could he handle the devastation?

"Mason, I don't know if I can let myself get involved with him again if he's just going to leave me once he gets what he wants. I can't go through that again."

Mason patted Cooper's arm again. "That's a decision you have to make, Coop, but I think talking to Alec is the only way you're ever going to be able to move on with your life, even if it's not with Alec."

Cooper watched Mason walk out of the kitchen, his words hanging heavily in the air. He leaned his head back against the wall, closing his eyes. Cooper hated this shit, hated feeling uncertain and afraid, hated not knowing what to do.

"Hey, you okay?"

Cooper opened his eyes to see Alec standing in the kitchen archway. God, he was one gorgeous-looking man. Alec was pure, masculine eye candy. Cooper could look at Alec for the rest of his life and die a happy man.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Cooper pushed himself away from the wall. A small chuckle escaped his lips. "Mason was drilling me for information about you."

"Oh?" Alec asked curiously. "What did you tell him?"

Cooper shrugged. "I told him that you spent the night and we fooled around a little." Cooper chuckled again. "He won't be happy until I tell him I had *hot monkey sex*. Ever since I set him and Jack up, Mason has made it his mission in life to fix me up with someone."

"Someone?"

Cooper glanced sharply at Alec. He had almost sounded... jealous? But that couldn't be right. Alec would have to have feelings for him to feel jealous. Right?

"Does he have anyone particular in mind, or will just any mindless fuck do?"

Yep, jealous. Cooper coughed into his hand to hide his grin. If he didn't think Alec would deck him, he'd start laughing with elation. Alec was actually jealous. That had to mean something.

"Well?" Alec exclaimed. Cooper could hear the anger and outrage in Alec's voice. He could see it in the small tic in Alec's jaw. "Does he have someone specific in mind, or does he plan on finding some idiot off the street for you to fuck?"

"Yeah," Cooper said as he stepped toward the kitchen archway, "he has someone specific in mind."

"Who, damn it?" Alec shouted.

Cooper glanced over his shoulder as he started through the doorway. "You." The image of Alec standing there, mouth dropped open in surprise stayed with Cooper all the way to the living room.

He crossed the room to sit on the couch, nodding to Jordan, who sat across from him. Jack sat with Mason curled up in his lap, the two boxer puppies they had gotten soon after purchasing their dream home curled up at Jack's feet.

Cooper frowned as he glanced around the living room. Comfortable overstuffed furniture, hardwood floors, and bright, vibrant colors abounded. Mason and Jack had made their little house into a haven away from the world. He hated to think that safety might now be in jeopardy because of a madman.

Cooper glanced up when Alec walked into the room a moment later. Alec quietly crossed the room and sat down on the couch next to him. He looked kind of like Cooper felt, uncertain, scared, and unsure of what to say or do. Cooper felt for him.

He wanted to reassure Alec that everything would be okay. Cooper stretched his arm out over the back of the couch. Without looking at Alec, he brushed his fingers along Alec's neck and gently stroked them through the soft blond hair at the nape.

Alec tensed for just a moment then leaned into Cooper's touch. A small shiver worked through Alec. Cooper grinned, looking away as he tried to get his head off of the gorgeous man sitting next to him and back on their reason for being at Jack and Mason's.

Jordan spoke up. "The first thing I want you to know is that I called lockup and Wallace is still there. I had them do a sight check just to make sure. He's in solitary confinement with a guard on his door. There is no way he can get out."

"And we need to know this why?" Jack asked hesitantly.

Cooper saw Jordan glance over at him. He patted Alec quickly on the neck then moved his arm so that he could sit forward, his elbows resting on his thighs. He took a deep breath to calm the sudden rapid beating of his heart then let it out.

"There's been another murder," Cooper said. "A young man fitting same general victim profile was found in a warehouse about two blocks from where Wallace held Mason. He was beaten and whipped, just like all of Wallace's other victims."

Cooper watched Mason's face pale. Jack's arms tightened around Mason. Both men were silent for several moments. Cooper couldn't blame either of them. Knowing that there was someone out there like Wallace was terrifying.

"Do you have any leads?" Jack finally asked.

Cooper shook his head. "Not yet. Jordan and I have been assigned the case because we know the particulars of Wallace's case. The chief asked Alec to assist us. Right now, we're waiting for the medical examiner's final report and following up a couple of leads."

"Isn't that a conflict of interest, Coop, you working on a case that's so similar to one where you were considered the victim?" Mason asked, speaking for the first time since Cooper's news. His voice was shaky.

"Probably." Cooper replied. "But I refuse to be taken off this case."

Mason nodded. Cooper knew Mason understood even if no one else did. Cooper had to be on this case so that he could assure not only Mason and Ben, but himself, that Wallace wasn't doing this. And, hopefully, catch whoever was.

"I've asked Sam and Mitch to join us," Alec added. "I want at least one of them to stay with you until we find whoever is doing this."

Jack opened his mouth to say something, but Alec held up his hand. "I know you're both perfectly capable of taking care of yourselves, but we would all feel a lot better if we knew you had a little extra muscle to keep an eye on things. Please?"

Jack stared at Alec for several moments then nodded. He hugged Mason closer as if he needed to assure himself that Mason was safe. "I don't like it, but whatever help you can give me in protecting my baby is welcome."

"Do you think this guy is going to come after us?" Mason asked quietly.

"I don't know, Mason," Cooper said. "But we need to assume the worst until we know better. This could be a coincidence, a fluke. Maybe this was just a simple murder that looks similar to Wallace's."

"But you don't think so," Mason said.

Cooper shook his head. "No, I don't think so and neither does Jordan. This case screamed at him from the moment he saw the body."

"So, if Wallace is locked up like you said, who's doing this?" Mason asked. "Do you have any theories?"

Cooper glanced at Alec, then back at Mason. "Alec has a couple of theories. One of them involves Ben working for Wallace."

"Not possible," Mason said without hesitation.

Cooper saw Alec roll his eyes. "Why isn't it possible?" Alec asked.

"It's just not, Alec," Mason said. "You don't understand the things Wallace did, how sick this guy really is. There is no way that Ben would do anything for Wallace now that he's gotten away from that monster."

Alec didn't look convinced.

"Alec, I know you don't have a good reason to believe me, but you will," Mason said, a small smile on his lips. "Ben Glassine doesn't have it in him to hurt someone, not like that."

"All right," Alec said, "I'll try not to consider Ben as a suspect, but I reserve the right to look into all leads no matter where they might go. If those leads take me to Ben Glassine, that's where I'm going."

"Fair enough," Mason said. "Just try to give Ben the benefit of a doubt, please? He really is a sweet young man who has been horribly abused. I only hope that one day he finds someone as special as Jack to teach him that not everyone is out to hurt him."

Alec nodded his agreement. Cooper was pretty sure that Alec was going to continue to look at Ben as a suspect until he could prove him innocent, but Alec didn't understand. Cooper knew that.

A special bond formed between Ben, Mason, and Cooper when they had survived Wallace's torture. Unless Alec experienced the hell they went through, he would never truly understand.

And Cooper hoped Alec never understood.

"Okay," Cooper said as he got to his feet, "we need to get back to the investigation. Call us if you see anything that makes you uncomfortable. Lock the doors and don't open them to anyone except us."

"Or Sam and Mitch," Alec added as he also stood up.

"Right," Cooper said. "Or Sam and Mitch."

Cooper started for the door, Jordan and Alec moving ahead of him. He paused at the door to look back at Mason and Jack. "You call me if anything seems out of the ordinary, and I do mean anything, no matter how strange. You need to keep your head in the game and your eyes on everything else."

Mason and Jack nodded. Jack wrapped both of his arms around Mason. Mason leaned back into his arms. "We'll keep an eye out, Cooper," Mason said. "You just make sure that you stay safe."

"Nothing is going to happen to me." Cooper chuckled. He pointed over his shoulder to where Alec stood staring at him, then winked at Mason. "I have my own personal bodyguard. If I'm real lucky, he'll be guarding my body later tonight."

Cooper grinned, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively at Mason. Mason laughed, breaking the tension as Cooper hoped. While he wanted Jack and Mason to keep an eye out on things, he didn't want them to become morose.

Cooper waved to Mason and Jack then headed out to where Alec waited for him. He started to climb into the car when he noticed Alec looking at him strangely.

"What?"

"What was that all about?" Alec asked, pointing back to where Mason and Jack still stood in the doorway of their house, huge smiles on their faces.

Cooper shrugged. "Mason wanted to make sure that I was going to be safe."

"And that's why he's laughing?"

Cooper shook his head. He grinned. "No, I told him that I had my own personal bodyguard and that, with any luck, later tonight, he'd be guarding my body."

Alec's mouth dropped open and his eyes widened in what Cooper could only guess was shock.

"You told Mason I was going to be guarding your body tonight?"

"Well, I assumed you'd be going home with me." Cooper lifted an eyebrow at Alec. "Was I wrong?"

"No," Alec said as he started to get into the car. "I have to go home with you tonight. I'm wearing your suit."

Chapter Six

Alec glanced over his shoulder and watched Cooper leaf through yet another stack of papers. He looked so frustrated. Alec could commiserate. Investigative work was not the glamorous work that everyone assumed it was. It took a lot of hours of research, paperwork, and twiddling your thumbs.

They had spent the morning talking to Jack and Mason, the afternoon making phone calls and going over reports. Now they were trying to find a lead, any lead. It wasn't looking good so far.

Currently, Cooper was going over reports from the Wallace case to see if there was a direct forensic connection to the present one. Jordan was making phone calls to other police precincts, trying to make a connection to other cases. And Alec was trying to tie all of the pieces together to give them a place to start their investigation.

Alec turned back to the message board he worked on and taped Ben's picture to it. Next to that were Cooper's picture and Mason's. There were also pictures of the four men Wallace had tortured and killed.

Two of the men had been identified, two had not. All of them fit the same basic physical description: young, varying degrees of brown hair, blue eyes, and glasses. The two men that had been identified were confirmed gay. They had yet to find out about the two John Does.

"Having any luck, Alec?"

Alec turned to see Cooper standing beside him looking at the board. He shook his head. "Not really. It would help if we knew who these last two men were. Mitch is taking their pictures around again to a few places to see if anyone knows them."

"That's good," Cooper said. "If we can confirm that they were gay, it might give us a lead to follow. Until we do, we can't consider the victim profile as all gay. We have to assume everyone is at risk."

"I'm really beginning to think that it's not so much about the men being gay as it is how they look."

Cooper peered carefully at the pictures of the victims, then at Alec. "What do you mean?"

"Okay, let's take you out of the equation for a minute," Alec said. He grabbed Cooper's picture and pulled it off the board. "Now, look at the men you have left. They all look the same. They're young, with slight body builds, brown hair, blue eyes, and glasses."

"We already have that profile, Alec. What are you getting at?"

"I don't think Wallace meant to take you, Coop. I think he was punishing you because of your involvement with Mason. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn't have taken you. You don't fit the profile."

"Shit!" Cooper exclaimed. He pushed his hand through his dark brown hair.

"So, besides being a sick bastard, why did he take men that look like this? Did they turn him on? Did he choose these men because he could easily overpower them? Is it their hair? Their eyes? What? Why these men?"

"Does he really need a reason, Alec?" Cooper asked. "Do any of these psychos need a reason to do the sick shit that they do?"

"Usually, yes," Alec said, nodding his head. "There's always a reason that serial killers pick the people that they do. It might be opportunity. It might be the victim profile. But there is always a reason, Coop."

"Well, their looks might be why he sexually assaults them. Maybe that's what he's attracted to," Cooper reasoned.

"True, but I don't think a serial killer would care that they were gay if they fit his desirable profile. It just wouldn't matter to him. In fact, I'd think he'd want someone that wasn't gay so that he could torture them. Wallace did seem to like subjecting his victims to his will."

Alec saw Cooper shudder. He patted him on the arm. "Sorry."

"No, it's okay." Cooper's small smile was wobbly. "You need to discuss this with me no matter how it makes me feel."

"Okay, so if Wallace is sexually assaulting his victims because he desires them, why wasn't the last victim assaulted?"

"Because Wallace didn't do it?" Cooper replied. "Because Wallace is still locked up?"

Alec rolled his eyes. "Coop, if this latest killing follows Wallace's MO in every other way, why wasn't the victim raped? Think about it."

Alec watched Cooper glance back at the board. His eyes roamed over the pictures of each victim slowly. Alec could practically see the wheels turning in Cooper's head. Alec knew if Cooper was given enough time he'd draw the same conclusion that Alec had while looking at the board. Alec crossed his arms over his chest and waited.

"He's doing this for Wallace," Cooper finally whispered. "He could be one of Wallace's victims, brainwashed to do what he thinks Wallace wants, or an accomplice in the killings, finishing Wallace's work."

"That's kind of what I thought."

Cooper looked over at Alec. "And you couldn't have just said that?"

"You needed to figure it out on your own to truly believe it because this puts Ben back in the running as a suspect." Alec smirked. "It wouldn't have been as much fun if I had just given it to you."

"Jackass."

Alec chuckled and blew Cooper a kiss. Cooper punched him. Alec grabbed his arm and grunted in mock agony. Cooper laughed and turned back to the papers on the desk. Cooper stacked several files together and put them into a briefcase before turning back to Alec.

"Let's check out of here and find something serious to eat. I could eat a cow right about now. Then we can go over these files and compare notes." Cooper waved at Jordan, gesturing that they were going to leave. Jordan nodded and went back to his phone call.

Alec grabbed his suit jacket and draped it over his arm. "Got any place in mind?" he asked as he followed Cooper out the door of the squad room.

"There's this little barbecue place around down on Third Street. They have great burgers and ribs."

Alec looked down at the suit he had borrowed from Cooper that morning. "Mind if we stop by my place first so that I can change clothes?"

Cooper glanced over at Alec and chuckled. "I guess that would be a good idea. I'd hate to see you spill something on my suit."

Alec cocked his head to one side. "It's a nice suit."

"I've always liked it."

Cooper tapped his foot, waiting while Alec unlocked the condo door. He had never been to Alec's place, not in the entire six months the man had been back.. He wondered if Alec's tastes had changed in the last ten years.

"Make yourself at home. I'm going to hop in the shower real quick," Alec said as they walked inside. "I shouldn't be more than a few minutes. If you're thirsty, there should be some soda in the fridge."

Cooper nodded, his eyes moving over the room. It didn't seem like Alec's tastes had changed too much, just become more refined. He still decorated in earthy tones with lots of books and artwork everywhere.

The main area of the condo was huge, encompassing the living room, entry, and dining room. A large gourmet kitchen was situated off to one side, and a small set of stairs led to a second-floor loft. Cooper assumed that was the bedroom as Alec had gone up there.

Cooper walked into the living area, whistling low under his breath at the items in the room. There was a really nice Pioneer Elite home theater system and a Toshiba fifty-two-inch LCD flat-screen television.

Add the brown suede couch and loveseat, the pine coffee tables, the pine bookshelves that lined one wall, and the river rock fireplace, and Cooper was seriously impressed. Even the artwork on the walls looked expensive.

The security business must pay pretty damn well, much better than a detective's salary. They hadn't had anything like this when they were together years ago, but they had also been starving college students. They had also been in love.

Feeling suddenly depressed, Cooper went to find Alec. If he was lucky, he might catch Alec in the shower or just coming out. Hot water, soap, and Alec? There wasn't a better combination.

The bedroom surprised Cooper as much as the downstairs had. The largest bed he had ever seen dominated one wall of the loft. A simple brown suede comforter covered it all of the way to the floor. Directly across from the bed was a solid white railing that overlooked the downstairs. Two large dressers sat against the farthest wall, with a door between them that Cooper assumed led to the bathroom. Wisps of steam came out under the door.

Another set of bookshelves lined the closest wall to the staircase. It was filled with books, artwork, and framed pictures. Cooper took a step closer to look at the pictures. Maybe he could get a glimpse into Alec's life over the last ten years.

He picked one silver frame, smiling at the picture of Mitch, Sam, and Alec standing in front of their business. Another picture showed Alec in a graduation gown. Since Cooper had never seen this picture, he assumed it was Alec's college graduation. He set it back on the bookshelf.

The next picture had Cooper's breath catching in his throat. It was him and Alec standing in a park. Cooper remembered the day that picture had been taken. They had gone to a local fair together, just a few months before Alec had left.

Cooper's hand shook as he set the silver frame back on the bookshelf. The next picture confused Cooper even more. It was a picture of Cooper on the day he had graduated from college, taken three years after Alec left him.

Cooper picked up picture after picture of himself from the bookshelf. Each one taken after Alec had left. One from the day he graduated from the police academy. One from the day he solved his first big case and went out celebrating with friends. Even a picture of Cooper from right around the time he had met Mason.

How had Alec gotten all of these pictures? Why did he have all of these pictures? Was Alec stalking him? Cooper wiped his sweaty hand on the fabric of his slacks, the room around him suddenly feel claustrophobic despite its immense size.

He glanced anxiously around the room. He didn't know what to think. Logically, Cooper knew that there had to be an explanation and if he just asked Alec why there were pictures all of the place, it would make sense.

He didn't know if he could handle Alec being some wacko. And that was just how Alec was beginning to look, like some psychotic wacko.

Cooper thought over the last six months. Alec had shown up out of nowhere after being gone for ten years. Because of the threat to Cooper from Wallace, Alec had taken over as his personal protection. Cooper hadn't argued.

Cooper's knees began to shake as he realized that, since then, Alec was always around, popping up wherever Cooper went. Alec even broke into Cooper's apartment. And now Cooper had been ordered to work the investigation with Alec. Cooper's days and nights involved Alec.

Suddenly afraid that he had gotten himself into a situation that he might not be able to get out of, Cooper set the last picture down and started to tiptoe across the room toward the stairs. The best thing he could do at this point was put some space between him and Alec. He just needed some time to think, some time to figure this all out without totally freaking out.

Cooper made it to the top of the stairs and started to take the first step down when the bathroom door opened and Alec walked out. Cooper froze on the stairs. He didn't know whether to run or pretend that nothing had happened.

"Oh, hey, did you find something to drink?"

Cooper slowly turned around. He took a deep breath and stepped back into the loft. Alec was pulling a blue cotton shirt out of dresser. Alec already had a pair of faded blue jeans lying across the bed.

"Alec?" Cooper asked nervously, gesturing to the pictures on bookshelf when Alec turned to look at him. "You want to explain those?"

Cooper wasn't surprised when Alec's body froze in place. What did surprise him was the panicked look on Alec's face when he looked at him. Alec's eyes dropped down, and he walked over to sit down on the bed, his back to Cooper. His shoulders slumped.

"It's not what you think, Cooper," Alec said quietly.

"You don't have pictures of me all over the place? Pictures of me from after you left me? Pictures of my college graduation? My graduation from the police academy?" Cooper waved his hand at the bookshelf. "Hell, you even have pictures of me dancing with Mason. What the hell is going on, Alec? Have you been stalking me?"

Alec let out what Cooper could only describe as a cross between a chuckle and a sob. "Okay, maybe it is what you think."

"Alec!"

"Christ! I didn't want you to find out this way," Alec groaned. His head dropped forward and he pushed his hand through his blond curls. Cooper could see his hand trembling.

"You didn't want me to find out what?"

"Basically? I have been stalking you."

Cooper blinked. "You... you've been stalking me?" He had no idea what to make of those words. Cooper had so many thoughts that he couldn't pick one, so his mind melted and went totally blank.

"Do you want to explain those words? Because I'm having a really hard time understanding them right now," he finally told Alec when he couldn't come up with a single idea of what Alec was talking about.

Alec folded his hands together and let them fall between his knees as he stared down at the floor. He looked so dejected that Cooper almost told him to forget it. They could just go out to eat and forget that this conversation ever happened. But then Alec began to speak.

"Do you remember meeting my father?"

Cooper's brows drew together in a frown. "Vaguely. I only met him that one time when he came to town and we all went to dinner. He wasn't very pleasant. Why?"

"He came to see me at work the next day while you were at school."

"And?" Cooper had no idea what that had to do with Alec having his pictures all over the place.

"He told me that he wouldn't stand for having a gay son, that I had to leave you and get my head screwed on straight." Alec took a deep breath. "He said he would stop paying for me to go to

college, and he would ensure that I never got a job, that he would ruin me. I didn't care. I told him I would pump gas if I had to. I told him to go to hell, and the next day, you had that little fender bender."

"What?" Cooper took a step closer to Alec, concerned by the slump of Alec's shoulders.

"He came to see me again about a week later. This time when I told him that I wouldn't leave, you got mugged. The last time he came to see me was about a week after that. He had pictures, Coop, pictures of you going to work, going to school, pictures of you inside our apartment."

Cooper plopped down on the bed beside Alec. "He had pictures of me?"

Alec nodded. "He said it would be a real shame if something worse happened to you. That if I really cared about you and wanted to ensure your well-being, I would let you go."

"Alec--" Cooper began, but stopped speaking when Alec held his hand up.

"I thought if we got away from him, we would be okay. I thought that all that mattered was the two of us being together, that we could overcome anything as long as we stuck together. That's when you lost your job at the coffee house."

"Alec, I got fired because of some stupid complaint by a customer. That had nothing to do with your father," Cooper insisted.

"You got fired because one of my father's lackeys got you fired. Do you remember how hard it was to find a job after that? People would be real interested in you for about a day and then suddenly they wouldn't even consider hiring you?"

"But that was just--"

"That was my father showing me that he had the power to ruin your life, to ruin our lives. The last time he came to see me, he showed me those pictures of yo--"

Cooper saw Alec swallow hard.

"He had pictures of you in the middle of the night." Alec's voice had gone very quiet, almost a murmur. "You were naked and asleep. It had to have been taken on one of the nights I was working late. I wasn't home, Coop. Anything could have happened to you."

"Why didn't you go to the police?" Cooper asked, his body shuddering at the thought of someone breaking into their apartment and taking pictures of him without his knowledge. "Hell, why didn't you say anything to me?"

"Christ, I don't know. I wanted to tell you, but I was afraid to." Alec wiped a weary hand over his face. "And I did go to the police. After my father's lawyer got done, they basically slapped me on the hand and told me to behave myself and stop harassing my father."

"They thought you were harassing your father?" Cooper asked, astonished.

"The chief of police and the deputy mayor were poker buddies with my father. He called them and they raised holy hell. Even if any of those officers had believed me, they never would have said anything. They would have lost their jobs."

"Still..."

Alec shrugged.

"Is that why you left me?"

"Yes. After I saw the pictures of you from that night, I knew that he would hurt you if I didn't leave. He made me go right there and then. I couldn't even take anything with me. He just put me in a car and had me driven off to some clinic for *homosexual rehabilitation*."

"For what?"

"It was a rehabilitation center that re-educates you into being straight. I actually pulled it off for a long time. I went back to college and got my degree, then got a job in one of my father's companies. No one ever knew that I was gay. I was even engaged once."

"You were engaged?" Cooper whispered, stunned. "Did you love her?"

"Hell, no, I couldn't stand her," Alec said sharply. "She was handpicked by my father."

"Why didn't you marry her?"

"Besides the fact that I hated her, you mean?" Alec laughed. It sounded bitter to Cooper. "I probably would have if my father hadn't died. Once he was gone, I donated all of his money to charities supporting gay rights and started looking for you."

Cooper chuckled. "Bet that made him roll over in his grave."

"God, I hope so. I hope he's burning in hell right now with the knowledge that I'm still gay, and all of his money is helping other people be just as gay as I am."

Silence fell between them. Cooper didn't know what to say. All of the reasons he had thought Alec had left him for were wrong. Alec had been in just as much hell as he had been in. Only, Alec knew about it while Cooper had been in the dark.

"How could you not tell me, Alec?" he finally asked.

"I wanted to, Coop, I swear to God I did. There just didn't seem to be any way to do it. How was I supposed to tell you that my father would kill you if I didn't leave you?"

Cooper could see the tension in the naked thigh sitting next to his. Cooper looked up at Alec. The man looked almost defeated. Alec's head bowed down to his chest, his shoulders were hunched, and his hands were clasped together so tightly they were nearly white. All of Alec was pale.

As casually as he could manage, Cooper said, "You never explained about the pictures, Alec."

"Oh, those." Alec chuckled as he raised his head to look at his bookshelf. "After I left, you moved, and I lost track of you for a couple of years. When I finally tracked you down, you were getting ready to graduate. I attended your college graduation and took pictures. After that, I just kind of kept taking pictures of you whenever I could."

"You came to my graduation?" Cooper asked. "And you never said anything to me? You could have talked to me then, explained things. I would have helped you."

"My father was still alive then, Coop," Alec said, as if that explained everything. "If he knew I was even looking for you, well, I don't know what he would have done. It was better to just let you think I was long gone."

"No, it wasn't!" Cooper shouted as he jumped to his feet, suddenly feeling all the rage from the last ten years boil over. "Do you have any idea what I went through when you left? I didn't know if you were alive or dead. I looked everywhere for you. I even filed a missing person's report on you."

Cooper waited for Alec to say something, anything, but he just sat there, his head dropping down to his chest again. Cooper couldn't believe Alec hadn't said anything to him, not one word.

They were supposed to be a team. It was supposed to be the two of them against the world. If Alec hadn't shared the bad things that happened back then, how could Cooper expect him to share anything now?

"Damn it, Alec, I loved you more than I've loved anyone in my entire life. I would have gone anywhere with you, done anything for you, and you just left me." Cooper wiped his hand across his face to clear away the tears that formed. "You didn't even leave a fucking note."

Alec sighed heavily, his voice filled with anguish. "I'm sorry, Cooper."

"That's it? That's all you have to say?" Cooper asked when Alec didn't say anything else. Alec just shrugged. "Fuck you, Alec."

Alec cringed as the front door slammed behind Cooper. He didn't know what he'd expected when he told Cooper why he had left ten years ago. He knew what he had dreamed, and it wasn't this. This hurt. Alec's misery was like a steel weight in his chest. It made it hard to breathe.

He slid off the bed and sat on the floor. He wrapped his arms around his stomach, suddenly feeling bone-deep cold. Alec was frozen to his very core. He was pretty sure even his heart was frozen.

Alec leaned his head back against the side of the bed. He could feel tears stream down his face, but he didn't have the energy to wipe them away. There just didn't seem to be any point. He felt bereft, desolate.

Cooper was gone and he wasn't coming back. Alec knew it when he saw the anger on Cooper's face, the sense of betrayal. Alec had fucked up, and it had cost him the only man he would ever love.

Chapter Seven

Alec groaned as he sat up. He wiped his hand over his face, then looked around the room. Something woke him up, but, for the life of him, he couldn't figure out what. A loud pounding at his front door gave him his answer.

He climbed to his feet and grabbed last night's jeans, pulling them quickly up his legs. He buttoned the first couple of buttons, but, when the pounding intensified, he left the last two undone and went to answer the door.

His eyes widened when he peeked through the peephole and saw Cooper standing on the other side. Alec's heart pounded with joy as he quickly unlocked the door and pulled it open. He managed a tremulous smile.

"Get dressed," was all Cooper said. "We have a lead."

Crestfallen, Alec's smile fell from his lips, and he turned away. Cooper hadn't come back. For just a moment, a brief moment, Alec had dreamed. It had been stupid. It would take awhile for Alec to realize that Cooper would never be his again.

"I'll be ready in a few minutes." Alec went back upstairs feeling just as weary as he had been the night before. It was only as he heard a small crunch under his foot that he remembered what he had done last night.

He bent down and picked up the broken picture frame glass and dropped it in the small trash can beside his nightstand. Alec grabbed the stack of pictures off the floor. He had taken all of the pictures out of their frames last night.

There didn't seem to be any reason to keep them up anymore. It would only hurt to look at them. He had kept them around in the beginning because he needed something of Cooper's. Through the years, each little photo had helped keep Alec sane.

He gently leafed through the stack until he came to his favorite. He rubbed his thumb over a portrait of Cooper taken a few years ago. Cooper's mother had paid for it. Alec had broken into the photographer's studio and stolen it.

The background was a cloudy brown. Alec could only see the top half of Cooper's body. It sent Alec's blood pumping every time he looked at it. Cooper was dressed in a simple white button-down shirt with tan wooden buttons. Cooper was clean shaven with his dark brown hair neatly combed.

But for Alec, it was the smile on Cooper's face and the glint in his hazel eyes that really did it. The look was sensual, sexy. It made Alec think of those nights when he and Cooper used to curl up together and cuddle all night long, just talking and loving on each other.

Maybe he'd keep this one out or at least in his nightstand drawer. A body had to have something to fantasize to. Cooper had always worked for Alec. And maybe he just wasn't quite ready to give everything up.

Alec wasn't foolish enough to think Cooper wanted him back. Alec just wasn't ready to let Cooper go yet. Alec imagined he'd have to stop stalking Cooper now. Cooper knew what was up. If Cooper caught Alec following him, Cooper would probably punch him.

"Are you ready to go yet?"

Alec jerked and dropped the stack of pictures on the floor. He quickly knelt down and started picking them up. "I'll be ready in just a minute," he called down to Cooper.

"What in the hell are you doing?"

Alec looked up to see Cooper standing at the top of the stairs, glaring at him. Alec's gaze flickered down to the stack of pictures in his hands and those on the floor, then back up to Cooper.

"Nothing," he said quickly. "I just have to finish getting dressed."

Alec's heart pounded as Cooper walked farther into the room. If he came around to Alec's side of the bed, there would be no way he could miss the pictures frames all over the floor or the stack of pictures in Alec's hand.

"Just go downstairs, Cooper. I'll be down after I finish getting dressed, and we can go," Alec insisted. He mentally crossed his fingers and hoped that Cooper would just do as he asked. That hope died when Cooper walked farther into the room. Alec grimaced.

"What is all of this, Alec?" Cooper asked as he walked around the end of the bed and came to a sudden halt. He stared down at the stacks of picture frames and the pictures for a brief moment. Then his eyes moved to the bookshelf they had decorated before.

"Getting rid of me already?" Cooper asked as his accusing eyes came back to meet Alec's.

"Fuck!" Alec exclaimed. He dropped the pictures on his nightstand and stood to his feet. "I can't win with you, can I? Nothing I do seems to be right. First, I leave trying to save your sorry ass and that's wrong."

Alec clenched his hands as agitation filled him. Cooper wasn't the only one who had been hurt by all of this. Alec had suffered, too. Every day for the last ten years, Alec lived with the fact that his love for Cooper could very well be what killed the man.

"Then I come back and tell you everything and that's wrong." Alec pointed his finger at Cooper. "Well, fuck you, Cooper Thomas. I said I was sorry and I am, but I'd do it again in a heartbeat if it meant keeping you alive."

Alec could see the slow burn of anger move over Cooper's body. Alec braced himself for the impact that he knew was coming. Alec felt the brunt of Cooper's anger hit his jaw in the form of a fist. It sent him reeling backward against the edge of the nightstand. Alec grunted at the instant pain that shot up his back.

"You had no right!" Cooper yelled as he swung at Alec again.

Alec threw his hand up to block Cooper, his other hand swinging out to catch Cooper in the shoulder. "I had every right, damn it!" Alec shouted back. Alec's hand glanced off Cooper's shoulder and hit the man's collar bone.

"Fuck you!" Cooper swung again. Alec pushed himself toward Cooper, intent on avoiding the fist coming at him and pushing Cooper away at the same time. All his quick shift did was press his body up against Cooper's.

Cooper reared back at the contact. Alec followed. Cooper slipped, arms flailing. Alec wrapped his arms around Cooper, twisting quickly as they both headed for the mattress. Alec felt the air whoosh from his lungs as Cooper landed on top of him.

Time seemed to stand still as Alec looked up to see Cooper watching him. Alec couldn't read the emotion glaring in Cooper's eyes. Too many years had passed, and Cooper had changed too much. But he could hope.

Alec reached up and caressed the side of Cooper's face. "I'm sorry, Cooper," Alec whispered. His heart was filled with so much sorrow at the pain he had caused Cooper that it felt like a physical ache in his chest.

Cooper's eyes welled with tears. Alec brushed them away. Cooper's brow furrowed. Alec smoothed the lines. Cooper's lips trembled. Alec calmed them with his fingertips.

"You left me, Alec," Cooper whispered, "like I didn't mean anything to you. You just left. I thought you were dead. I thought you didn't want me anymore. I thought that you had found someone else."

"There's never been anyone else, Cooper," Alec murmured truthfully, baring his soul to Cooper on the slim hope of the emotions he saw in Cooper's eyes. "There never could be. You've owned my heart since the first day I met you."

Alec watched Cooper's expression of pain and anger turn to desire and hope. His hazel eyes blazed down into Alec's. Cooper's mouth opened then closed. He swallowed then opened his mouth again.

"Promise?"

The beginning of a smile tipped the corners of Alec's mouth. "I promise, Coop."

Cooper's eyes dropped down to Alec's lips then flickered back up to Alec's eyes. Cooper drew his bottom lip in as if deep in thought. Alec rubbed his finger along Cooper's lip line, chuckling quietly when Cooper gently bit down.

Alec was surprised when Cooper's expression suddenly stilled and grew serious. He worried that Cooper didn't want him despite the hard cock he could feel pressed into his abdomen.

"Cooper?"

"Were you serious about waiting a week?" Cooper's voice broke with huskiness.

Alec hissed. "Not anymore." Alec wrapped his hand around the back of Cooper's neck and pulled the man down for a kiss. A delightful shiver of wanting ran through Alec as he felt Cooper's tongue brush against his.

He deepened the kiss, his lips pressed against Cooper's. His tongue warred for dominance, then submitted, only to flare up again for top position. He tried to tell Cooper with his kiss that he would take anything Cooper had to give.

Buttons flew everywhere as Alec pulled at Cooper's shirt. He didn't care. He'd buy Cooper a new shirt, a hundred new shirts. Whatever Cooper wanted, Cooper could have, as long as the man was naked in the next ten seconds.

"Coop, need you, baby," Alec's murmured against Cooper's lips as his fingers yanked on the zipper of Cooper's jeans. He had them unzipped and was pushing them down Cooper's legs before Cooper could even reply.

Alec grasped Cooper's cock. The loud groan Cooper gave sent joy blazing through Alec. He knew he had been naked with Cooper just the day before, but, somehow, it was just better today.

Yesterday, Alec had a hope that, once everything was said and done, Cooper might forgive him and let him stay. Today, he thought he might actually be able to keep Cooper. He could feel that hope growing with each soft touch of Cooper's hands.

Alec stroked Cooper's hips, the small of his back. He grabbed Cooper's butt and pressed the man's body down between his thighs, letting Cooper feel his arousal.

Alec slowly caressed Cooper's body, his sides, his back, his shoulders. Alec didn't miss a spot. Alec's heart hammered in his ears as Cooper caressed him back. Each touch felt new, different, as if he were discovering Cooper for the first time.

Cooper's nearness was overwhelming. He smelled of rough, raw male mixed with a hint of musk. Alec leaned up and took a deep inhale at the skin on Cooper's neck. It was the perfect combination.

Alec's breath hitched in his throat when Cooper's hands moved down to rub his butt cheeks. It had been a long time for him. While he hadn't been a saint in the last ten years, he had saved that part of himself for Cooper.

"Lube?" Cooper inquired. His voice was low and husky. "Condom?"

"Uh, nightstand, I think," Alec replied. His face burned a little as he rolled to his side and tried to reach the nightstand. Cooper beat him to it, pulling the drawer open and searching around inside.

"You're not sure?" Cooper asked.

Alec shrugged, feeling a burning rush of pink staining his cheeks. "Not that there have been that many, but I don't bring guys back here."

Cooper stopped searching the drawer to look over at Alec in astonishment. "Never?"

Alec shook his head. "There's never been anyone in this bed but me."

Cooper grinned, and Alec's heart took a perilous leap. He felt like he had won the lottery. Cooper suddenly leaned over and kissed Alec. Cooper's tongue explored, his lips dominated, his hands caressed every bit of naked flesh he could reach.

"You lose the jeans," Cooper ordered as he pushed himself back up. "I'll find the lube."

As Cooper moved over to continue searching the drawer, Alec quickly unbuttoned his jeans and pushed them down his legs. He was naked and waiting, legs spread wide, when Cooper turned back to him, lube and condom in hand.

"Damn, that's a pretty sight," Cooper groaned.

Alec held his arms out in invitation. In one forward motion, Cooper was in his arms, settling his body between Alec's legs. Both men groaned as their naked bodies pressed together. Alec's hands locked together against Cooper's spine.

"Cooper," Alec begged. "I need, baby."

Cooper chuckled. "You're going to have to let me go if you want to do anything more than cuddle." Cooper's smiling eyes met Alec's. "Not that I'm against that, mind you, but..."

Alec reluctantly loosened his hands from around Cooper's waist. It wasn't too terrible. He had lots of unexplored, smooth, naked skin to touch. And touch he did. His hands skimmed over strong muscles and lean hips; they pulled on hard nipples.

Alec wanted Cooper to come apart in his arms, to remember how wonderful it was between them and how good it could be. He wanted Cooper to be so enamored with him by the time they were done that Cooper wouldn't even consider looking at another man.

"Going to get you ready now, baby," Cooper said. A moment later, Alec felt a slick finger move between his cheeks, then rub against his sensitive hole. Alec's eyes squeezed tight. It really had been a long time, but not so long that he'd forgotten how good it felt.

And Cooper's touch was so sensuous, so delicate. He didn't just push right in as a lot of men might have. Cooper caressed and stroked. Alec got so hot that he was nearly begging for Cooper's touch by the time one finger pushed in.

"Alec!"

"Relax, baby," Cooper crooned softly in Alec's ear. "Damn, Alec, you're so fucking tight. You're going to feel so good wrapped around my cock."

"Didn't..." Alec's voice hitched as Cooper pressed in another finger. "I didn't... no one but you, Coop, no one's ever..."

Cooper's fingers stilled. "No one's ever... Alec, are you saying no one's fucked you in ten years?"

Alec opened his eyes to see Cooper staring down at him. Cooper's expression was part skeptical, part astonishment. Alec shook his head. "That belonged to you," Alec said simply. What else could he say?

"Christ!" Cooper's head fell forward to lean against Alec's shoulder. His body trembled in Alec's arms. "I didn't... Alec," Cooper raised his head to look down at Alec, "I didn't know. I haven't..." Cooper shook his head. His eyes were agonized.

While it pained Alec to acknowledge the fact that Cooper hadn't saved some part of himself, Alec knew it would be unreasonable to hold that against him. Cooper, thinking Alec had left, had moved on with his life. He had no reason to save himself.

"Ssshhh," Alec whispered. He placed his finger over Cooper's lips. "I never expected that you would save yourself for me, Cooper. You thought I was gone, doing who knows what. Don't let it spoil what we could have now."

"I wish I had saved myself, Alec," Cooper whispered. "I'm sorry."

Alec shook his head. "None of that matters now."

A seductive smile softened Cooper's lips. "I did learn a thing or two along the way."

"Oh?" Alec was intrigued. While they hadn't been each other's first lovers, they hadn't really had a clue ten years ago. Alec wasn't sure any gay man really did in the beginning. Heterosexual relations were taught in health class, not homosexual. Gay men pretty much had to figure it out on their own, kind of like on-the-job training. Alec smothered a chuckle at his thoughts. Maybe that should be on-the-blowjob training.

Alec's thought died a quick death when Cooper started moving his fingers. He winced, waiting for the small burning feeling to fade. Cooper, God bless him, just waited patiently, not moving until Alec nodded.

After that, it was pure sensation for Alec. He had waited ten years to feel Cooper loving him again. It had been a lonely ten years. Alec knew a lot of men didn't like to receive. They preferred the top position. With Cooper, they had shared both. They had shared everything.

Alec pushed his hips back against Cooper's fingers, impaling himself over and over again. He grabbed for Cooper, finding the man's arm. Alec used it to keep himself grounded as his world spun out of control.

Alec other hand reached for his cock, but Cooper pushed it away. "Coop," Alec groaned.

"Uh-huh," Cooper replied. "This is mine now."

"Yeah, yeah," Alec said, "okay." Alec pushed his hips toward Cooper. Cooper wanted his cock, he could have it, but he'd better do something with it soon or Alec was going to lose what was left of his mind.

Alec was pretty sure Cooper was torturing him when the man's lips bypassed Alec's cock and moved to lick up the small trail of pre-come dotting Alec's abdomen. Maybe it was payback for the last ten years.

Alec tried to move his hips toward Cooper, but Cooper ignored his movements. Instead, Cooper added a third finger to Alec's ass. Alec clenched his muscles around them. He felt so full. Cooper curled his fingers and brushed Alec's prostate.

"Cooper," Alec cried out as his body bowed off the bed. Alec started panting, unable to catch his breath as Cooper plunged his fingers in and out of Alec's tight hole, brushing the sweet spot inside with each push.

Alec knew he was going to come. He could feel the pressure building up inside his balls, making them feel heavy and hot and tight. He wanted Cooper to come with him. He wanted to come with Cooper inside of him.

"Coop," Alec moaned. He tugged on Cooper's hair, pulling his head up. Cooper resisted for a moment then moved up Alec's body until they were face to face. "It's time, Coop."

Cooper stared down at Alec for a moment. Alec felt Cooper's hand brush against the side of his face. Alec's breath hitched at the smile that crossed Cooper's face. "All right, Alec," Cooper murmured.

Alec cried out as Cooper pushed himself away until he knelt between Alec's legs and reached for the discarded condom on the bed. It was only as Cooper rolled the condom down his hard shaft that Alec remembered the need for it. Maybe, someday, they wouldn't need it.

He lifted his legs and set them on Cooper's shoulders. Cooper raised an eyebrow at him. Alec chuckled. He had learned a thing or two in the last ten years as well. He knew how good this position felt for both people involved.

Cooper leaned forward and pushed his cock against Alec's aching hole. Alec's breath caught in his throat at the desire shining in Cooper's eyes. He pushed out as Cooper pushed in. His hands gripped Cooper's arms. Alec could feel each inch of Cooper's more than impressive cock filling him.

Then Cooper was in, his balls resting against Alec's burning body. Alec took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He had been waiting for this moment for ten years, dreaming about it. Nothing he had ever fantasized had ever come close to the pleasure shooting through his body at this exact moment.

Cooper's eyes stayed glued to Alec's as he began to thrust into him. Alec let go of Cooper's arms, dropped his legs from Cooper's shoulders, and held his own arms out to Cooper. Cooper grinned and moved forward to lie over Alec, their chests pressed together, their mouths inches from each other.

Alec could feel every movement that Cooper made. He felt every breath that came out of Cooper's mouth. Alec cupped the side of Cooper's face and pulled him down until their lips met. Alec wrapped his legs high up on Cooper's back and locked his ankles together. His other hand moved to wrap around Cooper's neck, his fingers clenching in Cooper's hair.

It was a slow loving. After all of these years, Alec thought that they would have been all over each other. He thought that it would be fast and rough, but it wasn't. Alec could still feel the passion building in his body. He knew that they were both headed toward an explosive orgasm, but it was a slow, steady build, not urgent and needy.

Cooper lifted his head. Alec met his questing eyes. Cooper seemed to be searching for something in Alec's gaze. Slowly, Cooper began to smile, and it was a glorious smile filled with hope and happiness.

"Find what you were looking for?" Alec whispered.

"Yeah," Cooper replied, "you." Cooper suddenly grabbed Alec's thigh and pulled it up higher, tight against his side. It changed the angle of Cooper's thrust.

"Oh, God," Alec groaned as Cooper pegged his prostate. Alec pushed his head back into the pillow behind him. His eyes fluttered closed. Cooper thrust harder. Alec panted. His hands clenched on Cooper's arms.

"Harder," he demanded. "Oh, fuck, please, Coop, harder."

Cooper complied. Alec went out of his mind. The sensations shooting through his body made a distant part of Alec grieve for the time they had lost. The rest of Alec's world center on the cock in his ass and the body pressed down on his aching cock.

"Alec."

Alec opened his eyes to see Cooper staring down at him. The heat emanating from Cooper's eyes was scorching. Alec knew that if he could climb into them, he would never be cold again, and he had been cold for so very long.

"Come for me," Cooper whispered.

The sudden orgasm that blasted through him at Cooper's demand took Alec by surprise. He knew it was coming, he just didn't expect it without a little more hands-on stimulation. When it hit, Alec couldn't contain his cry of delight as he shot between their two bodies.

A moment later, Cooper's eyes widened. He roared out Alec's name. All of the heat Alec had been craving filled him. Alec opened his arms and welcomed Cooper into them when the man collapsed, his arms wrapping around Cooper.

Alec's trembling legs clung to Cooper as he buried his face in Cooper's warm neck. He could feel Cooper's uneven breathing in the rapid press of Cooper's chest against his. Alec's breathing wasn't much better. He felt like his heart was trying to pound its way out of his chest.

He finally settled back against the mattress, enjoying the feeling of Cooper's arms around him. He had no desire to move out of them. He was right where he had wanted to be since that fateful day ten years ago.

Alec opened his eyes and glanced up when Cooper lifted his head. Cooper's breath softly fanned Alec's face. Alec's brow drew together in a frown at the clouded eyes that met his. Was Cooper having regrets?

Cooper's thumb brushed against the soft, swollen skin at the corner of Alec's mouth where his fist had connected. Alec winced. Cooper leaned down and gently kissed the red mark he had left with his anger.

"You leave me again or don't tell me when you're in trouble, and I swear I will hunt your ass down and beat the ever-loving shit out of you." Cooper's face was somber as he made his promise.

Alec knew Cooper was dead serious. Alec had been given this one chance, and if he fucked it up, Cooper wouldn't give him another one.

"I promise."

Chapter Eight

Cooper chuckled as he watched Alec bounce around on one leg trying to pull his sock up without sitting down. Cooper tucked his shirt into his slacks, then grabbed his tie off the floor and shoved it into his pocket.

"You know, Alec, putting your socks on would be a lot easier if you'd just sit the hell down."

"Yeah, yeah, but if I get back on the bed, you're going to be joining me, and I believe you mentioned something about a lead?" It was all Cooper could do to resist the grin that crossed Alec's face.

He still wasn't sure how he felt about the turn of events that had taken place between him and Alec, but Mason would be thrilled. Against his better judgment, Cooper was going to give Alec another chance. He had to.

He was still angry with Alec, and he imagined he would be for awhile. Alec should have told Cooper that his father was blackmailing him. Cooper would have helped. But there was a part of Cooper that was strangely touched that Alec had cared so much that he had been willing to give Cooper up to save him.

Then there was that whole stalking thing. Cooper didn't know anyone that had been stalked by a lover for ten entire years. Cooper had never even seen Alec at any of the events the man photographed. But just the thought that Alec had attended them was heartwarming to Cooper, and a little creepy.

"Hey, Alec?"

"Yeah?" Alec asked as he grabbed a lightweight jacket out of his closet and pulled it over his broad shoulders.

"If you want more pictures, you'll just ask, right?"

Alec paused for a moment, staring over at Cooper in surprise. Then he chuckled. "Well, I'd really prefer it over breaking into the photographer's shop and stealing your mother's pictures."

"You didn't!" The blush shooting up Alec's face said that he had. The absurdity of the situation made Cooper laugh. "Oh, we can never tell my mother about this. She just wouldn't understand."

Alec chuckled. "Yeah, well, I found out that your mother was having your portrait done, and I wanted a copy. At least I didn't steal the negatives, because, believe me, I thought about it. I'm

pretty sure that photographer was going to hit on you, what with the way he looked at you and all."

Cooper's mouth dropped open. "You saw that?"

Alec shrugged his shoulders. He didn't look as happy as he had a second ago. "I saw."

"What else did you see?" The pained look on Alec's face told Cooper more than he was sure Alec wanted him to know. Cooper suddenly sat down on the bar stool behind him. He dropped his face into his hands. "Fuck, Alec."

"I never followed you when you went out with... with other men, Coop," Alec said quietly. "You have to believe that. I never crossed that line. I swear it."

That hadn't been Cooper's first thought. Well, it had been, but Cooper was more concerned about the pain it must have caused Alec to see Cooper out with other men. That was assuming Alec was telling the truth, and he really still cared about Cooper.

Cooper knew that Alec professed to still care for him, but he had yet to hear those three little words. He wasn't ready to say them back, not yet, but he was still unsure of exactly what Alec felt for him. It wasn't a comfortable position to be in.

Cooper looked up Alec. He could see an anxious look on Alec's face and maybe even understood it. This was all a little new to both of them.

"You never followed me when I went on a date, but you knew when I did?"

Alec nodded, his eyes falling down to the floor.

"How did that make you feel?" He had to ask. He knew it was cruel, but he had to know. "And I want the truth, Alec."

"Do we really need to discuss this right now, Coop?" Alec was hedging. Cooper could see it in his stiff posture and hear it in his voice.

"I think we should before we can go on, don't you?"

"Shouldn't we be following that lead of yours?"

"This is more important, Alec." Cooper watched Alec rub one hand over his face. The other was planted on his hip. He seemed to look around the room, anywhere but at Cooper.

"So, yeah, I knew when you went out on dates," Alec said after a moment. "I even knew when you took someone home for the night. And I hated every damn second of it. You belonged to me, and no one should have put their hands on you but me."

Cooper's eyes widened. By the time Alec was done talking, he was standing right in front of Cooper, and he was nearly shouting. His face was red with anger and his fists were clenched.

"I watched men come on to you every damn time you went out. And I watched the lucky ones go home with you while I had to turn away and pretend that the love of my life wasn't going home to fuck another man."

"So, you do love me?"

Alec's mouth dropped open. He started to say something then snapped his mouth shut. The glare shooting out of Alec's eyes might have burned a lesser man where he stood, but not Cooper. It made him tremble, but only with extreme happiness.

"You stupid son of a bitch," Alec growled. "What in the hell do you think this is all about?"

Cooper held his hands up to calm Alec down. "I'm just asking, Alec. I need to be sure. Even after everything you said about what happened ten years ago, you never once told me that you still cared."

Alec blinked. His eyebrows drew together in a frown. Then his eyes filled with a so much pain that it took Cooper's breath away. Alec turned away and stormed across the room before Cooper could stop him. He reached the door and grabbed the handle, turning his head slightly but not enough for Cooper to see his face.

"We need to get to that lead," he said quietly.

"Alec."

Alec's head fell against the door. "Can we just go, Coop? Please?"

Cooper got up and walked across the room. He could see the misery in the slump of Alec's shoulders. He knew his words had hurt Alec, but he had needed to say them. He had to be sure. If Alec left him now, Cooper didn't think he'd survive it.

Cooper pressed his body against Alec's back. He felt Alec jerk at the contact. Cooper rested his head on the nape of Alec's neck and rubbed the man's shoulders. "Alec, we have to talk about this."

Christ, now he sounded like Alec.

"What do you want from me, Cooper?" Alec murmured. "Do you want me to admit I was wrong? I made a horrible decision, but it's the only one I could think of at the time. Do you want me to say I'm sorry again? I am. You can't imagine how sorry I am."

Cooper jumped when Alec's fist hit the door.

"Just tell me what you want and I'll do it. Christ, Cooper, I'll do whatever you want."

Cooper rubbed his hands up and down Alec's arms. "I know you think you had a good reason for leaving me, Alec, but please try and see it from my side. I came home one day and you were gone, just gone. No note, no message, nothing. I didn't know if you were alive or dead."

Alec tried to turn around, but Cooper stopped him. "No, please, it's easier this way." Cooper felt Alec's body slump against the door. He took a calming breath to clear his head as he tried to figure out exactly what he wanted to say to Alec.

"Cooper, I--"

"Ssshhh," Cooper admonished. "I know that now, but I didn't then, or even a week ago. All this time, I thought you left because of something I had done or because you didn't love me anymore. No matter what you say, that's not going to go away overnight."

"It wasn't you, Cooper, I swear. I never stopped loving you, never. I had to leave because he would have killed you. My father had the money and the connections to do what he said he'd do. I know it deep down in my bones. If I had stayed, something horrible would have happened, and I couldn't let that happen. But I never stopped loving you."

"I know you promised, Alec, but I need to be sure that you won't leave me again. I can't do this-" Cooper stopped talking to swallow the lump that had lodged in his throat. "I can't let you back into my life if you're just going to leave me again the next time something happens."

Alec was silent for so long that Cooper began to fear his biggest nightmare was coming true. Maybe Alec didn't really want him for the long haul? Maybe Alec just wanted to ease his guilty conscience?

"I've wanted you from the moment I saw you, Coop," Alec finally whispered. "I've never wanted anyone else. It's always been you even when we were apart. I never established a relationship with anyone else because there was never any room in my life for anyone else."

"Wanting isn't the same as loving, Alec."

Alec turned around and cupped Cooper's face in his trembling hands. His gaze was intent. "It is to me."

Cooper stared into Alec's eyes, wondering if he could believe the man. Alec's eyes said he was being sincere, that he was telling the truth, but Cooper was so afraid to believe him. Cooper wanted to. Everything inside of him wanted to believe in Alec's words. Could he take the chance?

"Alec, I--"

Alec shook his head and pressed his fingers against Cooper's mouth. "Don't say anything, Cooper." Alec's fingers stopped pressing against Cooper's lips to softly caress them. "I want to be with you. I want the chance to show you that I love you, that I've always loved you and want to spend my life with you. Just give me a chance to prove it."

Cooper nodded without hesitation. What else could he do? Alec seemed to want exactly what Cooper wanted. The desire in his heart to have Alec outweighed the fear he had that Alec was just playing with him.

Having agreed to give Alec a chance, Cooper was a little confused when Alec glanced down at the floor. When he looked back up, his eyes were filled with apprehension and just a touch of smoldering anger.

"I won't deny that I want to go out and beat the shit out of every man who's touched you since I left. But that's something I have to deal with." Alec let a bitter chuckle loose. "Maybe that's my punishment for leaving the way I did, but I won't let it cloud what we can have together if you'll just give me the chance to prove to you that I mean what I say."

"I would have waited if I had known, Alec."

Tears filled the blue eyes that looked at Cooper. "I know, and maybe that's my biggest regret. I made a major decision for both of us without talking to you first, but I thought I was doing the right thing. I admit that there's a part of me that still does, but maybe the cost was too high. I caused a lot of damage, things that can never be fixed."

The corner of Cooper's lips twisted into a half smile. "So, how about you stop trying to fix the past and concentrate on the present."

Alec cocked his head to one side as if confused.

"We're both here, together. We're different people than we were ten years ago. I say we accept that the past was hard on both of us, that we both made mistakes no matter how innocently they were made, and get to know the men we've become today. Hell, we may find we don't really like each other at all."

"Do you really see that happening?"

Cooper chuckled. He could feel Alec's hard cock pressing against his. He knew that they had both been hard despite the emotional situation they were in. Sexual attraction didn't seem to be the problem for either of them. Trust was something altogether different.

"I'm not talking about sex, Alec. There's no question that we're attracted to each other, but what do we really know about each other outside of bed?" Cooper's eyes dropped. "What if you find that you don't really like me? We can't spend the rest of our lives in bed."

"Why the hell not?"

Cooper rolled his eyes before looking back at Alec. He was surprised by the mischievous grin he saw on Alec's face. "Alec."

Alec patted his chest. "Okay, I get what you're saying. We need to see if we have something to build a relationship on instead of relying on the feelings we had for each other in the past."

Cooper couldn't have said it better himself. He was just surprised that Alec got what he was saying. "Yeah," he agreed.

"Does that mean you won't spend the night with me?" Alec asked.

"No, but I don't want our relationship to be based on sex," Cooper replied. "I can get that anywhere." Cooper was fascinated by the way Alec's blue eyes darkened.

"No, you can't," Alec growled. "I'll kill the next man that touches you."

"Alec!" Cooper exclaimed. As much as he was shocked at Alec's words, he was also extremely pleased. It made Cooper feel wanted, needed. He hadn't felt like that in a very long time.

"I mean it, Cooper," Alec said harshly. "If we're going to see where this thing between us goes, there will be no other men, not as long as we're together."

"Alec, you know why I was with other men. Is this going to be a recurring problem with you?" Cooper flicked his hand around. "I'll admit that I like it that you're jealous, but you can't hold the past against me."

Alec looked like he wanted to say something. His mouth even opened as if he was about to; then he snapped it shut and dropped his head forward to rest against Cooper's. Cooper could feel him take several deep breaths before he began to talk again.

"I am never going to get over the other men you were with, but I don't blame you. I blame me. We both know you never would have been with them if I had told you what was going on. Just promise me that you won't be with anyone else while we give this thing between us a chance?"

"I think I can do that."

Alec's happy grin was beautiful and worth any misgivings Cooper might have. Cooper knew it wasn't going to be easy. He and Alec were different people than they had been ten years ago. Just because they had had something in the past didn't mean they could now. But they could certainly see if they did.

"Can I kiss you now?" Alec asked. His eyes flickered down to Cooper's lips, then back up.

Cooper smiled. "I'd like that." He started to lean in to kiss Alec, then paused. "And, Alec? You don't have to ask to kiss me. If you want to kiss me, kiss me."

"Good to know," Alec murmured before his lips claimed Cooper's. Cooper could feel all of Alec's hopes and dreams in the kiss. Alec was telling Cooper without words how much he wanted this chance. Cooper tried to give Alec back his agreement.

By the time Alec lifted his head, Cooper was breathless. His knees shook. He wasn't sure he could have stood on his own if Alec hadn't wrapped an arm around Cooper's waist.

"You ready to get to work?"

Cooper chuckled. "Not really, but I suppose we must."

"There's always tonight." Alec grinned as he dropped his arms from around Cooper's waist and turned toward the door. He glanced back over his shoulder, a mischievous grin on his face again. "Besides, I have plans for your sexy little ass later."

"Oh?" Cooper raised his eyebrow in query. He felt Alec give his cock a small squeeze through his slacks before the door opened and Alec walked out. He groaned. Tonight was a long way away. He might not survive that long.

Alec chuckled. "Work now, play later."

Cooper reluctantly shut the condo door behind him and followed Alec down the hallway to the elevators. "Spoilsport."

Alec climbed into the car beside Cooper feeling more optimistic than he had in years. Not only was Cooper going to give him a second chance, Cooper had agreed to spend the night. Cooper had also agreed to stay away from other men while they gave their relationship a chance.

While Alec knew he felt jealous every time he watched Cooper with another man, he just hadn't know until today how jealous he had been until Cooper forced him to bring it out into the open, or how hurt he had been by it.

Alec knew he couldn't put the blame on Cooper. All of it rested on Alec's shoulders. He had no one to blame but himself. That knowledge didn't make Alec feel any better about Cooper being with other men, but it made it somewhat bearable.

"So, tell me about this lead you have," Alec said once Cooper got the car on the road.

"Mitch called," Cooper responded. "He said one of his more seedy contacts recognized one of the men that Wallace killed. The victim was a man by the name of David Orton. And before you ask, yes, he was gay."

"Seriously?" Alec asked. He knew it was a possibility. They had discussed it back in the squad room. Still, it was a little eerie having it confirmed. It sent a shiver of dread down Alec's back and made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

"Yep," Cooper replied, "which means all of our victims are most likely gay."

"So, what's the lead, then? We already assumed that they were all gay."

"David Orton was a known submissive who belonged to a private club down on Third Avenue, but that's not the interesting part," Cooper said almost eagerly. "This contact of Mitch's said that Orton went missing about the same time two other men from the same club went missing."

"Two more bodies?"

Cooper shook his head. "Not that we've found."

"Do you think they could still be alive?"

"Well, we should assume that they are until we've found them, but I don't see how. Wallace was a serial killer. He beat, whipped, and sexually assaulted his victims until they died. Why would he leave them alive?"

Alec didn't have an answer. None of it made sense to him, but then he wasn't a serial killer. Who could tell what Wallace thought when he picked out his victims? Alec knew there was a psychology to it all, but damned if he understood exactly how it worked.

"So, where are we headed?" he finally asked.

"We're headed down to that private club Orton belonged to," Cooper replied. "I want to have a little chat with the owner and see what he knows. If three of the victims belonged to this man's club, he could be a suspect."

"Sounds like a plan."

"Something's bothering me about this, Alec."

Alec glanced over at Cooper. "What?"

"You remember when we were talking in the squad room? We assumed whoever was doing this was doing it for Wallace? Remember? Like he was doing it for Wallace because he might have been brainwashed?"

Alec nodded. "Yeah, I remember."

"What if we're wrong?"

"Wrong? I don't see how we could be. Except for the sexual assault, the killings are almost exactly the same."

"Are they the same, or are we just assuming they are? We talked about this, but I didn't take it seriously. I just didn't see how two people could be doing this, but what if this guy wasn't doing it for Wallace but with him?" Cooper asked.

"Like a partner?" Alec asked. The mere thought that there could be a sick asshole out there just like Wallace sent a deep chill down Alec's back. Somehow, thinking that the killer was doing this for Wallace was better than him doing it with Wallace, if not by much.

"I know it sounds crazy, but--"

"But we should investigate all leads, no matter how bizarre," Alec finished for him.

Cooper chuckled. "Yeah, and thanks for not telling me I'm nuts."

"I trust your judgment, Coop. You've been doing this a long time, and you have firsthand knowledge of what a sick bastard Wallace is. If you think it's a lead we should follow, we'll follow it."

Even if Alec disagreed with Cooper's theory, the smile that crossed Cooper's mouth would have made him follow any lead Cooper wanted. However, he didn't necessarily disagree with Cooper's assessment of the situation. It was just one more avenue for them to look into.

Alec was determined to catch whoever was killing young gay men, if not for the safety of the public, then for his own peace of mind. He'd never feel completely satisfied until he was positive that Cooper was safe.

There was something curling through Alec's gut that told him Cooper was in a lot of danger, more so than the man had ever been in before. Maybe even as much danger as he had been in from Alec's father. And Alec always trusted his gut.

They pulled in front of a set of brick buildings. They looked much like a brownstone from back east. The entire block was three-story townhouses, each one looking just a tad different from the one next to it. There was nothing that made the place scream BDSM club.

"This is it?" Alec asked as he climbed from the car and looked up and down the street.

"Yep," Cooper said as he walked around the front of the car. "Doesn't look like much, does it?"

Alec chuckled. "Isn't that the point?"

"Got me." Cooper glanced at him and shrugged. "Never been to a place like this."

"Never?" Alec asked, suddenly filled with curiosity about how much Cooper might have experienced over the last ten years. Cooper mentioned that he learned a lot. Alec wanted to know what.

"Uh, no. A little light bondage is fine." Cooper looked a little uncomfortable. "Pain? Not my cup of tea."

Alec tilted his head toward Cooper. "Ever had your bare ass spanked with the flat of someone's hand while your hands were tied over your head, your dick held tightly between thick muscular thighs, squeezing until you came?"

Cooper gave Alec a wide-eyed look. He gulped. Alec could practically see the image filter through Cooper's brain. The blush that suddenly covered Cooper's face told Alec that Cooper was actually considering the idea. It aroused Cooper. The hard cock that filled Cooper's pants was a dead giveaway.

Alec winked at Cooper and grinned. "Maybe later tonight I'll show you what it's like."

It wasn't until Alec walked toward the building that he realized that the flush on Cooper's face could have been fear. Wallace had tied the man down and whipped him. Was Cooper remembering that horrible situation instead of fantasizing about the sexual play between them?

He never wanted Cooper to associate anything they did together with what had happened with Wallace. Alec glanced back at Cooper, worry wracking him. He was surprised to find Cooper staring after him. Cooper had a huge grin on his face.

Relief flooded through Alec. Cooper didn't look like he was imagining anything except the two of them together. He just hoped that it continued. Alec knew he'd have to be careful until Cooper learned to trust him completely.

"Ready, sexy?" Alec asked.

Cooper walked the few steps between them until he stood right next to Alec. He leaned over and bumped shoulders with Alec, an easy grin on his face. "Yeah, well, you keep talking like that and we won't be going anywhere except back to bed."

Alec chuckled. "Not the worst idea you've had, Coop."

Chapter Nine

Cooper felt a little nervous as he walked up the steps leading to the private club. His breath came a little too fast, and his palms sweated. Not so much because it was a BDSM club, but because of the raging hard on he had developed just thinking about Alec smacking his naked ass.

He had never had thoughts like that in his life. Oh, sure, he had been tied down a time or two and had tied down others, but he had never gone as far as getting spanked. Cooper still couldn't figure out why the idea aroused him instead of making him feel disgusted.

After what Wallace had done to him, Cooper knew that being tied down and spanked should be the furthest thing from his mind. It wasn't. In fact, Cooper knew if he didn't stop thinking about it, he was going to embarrass himself by walking in to talk to a potential suspect with a hard on.

"Quick, say something to help me get rid of this hard on," Cooper murmured out of the side of his mouth to Alec.

"Jordan's hot."

Cooper rolled his eyes. "Not funny, Alec," he growled.

Alec laughed. "Maybe, but did it work?"

"Yes," Cooper replied. A small chuckle slipped through his lips. "But I never want to hear you say Jordan is hot again. It's just wrong."

"Why?" Alec smirked. "Because he's straight?"

"No, because he's my partner, and I don't think of him like that." Cooper shuddered. "Hell, I've seen the man naked in the locker room and I've never even *looked*. It would just be wrong, you know?"

"Good," Alec snarled. "Then I won't have to gouge his eyes out."

"Catty much?" Cooper snorted.

"Bite me," Alec said.

"I just might," Cooper replied. His eyes widened when Alec's face suddenly flushed. Alec liked being bitten? Cooper blew out a long, controlled breath. "When we get done with this interview, we need to have us a long talk, Alec."

Alec just wiggled his eyebrows. Cooper rolled his eyes and knocked on the large red door. He waited for someone to answer, wondering about why the door would be painted bright red. Was it a signal of some sort to people into the BDSM scene that this was that type of place, or was it just a red door?

When the door opened, Cooper was a little taken back by the man who opened it. He was older, probably in his late sixties, and dressed as Cooper thought an English butler might look. There wasn't a hair out of place, and the man looked like he had just bitten into a lemon. It was all Cooper could do not to burst out laughing.

"Can I help you?" the man asked in a very starchy voice.

Cooper held up his police ID. "Detective Cooper Thomas to see Dominick Sylva."

"Please come this way, sir."

Cooper stepped into the building to follow the man, shooting Alec a wry grin. Alec chuckled and followed Cooper. They walked down a long hallway. It seemed out of place with the rest of the neighborhood.

Dark wood covered the walls three fourths of the way up. The rest was covered in deep scarlet wallpaper. Large glass chandeliers hung down from the ceiling and scarlet red carpet lay all of the way down the hallway. Cooper wondered what the rest of the place looked like because the hallway made him think of old-fashioned brothels. Maybe it was supposed to.

"Please wait here," the butler remarked as he pointed to two of the chairs lining the wall. "I will inform Mr. Sylva that you are here."

Cooper eyed the chairs as the butler walked away. They looked old. While they seemed to be made of wood, he couldn't be sure. The chairs were covered with red fabric, but the wooden parts were painted in gold. Cooper actually thought they were pretty ugly, but what did he know? They could be priceless works of art as far as he knew.

They looked delicate and expensive. He wondered if they would hold his weight. Cooper decided to stand. He wasn't taking any chances. Cooper turned, chuckling when he saw Alec eyeing the chairs in much the same way he had.

Alec looked up at him and flushed. "Kind of ugly, aren't they?"

Cooper glanced back at the chairs. "Well, yeah, but I'm sure someone likes them. I'm just glad I don't have to have them in my house. I'm much more into comfort than aesthetics. I'm kind of a put-my-feet-on-the-coffee-table type of guy. I'd be afraid to sit in one of these."

"I was kind of thinking the same thing. They're a little gaudy."

"Hell, Alec, the whole place is gaudy," Cooper said, waving his hand toward the hallway they had just walked down. "Did you see that wallpaper? I mean really, scarlet? Who in the hell wallpapers with this shit?"

"I believe that would be me."

Cooper twirled around to see a rather tall man in an expensive, dark suit standing in the doorway behind him. *Oops*. Cooper used the excuse of digging out his ID to bend his head down and hide his flaming cheeks. It wasn't often that he was caught so unaware or so embarrassed. He held his ID out to the man, then shoved it back into his pocket.

"Dominick Sylva," the man said. "How can I be of service?"

"Detective Thomas, Mr. Sylva. I have a few questions I'd like to ask you concerning one of your members."

The man merely raised an eyebrow at Cooper then nodded, turning to walk back into the room he had come out of. "I'm always happy to assist the police in any way that I can, Detective. Please, come in."

Cooper followed the man into the room, noting that it appeared to be an office, a very nice office. It looked nothing like the rest of the place. Cooper wouldn't have minded having an office like this one. It was very chic while being comfortable.

A black leather couch was situated against one wall. The wooden desk near the other wall was neat and organized; a few books, a framed picture, a black phone, a computer, and a small stack of papers were all that covered it. Bookshelves lined another wall with a set of windows on the last wall.

"Please, have a seat, gentlemen," Dominick Sylva said as he gestured to the couch before sitting behind his desk. Cooper sat down, Alec sitting a few inches away. Cooper pulled out his pad of notes and flipped them open before looking up at the proprietor of the private BDSM club.

"Mr. Sylva, you have a member of your club by the name of David Orton?" Cooper asked.

"Yes, I do," Sylva replied, "but Mr. Orton hasn't listed his name in several months."

"Listed his name?" Cooper asked in confusion. "What exactly does that mean?"

Sylva quirked an eyebrow at Cooper. "Mr. Orton is a submissive, detective. When he lists his name in our stable book, it means he is available for scenes with our patrons."

"Scenes?" Cooper asked. Sylva chuckled. Cooper bristled. The man's reaction made him feel stupid.

"A scene is a setting or event where one participant, Mr. Orton in this case, performs with another participant, usually a more dominant person. Scenes can happen between the two participants, but in Mr. Orton's case with this club, they occurred in front of others."

"And what exactly happens in one of these *scenes*?"

Sylva was quiet for several moments, watching both Cooper and Alec intently. "Why are you interested in what occurs in a scene, Detective? Has something happened to Mr. Orton?"

"That's what we're here to find out, Mr. Sylva," Cooper replied. "Now, please, answer the question."

"A BDSM scene could be considered a romantic interlude or erotic encounter between the participants, depending on who you ask, but what happens can vary depending on the kink and lifestyle of those involved."

"They have sex in front of others?" Cooper asked.

"Sexual activity does not necessarily occur, but it can," Sylva replied.

"So, what does happen?"

"Like I said, that depends on the kink and lifestyle of those involved. Some scenes involve total dominance of one participant over the other. Other scenes involve control."

Cooper frowned. "Isn't that the same thing?"

Sylva chuckled and shook his head. Cooper was really beginning not to like this guy. "No, Detective, dominance and control are two very different things. Dominance is about a submissive giving another individual control over them in an erotic scene or an entire lifestyle."

"And control?"

Sylva smirked. "Control can mean many different things. A submissive having enough control not to come, no matter how much stimulation they receive, or even a Dom exerting control over a submissive. The variations are vast."

"And David Orton was a willing participant in these scenes?"

"Yes, we only allow willing submissives here, Detective. David had to sign a contract agreeing to my rules before he would ever have been allowed in the stables."

"Stables?"

Sylva smirked again. His fingers tapped at the desktop and he looked at Cooper. "You don't have much experience in the BDSM world, do you, Detective?"

"I really don't see what--" Cooper began, only to be interrupted by Alec.

"Mr. Sylva," Alec said as he sat forward, "I think it would be best under the circumstances if you assumed that the detective and I know nothing about the BDSM community. Treat us like amateurs and walk us through it."

Mr. Sylva watched Cooper for a moment longer, and then his eyes swung over to meet Alec's. "Very well. To be a submissive in my club, David would have agreed to the rules we have here, as does every Dom. I do not allow abuse of any kind."

"Isn't that what BDSM is all about?" Cooper asked. He was surprised to see a shot of anger cross over Sylva's face before he quickly masked it.

"No, Detective, not at all," he said smoothly. "Everyone has something that they like, some kink. Doms like being in control. Subs like being controlled. It's a give and take type of relationship. It does not mean abuse."

"Forgive me if I'm wrong, but isn't BDSM about beating and whipping another person?" Cooper asked, suppressing the deep shudder that rippled through him.

"It can, but only if there is an agreement between both parties as well as a chosen safe word. All of my stable boys have signed contracts stating what they will or will not submit to and have chosen a safe word. Once that word is spoken, everything stops. Any Dom that does not respect that safe word is removed from the club, and their membership is terminated immediately."

"And David Orton had a contract?" Alec asked.

Cooper watched Alec sit forward a bit and rest his elbows on his knees. He could kick himself for not asking the same question. He should have. Instead, he seemed to be obsessed with discovering what exactly happened in the BDSM community.

Maybe it was because of the things that Wallace did to him, or maybe it was his own curiosity. Either way, he wanted answers, but Cooper realized that he needed to get his head back on the case and away from the BDSM scene.

"Yes, of course," Sylva replied. "As I said before, David would never have been allowed to enter the stables unless he had a contract."

"You keep saying stables," Cooper said. "What exactly is that?"

"The stable is the club's pool of subs. Many of our patrons have their own subs, but for any scene to be played out here in the club by either one of our own subs or one brought into the club, I require a contract. I only allow willing participants in my club, Detective."

"So, outside subs are allowed in your club?" Alec asked.

"Yes, but only after they have been personally interviewed by me and have signed a contract," Sylva replied.

"And Mr. Orton was a stabled sub? Not an outside sub?"

"David had a few outside contracts here and there, but by and large he was a stabled sub. I assumed that was why he hadn't been around for a few months, that he had found someone to sign a long-term contract with."

"Does that happen often, Mr. Sylva?" Cooper asked, finally getting into the swing of the interrogation.

"It happens often enough, especially with a sub like David." Sylva smiled. "David was very good at what he did. In the three years that he has been a stabled sub here, he has had no less than four contracts. For whatever reason, those contracts ended and David returned to the club."

"How long has it been since Mr. Orton was here last?" Cooper asked.

Cooper watched Sylva power up his computer and look. A moment later, Sylva glanced over at Cooper. "David hasn't been in to the club in nearly six months. That is very unusual for him." Sylva's eyebrows drew together in a frown. "Something has happened to David, hasn't it?"

"What makes you say that?"

Sylva folded his hands together on the desk. "Detective, I am very good at what I do, and what I do is provide a safe environment for people to express their desires. I'm able to do this by knowing my clientele, Dom and sub alike. I know David. Even with an outside contract, he has never been away from the club for this long. I had initially assumed he had a contract, but now I'm not so sure."

Cooper glanced at Alec. He wasn't sure how much to tell the man. If they let on that David was a victim of Daryl Wallace and Sylva was involved, they might be tipping their hand. If they didn't and Sylva wasn't involved, more men might disappear.

He looked back at Sylva. "We believe that something has happened to David Orton, along with a two other men that you might know. David Orton was identified as a victim by a young man who had been kidnapped."

"A few other men," Sylva said slowly. "You're talking about the Daryl Wallace killings, aren't you? Was David one of Wallace's victims? Is he dead?"

Sylva didn't look happy about the prospect. In fact, he looked downright sick, his face pale and his lips pressed together in a thin line. Cooper's gut was telling him that Sylva, while being weird, was not involved. Cooper nodded.

"We believe so, yes. He was identified by another victim who saw him with Wallace," Cooper replied, taking a chance that the man was on the up and up.

"You mentioned two other men?" Sylva asked as he sat forward. "Do you have an ID on them?"

"Not as of yet, just the names Patrick and Spencer. No last names," Cooper replied. "But we were told that they belonged to your club."

Sylva looked over at his computer and started typing away on the keyboard. Several moments later, the printer started. Sylva stood up and grabbed the papers out of the printer before handing them over to Cooper.

"This is a list of the submissives signed up in my club. I've marked the ones that are here regularly and the ones we haven't seen in a few months. There are two more reputable clubs in the Portland area. If you want, I can call and get the same list from them."

Cooper started leafing through the papers, noting that there were pictures and physical descriptions with each profile. He glanced up at Sylva in confusion.

"Why would you be willing to do that, Mr. Sylva?" Did the man have an ulterior motive for volunteering the information?

"The BDSM community gets a lot of bad press, Detective. Even you think it's all about abusing someone against their will, and I'm sure you've seen some pretty sick stuff out there. We may do a lot of things that you don't like, but the one thing we have is that we are a very close-knit community. We protect our own." Sylva sighed. "If someone is hurting or killing a member of our community, we want to know. BDSM is not about abuse. It's about control and love, and caring and fulfilling a person's needs, a willing person. Anything beyond that doesn't belong here, and we don't want to be associated with it."

"Please, make your phone calls," Alec hastened to say. "We could use all of the help we can get to stop this guy."

Sylva looked confused for a moment as he stared at Alec. "I was under the impression that Wallace was locked up awaiting trial."

"He is, but we believe that we may have a copycat killer on the loose or someone who was working with Wallace before he was arrested. We'd like to stop him before any more young men go missing."

"I couldn't agree more," Sylva said as he walked back around his desk and sat down, reaching for the phone.

Cooper continued to leaf through the papers Sylva had given him while the man made his phone calls. As Cooper did, he realized that their case may be bigger than they had initially thought.

Out of the thirty-three submissives signed up at the club, five hadn't been in for several months including one named Patrick and one named Spencer. Cooper needed to ask Sylva about them.

He made several notes then looked up when he heard Sylva hang up the phone. "Well?"

"I've talked with Harold Montgomery. He has a private club over on Salmon Street. Paul Morrison operates a private club on Powell Boulevard. They both have subs that haven't been in their clubs in a few months. They're emailing me a list."

Cooper looked over at Alec. He knew his dismay was written on his face when Alec nodded and patted his leg. This was a lot bigger than they had first thought. Could Wallace have really killed all of these men and gotten away with it? Wouldn't someone have noticed something?

"Gentlemen," Sylva said as he folded his hands together again, "I know because of the nature of your case that there isn't a lot that you can tell me, but whatever you *can* tell me will help me help you. The more I know, the better chance I have of noticing something out of place."

Cooper considered his options once again and his instincts about Dominick Sylva. He really felt like the man was on the level, and they did need some help. Sylva had knowledge of a close-knit community that most outsiders couldn't get into. He could be a font of information. He could also be the killer. Cooper had to remember that.

"Would it be against your rules to give us a list of all of your clients, Mr. Sylva, more importantly, the one that may have had contact with David, Patrick, and Spencer?" Cooper asked.

Sylva looked startled. "You believe one of us could be doing this?"

Cooper shrugged. "We have to follow every lead, no matter how obscure it might be." With that statement, Cooper suddenly understood why Alec felt the need to see Ben as a suspect. Cooper knew Ben wasn't involved, but Alec didn't.

Sylva turned back to his computer and pushed a few buttons. A moment later, the printer started up. When Sylva's computer dinged, he hit a few more buttons and the printer went into overdrive. Ten minutes later, Sylva handed Cooper a stack of papers.

"This should give you a good place to start. I do ask one thing," Sylva said. "Please be discreet. Many of our clients have positions in the community. It could be detrimental to them if it were to get out that they are members."

Cooper nodded. "Understood, and thank you for your assistance, Mr. Sylva." He stood and held his hand out to Sylva. "I'll do my best to keep this under wraps and not involve anyone that doesn't need to be. I assume I can call on you if I need any clarifications?"

"Of course, however I may be of assistance," Sylva assured him. "I want to catch this person as much as you do. Besides giving our lifestyle a bad name, he's killing good people who just want to express themselves in a safe environment."

That statement nagged at Cooper. He looked at Sylva curiously. "What about unsafe environments? Your club has rules and regulations, safe words and contracts. What about BDSM clubs that don't have those?"

"There are several in the area." Sylva grimaced, looking disgusted. "Those in our community do not consider them true BDSM clubs. Pretty much anything goes, and safety is usually ignored. That would be where your abuse comes in, Detective."

"Can you give us a list of these clubs?" Alec asked, stepping forward. Cooper knew Alec had pretty much been staying in the background, giving Cooper the lead on the interrogation. While he appreciated it, he also valued Alec's insight and ideas.

Sylva walked over to his desk and grabbed a piece of paper. He started writing. "I can give you a basic list and put out a few feelers. A lot of these underground clubs are mobile, never staying one place more than a few nights. They prefer staying under the radar."

Sylva handed the paper over to Cooper. "I'd look into a man named Ambrose White. He's well known in our little circles for operating underground dungeons. Many of his subs either end up in the hospital or permanently damaged."

Cooper read over the list Sylva had given him then looked at the man. "What can you tell me about him?"

"Ambrose White showed up on the scene about five years ago. He considers himself a true dungeon master. He's never able to hold onto his subs for more than a few months before they are either too abused to continue or they run for the hills. We've had to rescue more than one sub after White was done with them."

Cooper frowned. "Why haven't you reported him to the police?"

"Like you'd believe us." Sylva smirked. "Look how you see us now. What would you think if you rescued an abused sub, knowing that he had willingly gone into some underground club for a scene and came away abused? How do you think he would have been treated? How would you have treated him?"

"I guess I can see your point," Cooper answered. "Just so you know, I may not agree with how you do things, but no one deserves to be abused."

"The issue is what you see as abuse and what we see as abuse. Being whipped willingly with a flogger is not abuse. It's willing participation in erotic play. It becomes abuse when safe words and boundaries are not respected."

"My apologies, Mr. Sylva," Cooper said, feeling like a heel. "I guess I don't see the lure of being flogged or whatever else it is that you do."

Sylva walked to the door and opened it, looking back at Cooper and Alec. "Just do what you can to catch this guy and all will be forgiven, Detective."

Cooper gave his first smile since walking into the place. "I'm going to do my best."

Alec followed Cooper out of the private BDSM club, a little worried about Cooper. He had probably learned a lot more about the BDSM world than he had ever wanted to learn. And he was a little too quiet.

As they climbed into the car, Alec glanced at Cooper. Concern filled him at the strange look that passed over Cooper's face. "You okay, babe?"

Cooper grinned. "A little freaked out, but yeah, I'm fine."

"Guess the whole *scene* thing isn't your cup of tea, huh?"

"No," Cooper replied as he started the car and drove out into traffic. "No, it's not."

"Yeah, it's not mine, either," Alec assured Cooper. He saw Cooper let out a deep breath and knew Cooper had been worried that it might be. "I tried some kinky things a few years ago, but it just wasn't for me. I don't mind the occasional bondage thing or a light spanking, but--"

"Or biting," Cooper added, chuckling.

Alec felt his face heat up. He hadn't really been planning on telling Cooper about that particular kink so early in their renewed relationship. He could see that conversation. *Hi, how are you? Yes, I still love you. By the way, I liked being bitten during sex.* Yeah, that'd go over well.

Alec saw Cooper glance over out of the corner of his eye. Cooper looked curious and just a tad intrigued.

"Alec?"

"Yeah, okay, so I like biting," Alec replied. "Sue me."

"Alec, it's nothing to be ashamed of," Cooper replied. "As I've learned recently, everyone has some sort of kink."

Alec rolled his eyes. "Oh yeah? And what's your kink, o wise one?" His eyes widened when Cooper's face flushed. "Cooper?"

"I like bubble baths," Cooper replied.

"Bubble baths are not kink, Cooper. They're a luxury."

"I like mine with a dildo or a butt plug."

Alec's mouth dropped open as shock filled him. "Seriously?"

Cooper chuckled. "Try not to sound so shocked, Alec."

"I'm not sure I can."

"Oh, thanks." Cooper frowned.

"No, no," Alec quickly said. He patted Cooper on the leg. "I just keep picturing you with a plug in your ass." He raked Cooper's body with his eyes and laughed. "I gotta tell you, Coop, that's one sexy imagine."

"Oh, now you're just being mean."

Alec held up a hand. "No, I'm not, I swear. The thought of you with a dildo or a butt plug in your ass is very arousing to me. See?" Alec grabbed Cooper's hand and placed it over the hardening bulge in his pants.

Alec wasn't lying when he said thinking about Cooper with toys in his ass was arousing. It did, a lot. Alec wanted to go home right there and then and dig into his toy box and play with Cooper. And he could think of a lot of different ways they could play, bubble bath not needed.

"Oh, we are so going home," Cooper groaned. He snatched his hand back and made a quick turn of the steering wheel. The tires squealed and the car turned sharply. Alec laughed and grabbed onto the dashboard. He really enjoyed the way that Cooper's brain worked.

"My place or yours?" Alec asked. "I have a toy box. I'm sure I could find something in there you might be interested in."

The look on Cooper's face was almost comical. His mouth had dropped open, his eyebrows shooting up nearly to his hairline. "You have a toy box?" Cooper croaked.

Alec nodded, loving the instant look of lust filling Cooper's face. "Don't you?" he asked, smirking at Cooper, one eyebrow raised in response.

Cooper shook his head. "Not exactly. I have a couple of toys, but I certainly don't have a box full of them."

Alec watched Cooper digest the fact that Alec had a box full of sexual toys. He waited for Cooper to process what was said, knowing that the question was coming. He could see the

wheels turning in Cooper's head. When Cooper turned to look at him, a small glare in his eyes, Alec expected it.

"I thought you said that no one ever went back to your place."

"I did," Alec replied, "and no one has ever tried the toys in my toy box. I bought them for you."

Cooper nearly drove off the road. Alec swore, grabbing the dashboard with both hands. "Shit, Coop, pay attention to the road. If you crash, you're never going to see what I have waiting for you at home."

Cooper quickly straightened the wheel out. He ran a shaky hand through his hair and blew out a deep breath. "Maybe we shouldn't talk about this while I'm driving."

Alec chuckled. "That might be a good idea, although I hate to miss out on telling you about the different-colored plugs I have in my toy box, or the handcuffs and cock rings. I bought them all with you in mind, you know?"

"Shut up, Alec," Cooper growled, reaching down to readjust the bulge in his pants. "Just shut the hell up."

Alec was still smiling a few minutes later when they pulled up in front of his condo. He climbed out of the car and shut the door, turning to find Cooper already standing on his side of the car.

"In a hurry?" he asked.

"Move!" Cooper ordered, pointing at the building they stood in front of. "If you're not up those stairs in the next twenty seconds, your clothes are coming off one way or another, and I don't give a damn who gets a glimpse of your lily-white ass."

Alec laughed, running up the stairs when Cooper lunged at him. He knew Cooper was right on his heels. He could hear Cooper's rapid breathing over his own. Alec rounded the corner on his floor and headed toward his door. He came to an abrupt halt when he spotted a shadow moving away from his doorway.

"Ben? Ben Glassine?" Alec asked when the man stepped into the light.

"Mr. Whitley, I was hoping that was you," Ben replied. "Have you seen Detective Thomas? I need to -- oh, Cooper."

Alec was puzzled by Ben's appearance at his doorstep. The little breathless way that Ben said Cooper's name set his hackles up. Cooper was his, and no matter how docile Cooper said Ben was, Alec wouldn't hesitate to stake his claim if needed.

"Ben?" Cooper asked as he stepped past Alec, concern lacing his voice. "What's wrong? Why are you here?"

Ben looked confused as he quickly dug into his pocket and pulled out a letter. "Your letter," he said. "You told me to come. I went by your office, but you weren't there. I called Mason and he said you were with Mr. Whitley. Mason sent me over here."

"I told you to come?" Cooper asked as he looked at the letter Ben held out to him. When he didn't take it, Alec reached past him to take it, but Cooper stopped him, grabbing his arm. "No, stop. We need to call forensics. There might be fingerprints on it."

Ben dropped the letter. Alec watched as the letter fluttered to the floor almost in slow motion. He stared at it like it was a snake waiting to bite him. Something told him that he wasn't going to be playing with Cooper and the toy box any time soon. The copycat killer had just upped the game.

Chapter Ten

"You want something to drink, Ben?" Cooper asked of the small man huddled on the couch, his legs drawn up to his chest, arms wrapped tightly around them. "Maybe some tea or hot chocolate, something to warm you up?"

"I'm fine, thank you," Ben replied softly.

Cooper could tell that he wasn't. The man was practically shaking apart before his eyes. Cooper couldn't blame Ben. The letter Ben had received telling him to come to Portland hadn't been mailed by Cooper. He would have called Ben, not sent a letter. He guessed Ben hadn't thought of that.

Of course, Cooper hadn't spoken to Ben in a couple of months, not since the last time he'd called Ben's parents' house to check in on him. After what Ben, Mason, and he had gone through at the hands of Wallace, Cooper felt the need to keep track of Ben, even if he was safe at home with his parents. Which was why this letter sent there scared Cooper so much.

Forensics picked up the letter a little while ago but until the technician got back to him, Cooper was going to assume that the copycat killer had sent the letter. And that meant that Ben had been pulled into whatever game was being played out. Cooper just had to figure out why.

Ben was an innocent, a gentle soul who never should have suffered the abuse Wallace meted out to him. Cooper was surprised that Ben had come out of it with his sanity intact. There were times Cooper thought he might not have.

Cooper walked over and sat on the coffee table in front of Ben. He tried to give him a reassuring smile. "Ben, when did you receive the letter?"

"About three days ago. I tried to reach you by phone, but you'd moved. I called your office, but no one at your office would tell me where you were. I felt funny about leaving a message, so I finally decided to drive here and look Mason up if I couldn't find you at your office."

"Well, I'm glad you decided to come, Ben."

"Really?" Ben asked, a small smile crossing his lips.

Cooper started to smile, but a low growl coming from the other side of the room had him glancing up at Alec in surprise. The glower on Alec's face made the hairs on the back of Cooper's neck stand on end.

Cooper patted Ben on the shoulder, then stood up. "Excuse me for just a moment, Ben. I need to talk to Alec about something then I'll get you some hot chocolate."

Cooper continued to look at Alec while he crossed the room. He pointed to the kitchen. "I need to speak to you. Now!" Without waiting for Alec to reply, Cooper walked into the room. He turned, watching Alec enter and shut the door behind him.

"What the hell is your problem?" Cooper asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

Alec seemed to avoid his gaze. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't give me that shit, Alec," Cooper snapped. "You practically growled at Ben and me when we were talking."

Cooper's eyebrow rose when Alec's face flushed. Alec still wouldn't meet Cooper's eyes, but Cooper caught a flash of pain in them when Alec glanced around the room. Cooper dropped his arms and walked over until he stood directly in front of Alec.

"What's wrong, Alec?" Cooper asked. He reached up and cupped the side of Alec's face. "Please tell me. We're not supposed to keep anything from each other anymore, remember?"

Alec finally met Cooper's eyes. Cooper was shocked by the anguish shining in them. "Alec, what is it, baby?"

"Ben is just so... well, he needs... what if... and you're so..." Alec stammered.

"Alec, take a deep breath and just tell me," Cooper encouraged. He was shocked by how unsure and hesitant Alec was behaving. He wasn't sure he had ever seen Alec as anything except self-assured and confident.

Alec's eyes fluttered closed and his chest rose and fell as he took a deep breath and slowly let it out. When he opened his eyes again, they were a little clearer, but Cooper could still see traces of pain in them.

"Ben is so gentle. He screams for a protector with every breath he takes. You're such a white knight, ready to rescue anyone. You two have a history together," Alec said. He pushed a hand through his blond hair. "What if you decide you want to be with him more than you want to be with me?"

Cooper smiled. He almost laughed, but the misery radiating out of Alec's eyes kept him from doing that. This was a very serious situation, not one to laugh at. Cooper realized that Alec had many of the same misgivings about their relationship that he did. It somehow made his own doubts about Alec seem smaller and less important.

"Not going to happen, Alec. I have a much stronger history with you than I have with Ben. You add that to the fact that, while Ben may be cute and in serious need of a protector, I'm not in love with him. I'm in love with you."

Cooper leaned in and kissed the astonishment off of Alec's lips. It was the first time he had put his feelings into words. "Besides, I don't want someone I have to take care of, Alec. I want a partner, someone who can stand beside me, not behind me."

"Really?" Alec whispered. The corners of Alec's lips began to lift into a grin when Cooper nodded. Then Alec's eyes widened suddenly. "Shit! Now I have to go in and apologize to the little runt. I'm sure he thinks I'm a monster."

Cooper chuckled. "Just make him welcome and I'm sure he'll see what a great guy you are. Right now, he's scared and unsure of what's going on. He needs our support, the protection we can give him, that *we both* can give him."

Alec smiled. "I can think of someone else that can help protect him, but it would have to stay between the two of us. Not even Jordan could know. If word got out about *who* he was, it could end his career."

Cooper frowned. "I'm not sure I like keeping Jordan out of things, Alec. He's my partner."

Alec's eyebrow went up. "I thought I was your partner."

Cooper rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean, Alec."

Alec chuckled. "Yeah, I do. Look, I'll make you a deal. I'll give him a call and invite him over. If he says it's okay, you can tell Jordan. I already assured him that you and Jordan could keep your mouths shut and that I trusted you both."

"And why do you think this mysterious man can help us protect Ben?" Cooper asked.

"Because he has a white knight streak wider than yours, and I happen to know that not only is he single right now, but he has a soft spot for Ben."

"He knows Ben?" Cooper asked. "Who is he?"

Alec shook his head, chuckling. "Not telling. Now go make Ben something to drink while I make a phone call."

Cooper stared at Alec for a moment then leaned in to give him another kiss. He leaned back and tapped his finger on Alec's chest. "Remember that Ben is in this situation just like us, and he doesn't have anyone to take care of him. He's scared and alone. Be nice."

Cooper watched Alec grin then walk out of the kitchen. He spent several minutes making hot chocolate before returning to the living room with three cups. Handing one cup to Ben, he set the other two on the coffee table and sat down next to Ben.

"How are you doing, Ben?" Cooper asked. "Are you holding up okay?"

"I don't think your boyfriend likes me," Ben whispered.

Cooper stared at Ben in shock. "How did you know Alec was my boyfriend? We just made up today."

Ben giggled. "Have you seen the way that man looks at you? His eyes eat you up every time he looks at you. He's obsessed with you. I knew if he wasn't your boyfriend before, it wouldn't be long until he was."

Cooper laughed. "Guess he didn't hide it very well."

"He was trying to hide it?" Ben asked, a confused frown making his forehead wrinkle. "Why?"

Cooper shrugged. "We had some problems that we needed to work out. It took us awhile." *Yeah, like ten years.*

"Is that why he doesn't like me?"

"I like you just fine, Ben," Alec said as he walked into the room. He sat down on the couch next to Cooper and wrapped an arm around his waist. "I'm just a little possessive of Cooper right now, especially with a cute little guy like you around."

Cooper laughed when Ben turned beet red. "Me? Cute?"

"Yes, you, Ben," Alec assured the man. If anything, Ben turned redder.

"I'm not cute."

Alec laughed. "Ben, you're so damn cute it's almost hard to look at you."

"Hey, now," Cooper growled. He pulled Alec's arm tighter around his waist. "No making passes at other men."

Ben reached a hand out. "Oh, no, he wasn't... he wouldn't..."

Cooper chuckled and reached for Ben's hand, giving it a slight squeeze. "I'm just kidding with him, Ben, don't worry."

"I would never--" Ben began frantically.

"Relax, Ben," Alec said. "I'm not worried about it, and neither is Cooper. We know that you would never do anything wrong. I'm not saying you're not cute as a bug, because you are, but Cooper is the only man in my life."

Ben slowly started to relax, leaning back into the couch cushions. He grabbed a couch pillow and held it against his body, his arms wrapped around it as he stared across at Cooper and Alec.

"So, want to tell me what's going on?"

Cooper grimaced. Not really. He'd rather just sit here and continue to joke around with Ben and Alec. He didn't really want to think about the letter that had been sent to Ben and what it meant. However, he supposed he couldn't get away from it.

Cooper looked Ben right in the eyes. "I didn't send the letter, Ben."

Ben was still for a moment, then he nodded his head. "Yeah, I kind of figured that part out. But if you didn't send it, who did? And why did they want me up here in Portland? Why did they say they were you and ask me to come visit?"

"I don't know, Ben, but I have my suspicions."

Cooper could feel the weight of Ben's eyes on him. He wasn't sure how to start the conversation, especially when he knew how terrified Ben would be. He opened his mouth to say something, anything, when the downstairs buzzer sounded.

As Alec got up to answer the door, Cooper smirked. The saying *saved by the bell* really was true. He knew that he was going to have to talk to Ben about what was happening and his possible involvement in the case, but he needed just a few more minutes to get his thoughts organized. He didn't want to scare Ben any more than he had to.

Cooper looked up when Alec opened the door. His mouth dropped open when he saw his boss, Chief John Rydal, walk through the door. This was the man Alec wanted to have assist them in protecting Ben?

That thought opened several more as Cooper replayed the conversation he'd had with Alec over in his head. His eyes widened as he comprehended the implications of what Alec had said. No wonder Alec had been worried about Cooper saying something to someone. John Rydal was gay.

"Chief," Cooper said when the man glanced over at him, caution in his eyes.

"Thomas," the chief replied, nodding in his direction, a worried look on his face.

Cooper smirked when the chief spotted Ben and his eyes widened. If Cooper wasn't mistaken, there was a spark of interest in Rydal's eyes as his gaze devoured Ben. Hmmm, this could make things interesting. Alec might have a point.

"Please, Chief, have a seat," Cooper said. He gestured to the seat next to Ben as he got up and moved to the loveseat. He smiled when Alec sat down next to him, placing his arm behind Cooper's shoulders. Alec had a mischievous grin on his face as they watched John sit down next to Ben.

"Stop calling me chief, Cooper," the man said. "We're not on the clock right now. You can call me John."

"Duly noted, chief, er, John." He grinned over at Alec, his eyes widening dramatically as he nodded toward John. Alec chuckled and shook his head.

Cooper glanced back at his boss. He wasn't surprised to find the chief and Ben staring at each other. He coughed to get their attention. When John tore his gaze away from Ben to look at him, Cooper smiled.

"We're were just telling Ben about what was going on," Cooper said. "Ben received a letter, supposedly from me that told him to come to Portland. When he couldn't reach me, he drove up." Cooper paused for a moment, frowning. "I didn't send the letter."

John sat forward, his gaze going from Cooper to Ben, then back. "Letter? What letter?"

"I've already had it picked up and taken down to the forensics lab for fingerprinting," Cooper assured his boss. "We believe the letter is connected to our case."

"How?" John asked carefully.

Cooper leaned forward, resting his elbows on his legs. He glanced at Ben cautiously, then back to the chief. "We believe that this case involves more than just Ben, Mason, or the missing men. We believe that it's a lot bigger than that."

"How so?"

"Today, Alec and I talked with a man who operates a private BDSM club downtown. He told us that some of his members have gone missing over the last few months. He was also able to contact the owners of two other clubs who have missing members."

"How does he know that they're missing and just haven't come into the club in awhile?" John asked.

"His members are pretty much regulars. It's not unusual for them to be gone for a few weeks here or there, but not for this length of time." Cooper reached over and pulled a stack of papers out of his briefcase and handed them to his boss. "He's given us a list of his missing members along with the missing members from the other two clubs."

"He wants us to look into a man named Ambrose White," Alec added. "He operates underground BDSM clubs."

"Ambrose White?" John said. "Where have I heard that name before?"

"You've heard of Ambrose White before?" Cooper asked in surprise. "When? Where?"

The chief shook his head. "I'm not sure, but I've heard of him somewhere." He looked over at Cooper. "What else have you learned?"

"So far as we can tell, all of the men who went missing were gay and known submissives," Cooper stated. "Ben, I know this is rather personal, and I apologize, but I need to know if you have ever had anything to do with the BDSM lifestyle."

Ben looked thoughtful for a moment. "I'm not exactly sure what you're asking, Coop."

"Have you ever been to a BDSM club or participated in that type of lifestyle?"

At Ben's confused frown, Cooper glanced over at Alec for assistance. He had no idea how to ask the questions he needed to ask because he still wasn't exactly sure what really happened in these clubs. He just had ideas, and he was quickly learning that they might be wrong.

"Ben, when you're with someone, and I'm not talking about Wallace but someone of your choice, do you take on a submissive role or a dominant role?" Alec asked.

Ben tilted his head to one side and gave Alec a look like Alec had just asked if he could fly. "Seriously?" Ben asked.

Cooper chuckled. He couldn't help it. Anyone looking at Ben could tell he was a gentle soul just from the shy way he held himself. Cooper couldn't imagine him taking the lead in any relationship. It just wasn't in Ben.

"Okay," Alec snickered lightly, "then I'm going to assume that you take on a submissive role. Correct?"

Ben nodded. "I didn't want what Wallace did to me. I--"

"Ben, no one has ever thought that," Cooper quickly assured the man. "We all know that what Wallace did was wrong. One doesn't have anything to do with the other. I'm just trying to see if there is a connection between you and the other men that disappeared."

Ben's lips twisted together for a moment. "Then, yeah, you could say I prefer a more submissive role. I like it when I have someone to take care of me and protect me. I don't like to be abused, but I like stronger men."

"Have you ever been to a BDSM club?" Alec asked.

"I don't know if you could exactly call it that," Ben replied. "It was more like the biker bar from hell."

"Where was this club?" Cooper asked quickly. He suddenly had so many questions for Ben. "How did you find it? Did you go with anyone else? Leave with anyone? What did you do there? Did you--"

"Whoa, Cooper, slow the hell down," Alec said, laughing as he grabbed Cooper's arm and pulled him back. Cooper rolled his eyes. Okay, so he had gone a little overboard with his questions. He needed to slow down and give Ben a chance to answer them.

"Sorry, Ben," Cooper said.

Ben giggled. "It's no problem, Coop. I know you're just trying to figure things out. But, just so you know, the club was over by Lloyd Center. I don't remember the exact address. It was pretty late at night. It was in some warehouse-type building, like a mechanic's garage that had been cleared out and cleaned up."

"Would you know it again if you saw it?" Cooper asked.

Ben shook his head. "Don't think so. I was pretty drunk. Went out with several friends and we were bar hopping. Someone said they knew of this club where we could have a really good time and away we went."

"Someone?" John asked. He didn't sound happy to Cooper. His voice was filled with a mixture of concern and anger. "One of your friends?"

Ben looked over at John and shook his head. "No, it was just some guy we met up with at one of the other bars."

Cooper scooted forward to sit on the edge of the love seat. It was all he could do to sit there calmly. "Do you remember what he looked like?"

Ben frowned and looked down at his hands, twisting them together. He was quiet for several moments as if searching through his memories. Finally, he lifted his head and look over at Cooper, shaking his head.

"Sorry, Coop, like I said, I don't remember much of that night. I know he was white, a few years older than me, and just about my height. He also had dark hair."

Cooper glanced over at Alec as he took that information in. The man Ben described almost fit the victim profile. "Ben, this is really important. Do you remember if the man wore glasses?"

Ben shook his head. "Sorry. He could have been wearing a neon sign and I wouldn't have noticed. Like I said, I was pretty much out of it. I don't ever remember being that drunk in my entire life. If Stan hadn't helped me home, I don't think I ever would have made it."

"Stan?" John asked. Cooper bit his lips to hide his smile at the possessive growl in John's voice.

Ben glanced over at John. "A friend from college, Stan Montgomery," he explained. "He was one of the guys I went out with that night."

"Okay, Ben, try to remember," Cooper said. "You said that you don't ever remember being that drunk? How did you feel? What were you drinking? Did anyone buy you drinks? Or try to get you to leave with them?"

"Like Wallace did?"

"No, more peaceful like. Did anyone try to pick you up that night or buy you a drink that you actually drank?"

"Not that I can remember," Ben said. "I mean, sure, a few guys hit on me, but I wasn't really interested in a one-night stand, you know? I just wanted to go out and have some fun. Why?"

"I suspect you were drugged," Cooper said, "which is why you don't remember much of that night."

"Drugged?" three people shouted at the same time. Cooper held his hand up to stop them.

"Do you remember what happened to the last victim? He was drugged with flunitrazepam. It causes anterograde amnesia, hallucinations, and confusion." Cooper grimaced. "I believe that might explain Ben's hazy memories. I also think that it was the beginning of the plan to kidnap him."

The room was so silent. Alec was frowning. John looked angry, his hands clenching into fists. Ben seemed horrified. His face had gone pasty white, his eyes wide.

"This is just a theory, but I believe that someone is drugging young men and kidnapping them. I think that Wallace was doing it before he was caught, and I think his accomplice is doing it now. That's why this last victim wasn't sexually assaulted, because Wallace is behind bars."

"Last victim?" Ben cried out. "There's another one?"

"I'm sorry, Ben, I should have told you. We discovered another body a couple of blocks over from the warehouse where we rescued you and Mason. He fits the same basic description that you and Mason do, and he was abused like we were, but he wasn't sexually assaulted."

"So, it's not over now that Wallace is behind bars?" Ben squeaked.

Cooper shook his head. "No, Ben, it's not over."

"And the letter? He's after me, isn't he?"

Cooper couldn't lie to Ben. He wished he could. Cooper realized he could be wrong, but he didn't think he was. That letter had been sent with a purpose. It might have been because Ben had escaped and was the one that got away, or maybe because the killer wasn't done yet.

"I believe so, Ben, yes," Cooper admitted. He hurried to assure Ben that they would keep him safe, though. "There are a lot of people who are going to protect you, Ben. I don't want you to worry about that. Between John, Alec, and all of our friends, no one will get their hands on you."

"You can't be sure of that, Coop," Ben said quietly. "Mason had protection, and Wallace still got to him."

"True, but whoever is doing this is not Wallace," Cooper agreed. "And we have a lot more information this time. Last time, we didn't even know we were dealing with a serial killer. This time, we do. Now, I need you to do something for me."

Cooper reached into his briefcase and pulled out another folder. He opened it, pulling some pictures out and setting them on the table. "Can you identify any of these men?"

Ben leaned forward and looked through the pictures one at a time. Cooper had laid them all out there, not wanting to influence Ben. He watched Ben move them around a little, separating a few here and there before Ben looked up at him.

"These four men were the ones with Wallace," Ben said, indicating four pictures. "These guys? I've seen them around, but I've never met them."

"Where have you seen them, Ben?" Cooper asked, trying to keep his excitement out of his voice.

Ben's forehead wrinkled. "I'm not real sure. I just know I've seen them."

"Did Wallace have them? Were they with Wallace?" Cooper asked.

Ben looked like he was thinking hard. "I can't be sure, but I think Wallace had pictures of them, pictures just like these ones."

"What do you mean pictures just like these? Black and white pictures?" the chief asked.

Ben shook his head. "No, I mean just like these, like copies of these pictures."

Cooper's mouth dropped open as the hairs on the back of his arms stood up. He felt a cold chill work its way up his spine. What Ben was implying didn't bode well for the men in the pictures or their case.

"Are you sure, Ben?" Cooper asked quietly.

Ben shook his head. "No, not really, I mean, I remember seeing Wallace with a bunch of pictures like these, and some of the men in them look real familiar, but I couldn't swear to it." He looked up at Cooper, concern marring his face. "Is that bad?"

"No, Ben, not at all," Cooper assured Ben. "In fact, it's very helpful. It gives us a lead to follow. I want you to tell us everything you can remember about these pictures and where you saw them, anything about Wallace, okay?"

"You need to tell us everything, Ben," Alec added, "no matter how obscure or weird you may think it is. Start by telling us about the night Wallace took you."

Ben nodded. His hands twisted together in his lap until John reached over and grabbed them, giving them a small squeeze. Ben shot him a small, thankful smile. Cooper couldn't swear to it, but Ben seemed to relax a bit and lean into John's larger body. He thought Alec might have hit the nail on the head with his boss. John was interested. It seemed Ben might be just as interested.

"I was out with some friends," Ben began. "We were just having a good time, minding our own business. I was out on the dance floor. I guess I had had a few drinks by then when I felt someone grab my arm and start pulling me off the dance floor."

Ben looked up at Cooper, his eyes stricken with hard memories. "I tried to resist him, but it was like my body wouldn't do what I wanted it to do. Before I knew it, he had pulled me out the door and put me in his car. I must have passed out, because when I woke up, we were in some building and he had me tied up."

"It's okay, Ben," John said softly. "There would have been nothing you could have done. You need to know that. Wallace was experienced at kidnapping people. He knew what he was doing. Nothing you could have done would have stopped him."

"Maybe if I had yelled louder or--"

"No, Ben," John said, shaking his head. He grabbed Ben and pulled the smaller man into his arms. John held Ben close and rubbed his back. "I've been doing police work for a long time and I know what I'm talking about. There was nothing you could have done."

"He's right, Ben," Cooper said. "You and I both know what Wallace was like, the horrible things he was capable of. If he could take a man as big as me, one who's been trained in self-defense, what makes you think you ever had a chance against him?"

Ben shrugged, silent tears falling down his pale face. "If he could get to me then," Ben whispered, "what makes you think he can't get to me now?"

Cooper reached over and patted Ben on the leg. "Before, you didn't have us."

Chapter Eleven

It had been a long day and an even longer night. Alec could hear Cooper downstairs, talking with John, telling him goodnight. John had decided to stay the night, the three of them determined to protect Ben by whatever means they could. For John, that meant staying the night and protecting Ben personally.

Alec knew it had been a good decision to give the man a call earlier. John had a soft spot for Ben Glassine, and right now, Ben needed something soft. He needed to know that there was gentleness in a world that had pretty much shown him nothing but hardship and abuse. Alec was sure that John could give that to Ben.

Cooper, now, he was something else altogether. Alec kept expecting the recent events with the case to bring back bad memories for Cooper, but the man kept right on going. Alec respected that about Cooper. He was a fighter.

Alec also felt like it left him in the dust. Cooper didn't seem to need him. On one hand, that was a good thing. Cooper was a strong man. That had helped Cooper recover from the things Wallace had done to him.

On the other hand, Alec was starting to wonder if Cooper had ever dealt with the things Wallace had done to him. If Cooper hadn't, there would come a point where the man would crack. Alec just had to hope that he was there to pick up the pieces when it did happen.

Alec glanced over when he heard Cooper coming up the stairs. Hearing voices from below, he wondered if having a loft condo was such a good idea. It had seemed like it when he got the place. Now he wasn't so sure. There was no privacy.

"Hey, baby, how you holding up?" Alec asked as Cooper sat on the side of the bed to take his shoes off. "Are you doing okay?"

Cooper smiled at Alec over his shoulder. "I'm doing okay. Tired, but okay. How about you?"

Alec rolled to his side. He rested his elbow on the bed, his head on his hand as he watched Cooper get undressed. He was surprised that, as tired as he was, he could still be so aroused by the sight of Cooper's naked body.

"I'm good," Alec replied. "A little worried, just like you."

Alec heard a little chuckle come from Cooper as he slid into bed. Cooper rolled over and snuggled right up to Alec, his head lying on Alec's arm, his arm wrapped around Alec's waist.

"Yeah, there was a lot to take in today." Cooper's voice lowered almost to a whisper. "You were right about John, though. If he can take it slow, I think he has a good chance of winning Ben over. I've never seen a man so taken with someone like he was taken with Ben."

"I have." Alec chuckled. "Me."

A moment later, Alec shuddered. "Cooper? That had better be your hand between my legs."

"Well, it had better not be anyone else's hand," Cooper replied.

Alec shuddered again as Cooper's fingers wrapped around his hard cock. He groaned. Cooper was slowly stroking him, not enough to get him off but just enough to keep him really, really interested.

"God, Coop," Alec whispered. Cooper had scooted under the covers and moved down his body. Alec couldn't see what Cooper was doing, but he sure could feel it, especially the hot lips that replaced the hand holding his cock.

Alec quickly realized that Cooper had learned a lot in the time they had been apart. He was sucking Alec's cock like a professional. Alec gripped the sheets on each side of his body as fire licked up his body with every lick of Cooper's tongue.

He was going to explode, combust right on the spot. Alec just knew it. Cooper was doing things with his mouth Alec wouldn't even think were possible if he didn't feel them himself. The soft licks of Cooper's tongue, the brush of his breath, even the tight grip made by Cooper's lips, each one was designed to drive Alec crazy.

Alec bit his lip trying to keep his moans to himself. While they might be upstairs, there was nothing more than a railing and a few feet separating the loft bedroom from the men downstairs. It would be very embarrassing for them to hear him.

Just when Alec thought he couldn't hold his orgasm back another second, Cooper let go of him. Cooper scooted up and straddled Alec's body. Alec was a little wary of the mischievous grin on Cooper's face.

"What?" Alec asked hesitantly.

Cooper just kept on grinning, not saying a word as he leaned over the bed and reached into the nightstand. A moment later, he was back, lube and a condom in hand. Alec raised an eyebrow in query as Cooper pushed himself back until he straddled Alec's thighs. Alec's aching cock stood proudly in front of him.

"This time," Cooper said as he rolled the condom down Alec's cock, "I'm going to ride you, big boy. Think you can handle it?"

Alec groaned. Oh, he could handle it and then some. It had been a very long time since he had felt the delight of being inside of Cooper. As much as he truly enjoyed the feeling of Cooper fucking him, there was just something about sinking his hard cock into the man that set Alec's world on fire.

"Oh, I think I can handle it just fine, Detective," Alec crooned. "Can you?"

"Let's find out." Cooper lubed up his fingers. Alec watched in fascination as Cooper leaned forward on one arm and reached back with the other. Alec couldn't see exactly what Cooper was doing, but he had a fabulous imagination and it was working overtime.

Not wanting to be the only man in the room losing his mind, Alec reached down between their bodies and grabbed Cooper's cock. Alec grinned when Cooper's body suddenly stilled and the man looked down, his face flushed with desire.

Alec began slowly stroking Cooper, just as slowly as the man had stroked him. Not too fast, not too slow, just enough to keep Cooper on edge. Cooper's movements after that were shaky and uncoordinated.

Alec laughed when Cooper suddenly pulled his fingers free and pushed Alec back onto the bed, straddling Alec's hips. Alec gripped Cooper's hips as the man slowly lowered himself down onto his cock.

The feeling was incredible. Alec had serious doubts about how long he would be able to last without giving in to the need to explode. Cooper was so hot and tight, Alec could feel every breath the man took.

Cooper's hands found purchase on Alec's chest, Cooper's fingers grazing Alec's nipples. Alec hissed, his hips bucking against Cooper. He gripped Cooper's hips and pulled the other man down on his cock, groaning at the intense contact.

Alec held on to Cooper's hips as the man began a dance as old as time, his body moving up and down on Alec, welcoming each thrust of Alec's cock. The pleasure was overwhelming. Alec knew he was moments away from falling over the edge into orgasmic bliss. He wanted Cooper with him when he went.

That thought in mind, Alec reached down between their bodies and grabbed Cooper's straining cock. His hand trembled as he stroked Cooper, his thumb brushing the tiny pearls of seed pooling on the top. He could feel Cooper's entire body shudder above him.

"Coop," Alec whispered, looking up at Cooper. His breath hitched in his throat at the look of total adoration and devotion shining in Cooper's hazel eyes. It made Alec feel like he was the most important person in Cooper's world, the center of his universe.

It also sent a bolt of lust shooting through Alec that was unparalleled by anything he had ever felt before, even ten years ago. Alec felt it start in his toes and move slowly up his body until it shot out the top of his cock.

"Oh fuck, Coop," Alec cried out as he filled the condom, not caring at that moment if the man on the moon heard his cries of completion. Elation worked its way through the haze surrounding Alec as he heard Cooper cry out above him. Warm spurts of Cooper's release covered his hand and abdomen.

Alec welcomed Cooper into his arms when the man collapsed on top of him, Cooper's face buried in his neck. Alec could feel Cooper's rapid breathing in the breath on his throat, the swift movement of Cooper's chest against his.

Alec wrapped one arm around Cooper's back, stroking him softly. Cooper finally lifted his head to stare down at Alec. Alec lifted the other hand and licked it clean of Cooper's seed. His eyes never broke contact with Cooper's.

"Shit!" Cooper groaned. "That is so fucking hot!"

Alec grinned and grabbed Cooper by the back of the neck. He kissed Cooper, sharing the taste with the man he loved. He pushed his tongue inside of Cooper's mouth, exploring, touching, tasting. Alec devoured Cooper, wanting to imprint himself on the man until Cooper couldn't tell where he ended and Alec began.

"Love you, Coop," Alec whispered against his lips.

Cooper lifted his head and gazed down at him. Alec felt Cooper's hand brush the side of his face. Cooper's smile was whimsical, beautiful. It filled Alec with hope that everything in their lives would be solved as long as they stayed together.

"You damn well better," Cooper said. "Or I might have to hurt you."

Alec raised an eyebrow at Cooper's words. "Oh? You and what army?"

Cooper wiggled his hips, reminding Alec that they were still connected. "Who says I need an army?" he asked.

"I do." Alec grinned. He swiftly rolled Cooper onto his back, pushing Cooper's legs up to his chest. He held Cooper's hands down against the mattress. Cooper wiggled and tried to wrestle away. Alec just held him there. Alec loved the stunned look on Cooper's face when he realized he wasn't getting away quite so easily.

"You were saying?" Alec chuckled.

Cooper rolled his eyes before giving Alec a glare that quickly turned into a grin. "You're such an ass."

Alec leaned down and brushed his lips against Cooper's then looked into Cooper's beautiful hazel eyes. "Yeah, but I'm your ass."

Cooper's eyes were thoughtful as he stared back up at Alec. "Yeah, I guess you are at that."

Alec could hear movement coming from downstairs even before he opened his eyes. Voices spoke so quietly that he knew someone was talking, but he couldn't quite make out their words. Cooper was snoring softly in his ear. The noise coming from people moving downstairs just added to the background noise.

He didn't want to move. He was cuddled up next to Cooper's warm body, an arm thrown over his trim waist. Alec couldn't really think of a place he wanted to be more than where he was right there and then.

Cooper's strong, masculine scent was filling his senses, overshadowing every other scent in the room. Alec leaned closer, burying his nose in Cooper's neck, and took a deep inhale. He was overwhelmed by the sweet scent of his lover.

Alec closed his eyes as he thought about how lucky he had been. Cooper was giving him a second chance, one Alec probably didn't deserve, but one he would gladly accept and never take for granted.

Things could have seriously gone in the other direction. It proved to Alec how big Cooper's heart really was that he had even listened to Alec's explanation when he believed it was something he had done that had made Alec leave.

Alec wrapped his arm tighter around Cooper's body as the realization of how easily he could have missed out being with Cooper really sank in. Alec knew he would have to do everything within his power to prove to Cooper that the man made the right decision.

"Mmmm, morning, baby," Cooper whispered, grabbing Alec's arm and giving it a small squeeze. "How'd you sleep?"

"Pretty good," Alec replied. "You?"

Cooper rolled over onto his back and looked up at Alec. "Better than I have in a long time."

Alec couldn't help but smile. He hoped that meant Cooper wanted to spend the night and sleep with him a lot more, if not permanently. They weren't far enough along in getting to know each other again for Alec to suggest that Cooper move in, but it was all he could do not to make the offer.

"I'm glad," Alec said instead. He promised himself that the minute this case was over, though, he was going to ask, or beg, whatever it took. Alec wanted Cooper with him on a full-time basis. He wanted to wake up with Cooper in his arms every day, not just occasionally.

"Hungry?" Alec asked when Cooper didn't say anything, just continued to stare up at him.

"Yes," Cooper said, grinning. "I am."

Alec's breath caught in his throat as Cooper's hand wiggled between their bodies and grabbed his cock, stroking him. He was suddenly ravenous and not for food. Alec was surprised by the growl that came out of his throat as he leaned down to capture Cooper's lips with his. Apparently, he was a lot hungrier than he knew.

His lips ravished Cooper's mouth, his tongue exploring, demanding entrance from Cooper. Alec rolled over on top of Cooper, settling between Cooper's legs until their cocks pushed together. The little moans coming from Cooper set his blood on fire.

"Coop," Alec groaned against his lips. "You are so fucking sexy."

Alec snapped back when Cooper giggled at him. He wasn't sure he had ever heard that particular sound come out of Cooper's mouth before. It surprised him. The sexy little grin on Cooper's face, though, he had seen before. Alec didn't realize until he saw it how much he had missed it.

"That looks good on you," Alec said.

Cooper's brow creased as he frowned. "What's a good look on me?"

Alec grinned. "Me." Before Cooper could react, Alec swooped down and captured his lips once again. He put everything he had into the kiss, nibbling on Cooper's lips before pushing his tongue instead Cooper's mouth and exploring.

A long, deep groan came from Alec when Cooper responded in kind. Their tongues warred with each other for dominance, neither one wanting to give in. It was a contest of wills that Alec had every intention of winning until he felt Cooper's hand wrap around both of their cocks, not just his.

"Fuck, Cooper!" Alec rested his forehead against Cooper's before lifting up to look down into Cooper's eyes. Their faces were a mere breath apart. Alec could see every emotion Cooper felt and they all sent his heart soaring.

Alec stroked his hand along the small curve of Cooper's cheek. "Love you, baby," he whispered. No matter how many times he had said it in the last few days, the sense of wonder in Cooper's eyes always surprised him.

Alec knew he had done that, made Cooper unsure of how Alec really felt about him. He promised himself then and there that he would say it so much that Cooper would get tired of hearing him say *I love you*.

"Always loved you, Coop, always will," Alec reaffirmed. "There's never been anyone else."

Cooper's eyes widened, then rolled back in his head before falling closed. Cooper cried out, and Alec felt hot liquid spill between them. Cooper's hand trembled around their cocks. Alec reached down and took over, stroking himself as quickly as he could.

He kept his eyes glued to Cooper's face even as he felt his own release approaching. "Cooper, look at me," he whispered. The moment Cooper's eyes opened and Alec saw the light shining in them, he felt himself start to tilt over the edge. "Watch me, baby, watch what you do to me."

Another tug of his hand, then another, and Alec felt his orgasm rip through his body. He groaned. His cock pulsed with each spurt of cream shot out between them, mixing with Cooper's seed. Alec's heart pounded and the edges of his eyesight went a little gray with the intensity of the feelings roaring through his body.

He leaned down and rested his forehead against Cooper as he waited for his breathing return to normal. Alec wasn't sure he would ever get used to the ecstasy Cooper created in his body. He could always hope, anyway.

Once he felt he could breathe without passing out, Alec leaned back and smiled at Cooper. He used his hand to mix their combined seed together, then brought his hand up to his mouth and licked it clean. Cooper's eyes darkened, turning nearly chocolate brown.

"I fucking love it when you do that," Cooper growled.

"Guess I'll have to do it more often."

Cooper quirked an eyebrow, tilting his head to one side. "Is that a challenge?"

Alec laughed. "Definitely."

"Then I accept."

Alec was thrilled. "Means you're going to have to spend a lot more mornings waking up in my bed," he hinted. He tried not to hold his breath as he waited for Cooper's answer, but it was really tough. He wanted Cooper with him so bad.

"I may be able to handle that," Cooper replied, "but only if you share your suits."

Alec grinned. "You need cuff links, too?"

Cooper opened his mouth to reply when a shout from below stopped him. "Are you two going stop fooling around and get your asses down here?" John shouted. "You're not on vacation, you know."

Alec burst out laughing when Cooper's face turned beet red. He groaned a moment later and grabbed his arm after Cooper lightly punched him. Alec rolled off of Cooper and watched as he scooted to the edge of the bed.

"Oh, so now that the honeymoon is over, the abuse begins," Alec said. He laughed and raised his voice so that the people below could hear him. "He's abusing me, John."

"I don't care what in the hell he's doing to you," John shouted back, amusement clear in his voice. "I don't want to hear about your kinky sex life."

Cooper's face burned even brighter as he glared over his shoulder at Alec. "Sssshh!"

Alec felt giddy. Cooper had agreed to stay at his place more often. It was the start of getting Cooper all of the way moved in as far as he was concerned. It was just a matter of time. Alec scooted over to sit next to Cooper, then pushed Cooper's body back down on the bed.

Before Cooper could utter a word, Alec covered Cooper's mouth with his own. Any protest Cooper might have given was smothered beneath Alec's lips. Within moments, Alec felt Cooper's lips soften. Cooper's hands curl into the hair at the nape of Alec's neck.

By the time Alec lifted his head, the fight had gone out of Cooper. The man's lips were just as red as his face had been moments before. Alec got up and moved toward the bathroom. He needed a shower, as did Cooper.

Alec heard Cooper come into the bathroom just as he stepped into the shower and closed the glass door. A moment later, Cooper opened the door and stepped in beside him. Cooper grabbed the soap and glared over at Alec.

"You don't fight fair."

Alec smirked. "All's fair in love and war, baby."

"This is war?" Cooper asked, his hand motioning between their two bodies.

"Hell, yes," Alec replied as he poured shampoo into his hand and applied it to his head. He closed his eyes to keep the soap out of them as he washed his hair. "I have ten years of fucking up to fight."

"Alec--"

"I also have a lot of weapons in my arsenal, and I intend to use every damn one of them to win you over."

When Cooper didn't say anything, Alec started to get worried. He quickly rinsed his hair off and then his face. Not knowing what he would find, he cautiously turned to face Cooper. Alec was shocked by the flushed face and twinkling eyes that met his.

"Cooper?"

"Does that include that spanking thing you mentioned yesterday?"

"Uh... yes?" Alec replied. He wasn't quite sure how to answer that without either scaring Cooper away or making him uncomfortable.

Cooper's grin was wicked. It made Alec's cock throb. "Wanna discuss terms of surrender?"

Chapter Twelve

Cooper couldn't keep the silly grin off his face as he walked down the stairs, Alec right behind him. He felt like a goober. He also felt happy and alive for the first time in a very long time, something that surprised him. He couldn't remember being this optimistic about the future in years. And he knew he owed it all to the man behind him.

The mere thought of the power Alec had in his life scared Cooper. He was becoming less and less worried that Alec was going to leave him with every passing moment, but his fear hadn't totally left him. There was always the possibility.

They still hadn't learned enough about each other to really know if they were right for each other. All they really had was an intense attraction to each other and a lot of memories. And those memories were ten years old.

It wasn't a great basis to build a relationship on. In fact, it pretty much sucked. If Cooper had been giving advice to any of his friends, he would have told them to run for the hills and forget about the relationship. It was doomed. He was lousy at taking his own advice.

"Well," John said when they walked into the kitchen, "it's about damn time."

Cooper merely raised an eyebrow at John. He walked over to the coffee pot and poured himself a cup, adding sugar and cream. He could hear Alec snicker behind him. *Jackass!* he thought as he took a sip of his coffee. He groaned and closed his eyes as the hot, caffeinated liquid hit him.

"Stop that or I'm going to drag your ass right back up those stairs, and then we'll never get anything done."

Cooper opened his eyes to find Alec staring at him, a strained look on his face. Cooper just grinned and took another sip of his coffee. It was good to know that he could arouse Alec so easily. He could have fun with that, and he intended to, starting now.

Cooper turned and leaned over the counter, resting his elbows on the breakfast bar ledge as he stared across at John and Ben sitting at the small dining nook. Cooper purposely pushed his ass out, bumping hips with Alec.

"So, what's on the agenda today?" Cooper asked innocently. He heard a small growl and felt a hand brush his ass. He hid his grin behind his coffee cup, taking another sip.

"Well, I'm going to take Ben to work with me for a little while. I have a few files I need to go through before we head over to my place," John said. "I know I've heard the name Ambrose White before, and I need to do a little checking."

Cooper felt himself flush just a little as his boss glared over at him and Alec. "If you two can tear yourselves away from each other, I'd like you to find out where that letter came from."

Cooper couldn't help himself, he just couldn't. "Jealous?"

"Yes," John grumbled as he cast a quick glance at Ben.

Oh, okay. Cooper felt bad at the desperate and hungry look on John's face when the man looked at Ben. He knew John had a thing for Ben. Cooper just didn't realize how much of a thing. He wondered if Ben felt the same. The look on Ben's face said yes, which made Cooper wonder what was keeping the two men apart. Cooper thought he might need to talk to Mason.

"Cooper, you know that I--"

Cooper held up his hand, stopping John. "I know, Chief, mum's the word."

John nodded, looking decidedly uncomfortable. Cooper knew he was worried about word getting out about his sexual preferences. If he became involved with Ben, Cooper wondered how he was going to keep that a secret. That might be the reason John didn't make a move on Ben.

Cooper would have to think on that and about how he might help. If any two needed each other more than John and Ben, Cooper didn't know them. John and Ben seemed made for each other, maybe as much as Cooper and Alec were made for each other.

"Well, I guess we'd better get to it, then," Alec said as held out his hand for Cooper's cup. Cooper handed it over, bemoaning the loss of his coffee, and watched as Alec washed both cups and set them in the dish drainer.

Cooper stood up. "You have my cell number, Chief, if you need me?"

John nodded.

Cooper turned his attention to Ben. "Ben, you need anything before we go?"

Ben blushed, shaking his head. "I'm okay."

Cooper smirked. Yeah, he was pretty sure that if John had anything to do with it, Ben would be just fine. "Okay, if you need anything, just call, okay? And don't forget to lock the door when you leave."

Ben nodded. Cooper bit his lip to keep from laughing when he saw Ben peeking at John under his lashes. Yep, Ben was going to be just fine.

"Come on, handsome," Cooper said as he started out of the kitchen, smacking Alec on the ass as he walked by. "Let's go solve some crime."

Cooper grabbed his briefcase and suit jacket out of the living room and headed for the door. As he walked out and headed down the hallway to the stairs, he heard Alec close the door, then follow him. In just a few minutes, they were on the road and heading toward the police department forensic lab.

"So, any ideas?"

Cooper turned to look at Alec, shrugging his shoulders. "Not really. I mean, yeah, we can find out what post office the letter was sent from, but what will that tell us? Unless I miss my guess, it was sent from the post office closest to my old apartment."

"What makes you say that?" Alec asked, not looking one bit happy.

"It would only make sense, wouldn't it?" Cooper replied. "The letter was supposedly sent from me to Ben. It has my old address written on it as the return address. Whoever sent it obviously doesn't have my new address."

"Even if he doesn't know where you currently live, I still don't like it," Alec stated simply. "I feel like he's trying to draw you back into his little game, Coop."

Cooper nodded. "I suspect that's exactly why he did it."

"There is another theory, Coop," Alec said after a moment.

Cooper glanced at Alec, noting his rigid jaw and clenched hands, then looked back at the road. "What?"

"He does have your new address, but he wanted Ben involved in his little game and not you, which is why he gave your old address and not your new one. If he gave your new one, Ben would have gone there. Maybe he didn't know that Mason and Ben still talk, and Ben knew you had moved?"

Cooper didn't like that at all. "If we go with your theory, Alec, then whoever sent the letter might be using my old apartment as a home base."

"Or at least a place to lure Ben to," Alec replied. "That is, assuming this is all about Ben and not about you, too."

Cooper shook his head. "No, no, I think you're on the right path here. Suppose whoever is doing this still wants Ben. He uses my old address and sends Ben a letter to get him up here. Only, he doesn't know that Ben knows I've moved. He expects Ben to go to my old address, where--"

"Where he can kidnap him again," Alec finished for Cooper. Cooper flinched when Alec's hand slammed down on the dashboard. "Damn! That has to be it. This asshole is still after Ben."

Cooper jerked the steering wheel, quickly turning the car around and heading back to Alec's condo. He grabbed his cell phone and scanned through the numbers until he found the chief's cell number and dialed it. He glanced over at Alec. Worry filled him as the phone rang and rang and rang.

"Call Sam and tell him to meet us at your place as fast as he can get there. Break the damn speed limit if he has to. I'll cover it," Cooper said. "Tell Mitch to stay with Jack and Mason and to not let anyone in. Tell him to keep his eyes and ears open and to be ready for anything."

Cooper drove as safely, but quickly, as he could while Alec made the phone calls. The closer to Alec's place that they got, the more worried he became. Neither John nor Ben answered their cell phones or Alec's house phone.

He pulled to a stop in front of Alec's building and jumped out of the car. Cooper ran around the side of the car toward the building. As he ran in, he caught a glimpse of Sam coming in behind him and Alec.

By the time Cooper had reached Alec's floor, he had his gun drawn and had slowed to a walk. He crept down the hallway from the stairs to Alec's apartment. Reaching the door and finding it slightly ajar, he turned and held his fingers to his lips.

Turning back to the door, he nudged it open enough to see inside. He couldn't immediately see anything out of place, and the silence inside was almost deafening. Maybe John and Ben had already left and were safe in John's office. Cooper could hope.

He took a step inside of the apartment and glanced around. So far, so good. Cooper motioned to Sam to check upstairs. He wanted Alec with him where he could keep an eye on the man. Knowing Alec was behind him, Cooper carefully made his way toward the kitchen, the last place they had seen Ben and John.

He stopped at the wall, pressing himself back against it. Taking a deep breath, Cooper glanced around the corner. Nothing looked out of place. The coffee cups were still in the dish drainer. The chairs at the dining table were pushed in. Nothing seemed broken.

Still, Cooper was beginning to get a cold clench in his gut that screamed at him that something was very wrong. He edged over to the breakfast bar, startled when he spotted John lying on the floor, knowing that they had been too late. Ben was nowhere in sight.

"Christ! John, are you okay?" Cooper said as quietly as he could as he hurried across the room to kneel down next to John. As he went to roll John over, Cooper noticed the blood on John's head. He also noticed the handcuffs connecting John to the base of the table. That couldn't be good.

"John?" Cooper said again. "Come on, man, wake up." Cooper jostled John's arm, letting out a sigh of relief when the chief groaned and started to come around. "Where's Ben, John?"

"B-- Ben?" John asked, his voice sounding shaky and confused. When he looked up, Cooper could see that his pupils were dilated and he looked dazed. John suddenly started to struggle, trying to sit up. "Ben! He took Ben!"

"Okay, calm down, John," Cooper said as he tried to settle down the excited man. "You have a head injury. You're not going to be any good to Ben if you're in the hospital."

"Fuck that!" John yelled. "That man took Ben."

It was only as John tried to sit up once again that he noticed the handcuffs. He held his wrist up, shook it a little, then glared at Cooper. He held out his hand as much as he could. "Key?"

The situation would have been almost comical if it weren't so dire. Cooper reached into his pocket and pulled his handcuff key out. He uncuffed John then helped him stand up. Cooper got to his feet, glancing around the room for any sign of the intruder, anything that might lead them to Ben.

"What happened, John?"

"I'll tell you on the way," John said as he started toward the living room.

"On the way where?" Cooper asked, following his boss. He stumbled as he ran into John, who had stopped suddenly, looking very confused.

"I don't know," John said. He looked over at Cooper, his eyes filled with desperation. "Fuck, Cooper, I don't know where Ben is."

Cooper patted John on the shoulder then directed him toward the living room. "Okay, then, let's sit down and try and figure out what we know. In the meantime, we need to call in a forensics team to go over this place with a fine-tooth comb. No one can get away scot free without leaving some sort of trace."

John nodded, still seeming dazed, but he walked into the living room. Cooper glanced over his shoulder, needing to reassure himself that Alec was right behind him. Cooper smiled when Alec nodded at him.

Cooper put his gun back in its holster, then sat down on the couch next to John. He glanced up when Alec patted his arm.

"You talk to John," Alec directed. "I'm going to go check on Sam."

Cooper nodded. He turned his attention back to John. The cut on John's forehead was still bleeding. Cooper jumped to his feet and went back into the kitchen. He grabbed two hand towels, wetting one.

Cooper had just started back into the living room when Alec and Sam came running down the stairs so fast that Cooper was afraid they were going to fall. He opened his mouth to say something about them being stupid when the terrified look on Alec's face made his heart jump into his throat.

"Bomb!" Alec yelled.

Cooper dropped the towels in his hand and ran. He saw Sam grab John by the arm and drag him toward the door. Just as Cooper reached the front door, he glanced back over his shoulder to check on Alec.

He caught sight of Alec's face right behind him, and then a large, thundering roar blasted through the air, light flashed, and the floor shook. Cooper felt something hit his back. He lost his balance and fell through the doorway to the hallway floor.

He glanced back at Alec only to see his stunned face for just a second then Alec was simply gone, disappearing from Cooper's sight. Cooper tried to crawl toward where he had last seen Alec, but the noise was too loud, the hallway filling with smoke until he couldn't even see his hands in front of him.

"Alec!" Cooper screamed, not knowing if Alec could hear him but needing to try anyway. Smoke filled his lungs, making him cough and choke. He reached down and grabbed the edge of his shirt, tearing a strip off. He used it cover his mouth and then crawled toward the last place he had seen his lover.

Cooper could feel debris and fragments of what had once been Alec's condo cutting into his hand as he crawled. He didn't care. He had to find Alec. He couldn't lose him after getting him back again.

Cooper coughed when a rush of hot smoke billowed up at him. He ducked down and tried to peer through the thick smoke. He could see flames throughout the destroyed condo. It licked up the walls and engulfed furniture, burning everything in its path.

"Alec!" Cooper called out again and then quickly covered his mouth once more. When he received no answer, his heart sank. He knew the pain in his chest wasn't caused by smoke inhalation but by the possible loss of Alec.

Cooper moved farther into the blazing room, determined to find Alec. He wouldn't give up hope until he had absolute proof that Alec was gone for good. Feeling around with his hand, Cooper continued his search.

His eyes began to water and burn. His hands bled. Flames scorched at the skin of his body. Still, Cooper searched. Suddenly, Cooper felt something warm and soft. He let out a cry when he realized that he held a leg in his hand.

Following the leg up, Cooper moved until he could find Alec's face through the haze filling the room. He sat down, cradling Alec's head with his arm. His heart pounded in his chest as he searched for a pulse. Elation filled Cooper when he found one.

"Alec?" Cooper choked out as he bent down over Alec's motionless body. "Alec? Baby? Come on, open your eyes. You need to open your eyes. The damn place is on fire, baby, and we need to get out of here."

Getting no response from Alec, Cooper tried to assess the man's injuries. He felt up and down Alec's body, but there didn't seem to be any broken bones. There were some cuts and bruises and a little blood from what he could see through the smoke-filled room, but nothing major.

Cooper knew that they had to get out of the apartment before they went up in flames. Hoping that he wouldn't cause any more damage than was already there, Cooper got to his feet. He grabbed Alec under the arms and pulled him toward the door.

He had just reached the doorway when he felt more hands grab onto Alec and start to pick him up. Cooper started to fight, not knowing who was grabbing Alec until he realized that it was John and Sam.

Sam picked Alec up in his arms and carried him down the hallway. John wrapped an arm around Cooper and helped him down the hallway after them. Cooper was grateful to both of them. He could feel his strength waning and knew he needed the help.

The trip down the stairs was painfully slow and cough racked. Cooper absently noted people hurrying about, firefighters and police officers and people he assumed were residents of Alec's building.

He leaned over to John. "Get-- get pictures of everyone at the scene in case--" Cooper had to stop talking when a bout of coughing took his breath away. By the time Cooper could catch his breath, the paramedics arrived.

Cooper was quickly ushered into an ambulance before he could protest. An oxygen mask was placed over his nose and mouth and EMTs began taking his vitals. Cooper allowed it for a few minutes as he tried to take in as much fresh clean air as he could. Then he pushed the mask aside and sat up.

"Sir," the paramedic said, "sir, we need to get you to a hospital and have you checked over. You could have serious injuries, sir."

Cooper shook his head, coughing some more. "Al -- Alec."

"He's already on his way to the hospital, Coop."

Cooper glanced up to see Sam standing in the doorway. "Sta -- stay with him."

Sam nodded and shut the door. Cooper felt the paramedic grab his shoulder and try to pull him back down. Knowing that Sam would keep Alec safe, Cooper gave in to the paramedic and the exhaustion that overtook his body and lay back down.

He heard the siren start as the ambulance took off and wondered how long he would be in the hospital this time. Cooper closed his eyes and prayed for all he was worth that Alec was going to be okay. Cooper didn't know what he would do if anything happened to Alec.

"Damn it, I told you, I'm fine," Alec shouted as another nurse tried to get him back into bed. He had woken up in the exam room of the emergency room. Giving the doctor a few minutes to check him over before getting up had been the hardest thing Alec had ever experienced. Well, almost. Not knowing what had happened to Cooper was harder.

He needed to find Cooper. He needed to know that Cooper was okay, to see the man with his own eyes. He wasn't going to be okay until he did. And, as far as he was concerned, the well-meaning doctors and nurses were keeping him from doing just that.

They wouldn't tell him anything about Cooper's condition. They wouldn't tell him anything beyond the fact that Cooper was alive and being seen by a doctor in another exam room. That wasn't good enough for Alec. He wouldn't be satisfied until he knew Cooper was okay.

"Stop that," Alec growled when a nurse tried to wrap a blood pressure cuff around his arm. He ripped it off and tossed it. "I'm fine. I just need to find out what in the hell happened to Detective Thomas."

"You sure do like to bellow a lot," a voice from the doorway said. "Is this something I need to watch out for?"

Alec's heart thundered in his chest as he glanced over to see Cooper standing in the doorway. He quickly took in Cooper's injuries. One bandaged hand, some cuts and bruises, and a lot of soot on his clothing. Other than that, Cooper looked like Alec's Cooper.

"Cooper," Alec whispered. He slipped off the bed, not caring that every nurse in the place was probably getting a good look at his ass through his open hospital gown, and met Cooper halfway across the room.

Alec's lips immediately met Cooper's, desperate to reaffirm that they were both alive and safe. Alec's hands gripped Cooper's arms for a moment as he tried to steady his trembling legs. Then one arm wrapped around Cooper's back. The other clenched in Cooper's hair, holding Cooper's head close as he kissed the man.

Alec finally had to lift his head due to lack of oxygen. His eyes anxiously searched Cooper's face for signs of pain. All he saw was exhaustion and relief tinged with a huge amount of love. Alec closed his eyes for just a moment as he leaned his forehead against Cooper's.

"Fuck, Coop, I thought I had lost you," he whispered.

"Not gonna happen, baby," Cooper murmured back.

"When that bomb went off, I just knew we weren't going to get out fast enough."

"That would explain that fool stunt of yours, hmmm?"

Alec opened his eyes to look at Cooper. The man did not look happy. Alec couldn't help but grin. Yeah, pushing Cooper through the door was probably stupid. He should have just tackled him through the doorway. At least that way, they both would have made it out of the apartment.

"You have got to stop trying to protect me, Alec." Cooper grimaced. Alec arched an eyebrow when Cooper grabbed his hospital gown and shook him. "While I'm not ungrateful, sacrificing yourself for me is not the way to win me over. I'd prefer us to be together, not apart."

"I'd do it again if it meant saving your sexy ass."

"Not an option!" Cooper growled.

"Coop--"

"Not an option, Alec," Cooper repeated. "It's both of us or neither of us. Whatever happens, it's us together."

Alec wasn't so sure of that. He'd shove Cooper through that door again in a heartbeat if it meant saving Cooper's life, even knowing it could mean his own. He'd do anything to keep Cooper safe.

"Alec!"

"How about I try?"

Chapter Thirteen

"I don't care what the hell you say," Cooper shouted as he jerked his arm away from the intern who held his arm. "I'm leaving and that's final. Get whatever paperwork you need and I'll sign it, but I'm out that door in five minutes."

"Detective Thomas, please," the young intern said. "You have two bruised ribs and a possible concussion. You need to be in the hospital at least overnight for observation."

"What I have is a missing young man who is most likely being tortured at this very minute by a madman," Cooper replied. "What I need to do is get out there and find him before he wishes he were dead."

"Detective Thomas, I'm sure a little more time won't make a difference one way or the other. Besides, you're not going to be much help to anyone if you get worse."

"A little more time could make all of the difference in the world." Cooper yanked his shirt off over his head and turned, showing his back to the intern. He heard him inhale sharply at the criss-cross of scars on his back. "This is what this madman did to me in just a few hours. What do you think he could do to a defenseless young man if I give it just a little more time?"

The intern sighed. "Very well, Detective, I'll release you, but you must be careful for at least the next couple of weeks. And I want someone keeping an eye on you for the next twenty-four hours, understood?"

Cooper nodded even as Alec stepped forward. "I'll keep an eye on him, doctor."

"Now, wait a minute," the intern said, holding up his hand. "I agreed to let Detective Thomas go, not you. You were injured far more than the detective, Mr. Whitley. I must insist that you stay in the hospital for observation."

"Not gonna happen, Doc." Alec smirked, crossing his arms over his chest.

The intern turned to Cooper. "Detective Thomas, surely you can--"

"Sorry, Doc," Cooper said as he pulled his shirt back down and grabbed his jacket. "He goes where I go."

The intern threw his hands up in the air. "Oh, I give up. You two deserve each other."

Cooper shot Alec a quick grin. "I couldn't agree more."

"Fine, fine," the intern said. There was a great deal of resignation in his voice, "Sign the discharge papers on your way out. I'd offer you something for the pain before you leave, but I doubt you'd accept. I suggest something over the counter from your local drug store. Your head is going to explode as soon as you come down from your adrenaline rush."

Cooper nodded. He suspected as much. His head was already beginning to ache a little. "Hey, Doc, we do appreciate what you've done. We're probably not the easiest patients. But, like you, we have a job to do. A man's life is at stake here, a man we know and like very much. We have to find him before this psycho can do too much damage."

"I understand," the intern replied. "I still think you should stay in the hospital for observation, though."

"I can appreciate that, Doc, believe me." Cooper chuckled as he pulled his jacket on and headed for the door. Pulling the curtain back, he was startled to find Sam standing there. "Oh, hey, Sam, what's up?"

"You ready to go?" Sam asked. "I have the car waiting outside to take us to Jack and Mason's house."

Cooper started walking. He glanced curiously at Sam. "Why Jack and Mason's house?"

Sam shrugged. "Alec's condo is toast. Yours is too small. Seemed like the next best place. We need to regroup, put our heads together, and figure out where the hell Ben is being held."

Cooper couldn't argue with that. Without even looking, he reached back, waiting for Alec to take his hand. He heard a soft chuckle, then Alec's warm fingers entwined with his. Cooper gave Alec a little yank until the man walked beside him. He refused to release Alec's hand as they walked to the car.

Cooper was surprised to find John sitting in Sam's car when they reached the parking lot. Sam didn't seem to be in the same situation. He just walked around to the driver's side and climbed in. Cooper shrugged and climbed into the back seat, Alec climbing in beside him.

As soon as Sam had the vehicle underway, Cooper scooted closer to Alec, grabbing his hand again. The last few hours had passed so fast. It was hard for Cooper to believe that just yesterday he and Alec had gotten back together. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

Cooper didn't know if it was the bomb or just having Alec back in his life, but he knew things had changed in a major way. For one, he was no longer going to worry about the past. It was, essentially, in the past. He had a bright future to look forward to with Alec, and he was going to grab onto that future with both hands and not let go.

"You need a bath, baby."

Cooper turned to look at Alec. "You're not smelling so spiffy there yourself, Romeo."

Alec's eyebrow arched. "Are you saying I stink?" he asked in his most haughty voice.

"Perish the thought," Cooper said. "Reek maybe, give off a strange odor quite likely, make little old ladies cry for sure, but I would never tell you that you stink."

"Oh, you're all heart." Alec chuckled. "Is my aroma so bad you can't come a little closer?"

Cooper grinned, then scooted closer and laid his head on Alec's shoulder. "Perish the thought."

"We're here, gentlemen."

Cooper shook himself awake and glanced over to see Sam standing with the door open. He nudged Alec. "Hey, baby, it's time to wake up. We're at Mason's house."

Alec's eyes blinked open and he looked around as if confused. Cooper hadn't realized they had fallen asleep. They both must be more tired than he had thought. He guessed bombs must do that to a person.

"Come on, Alec," Cooper said as he moved toward the door. "I'm sure Mason has a shower and a hot meal waiting for us."

Alec grumbled but climbed out of the car behind him. Cooper grabbed his hand and started for the house. Just as Cooper had suspected, Mason and Jack were waiting at the front door for them. Mason looked so flustered, Cooper thought Mason might explode right there and then. The man was practically bouncing in place.

"Hey, Mason," Cooper said as soon as he reached the front steps.

"Hey, Coop," Mason squeaked before throwing himself into Cooper's arms. Cooper grunted, catching the smaller man with one arm and giving him a hug.

"I'm okay, honey, don't you worry," Cooper assured his friend. "Just a few bumps and bruises, nothing permanent."

"Oh, God, Coop," Mason cried. "I was so worried. Sam called and said someone set off a bomb in Alec's condo and that you both had been taken to the hospital." Mason turned to glare at the man standing behind him. "Jack wouldn't let me go to the hospital. He said it wasn't safe."

"He was right." Cooper released Mason and glanced at the man standing behind him. "Hey, Jack."

"Coop."

"Are you hungry? I made food," Mason said.

Cooper chuckled and wrapped his free arm around Mason's shoulders. The other one was still attached to Alec. "I'm starving, and both Alec and I could really use a bath. I'm pretty sure John and Sam could use one, too."

"I'm not sure we have enough hot water for the four of you to take showers," Mason said as they walked into the house.

"That's okay, Mason. Alec and I will shower together, conserve water."

"Oh?"

Cooper just grinned.

"Oh, you and I *have* got to talk," Mason snickered.

"After my shower, honey," Cooper replied. "I feel so grimy right now."

Mason wrinkled his nose. "You stink, too."

"Thanks."

Mason grinned, waving Cooper and Alec toward the house. "Come on, let's get you some hot water and food. Then we can talk."

Cooper nodded and followed Mason into the house, Alec right behind him, which is right where Cooper wanted him. He had no plans to let the man out of his sight for a very long time.

Cooper went straight to the bathroom, pulling Alec in with him. He shut the door as soon as Alec was through the doorway and leaned back against it. He looked at Alec, impressed by the sheer masculinity the man exuded despite the dirt, cuts, and bruises on his body.

"You're pretty sexy for a man that just got blown up."

Alec glanced up from where he was pulling the hospital scrubs down his arms. "You think so?"

Cooper grinned and took a step closer. "I know so," he said. "I happen to be the premiere authority on sexy men who get blown up. I can tell a good one when I see him."

Alec arched an eyebrow. "Oh? And just what are the signs of a sexy man who's been blown up?"

Cooper chuckled, delighted that Alec wanted to play his game. He grabbed the edge of Alec's shirt and helped him pull it over his head. He quickly dropped it on the floor, his eyes already roaming the muscular chest and ripped abdomen he had uncovered.

"For one, he's usually a strong man," Cooper said, trailing his hand up Alec's chest to his shoulders. "He tries to carry the weight of the world on his broad shoulders--" Cooper looked into Alec's eyes. "Even when he shouldn't."

"Cooper--"

Cooper pressed his finger over Alec's mouth. His hands moved over to run his hands down Alec's arms. "He has arms strong enough to hold someone close or to push them through doorways to keep them safe."

"Cooper--"

Again, Cooper placed his finger over Alec's mouth, stopping him from speaking. Cooper trailed his fingers up over Alec's face to his eyes and nose, then back down to his lips.

"He has thick, luscious lips that begged to be kissed, lips that can say the sweetest of words or tear a man's heart out, even if he doesn't mean to."

"Cooper--"

Before Cooper could stop Alec this time, Alec grabbed his fingers and frowned at him. "Would you stop that? It's very annoying."

Cooper grinned. He pulled his fingers free and continued trailing them down Alec's body, starting with Alec's stubble-covered chin, then his neck. Alec was so gorgeous, the thick, corded muscles of his neck hardening under Cooper's caress.

"His body is hard and powerful, everything that a man dreams about when he thinks of his lover," Cooper whispered as he pushed the hospital scrubs down Alec's quivering legs.

Cooper could feel the reaction his words and touches were having on Alec's body. Alec's chest rose and fell with each rapid breath. His muscles tightened with each light caress of Cooper's fingers. His cock thickened, hardening to silken steel.

Cooper groaned at the sheer masculinity of the man in his arms. Alec was the sexiest man Cooper had ever seen even after all of these years. No man had ever measured up. Maybe that was why he hadn't developed strong feelings for someone. He had been waiting for Alec.

"Alec," Cooper whispered as his hand encircled Alec's hard cock. He wanted to feel that cock inside him. He needed to reaffirm that they were alive and together. "Alec, I need you."

Alec's blue eyes blinked at Cooper then roamed down his body. Cooper watched the slow, easy grin cross Alec's face. Cooper knew Alec could see his hard cock pushing against his pants, eager to feel Alec's sweet touch.

When Alec reached for his pants, Cooper was all too ready to comply with whatever the man wanted. Cooper pulled his shirt off while Alec did the same to the rest of his clothing until Cooper was naked. He turned around and faced the sink, bending over to rest his body on his arms and spreading his legs wide.

Cooper whimpered at the feel of Alec's hand between his legs, the light, feathery touch against the back of his balls making him ache with need. Shivers of desire shot through him like a bullet, making Cooper's entire body quake. He wasn't sure his legs would hold him up.

"Alec," Cooper pleaded, spreading his legs even further. Alec didn't disappoint. He cupped Cooper's balls in his hand, giving them a gentle squeeze before dragging his fingers back along Cooper's ass crack.

Cooper arched up on his tiptoes, trying to maneuver Alec's fingers where he wanted them. He wanted to feel them sink into his body. He wanted the ache, the heat that went along with being impaled on something long and hard. Cooper wanted Alec's cock, but his fingers would do to start.

When Alec's fingers pushed into him, Cooper cried out, almost over-sensitized from need. He could feel the burn, the small ache of pain from being stretched. More importantly, he could feel Alec's fingers pushing in and out, grazing his sweet spot and sending shocks through his body.

Cooper pushed back, bending more at the waist and pushing his ass toward Alec. He couldn't contain his cry of delight when he felt Alec's tongue scrape his hole. The sensation was so intense, Cooper felt his knees waver, threatening to collapse.

Alec grabbed Cooper's cheeks, holding them apart with his hands, and began fucking Cooper with his tongue and fingers. Cooper felt exposed, spread open as he was. He didn't care, especially when Alec reached between Cooper's legs and grabbed his cock, stroking him.

"Al-- Alec," Cooper groaned. He squeezed his eyes closed as intense pleasure radiated through his body. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up, his heart thudded in his chest, his hands clenched and unclenched on the countertop.

He wasn't sure how much longer he could hold out. The sensations racing through Cooper's body just felt so good. Alec seemed to be doing everything in his power to drive Cooper crazy, and it was working.

"Alec, need you," Cooper whimpered. "Not gonna last -- not gonna last much longer." He cried out in protest when Alec's fingers and tongue left his body.

"We need lube, baby," Alec said. The deep, rough sound of Alec's voice made Cooper's heart beat faster.

Cooper leaned up and looked around frantically. He couldn't see anything that they could use as lube, not a damn thing. *Screw it!* He needed Alec and he needed him now.

"Skip it, Alec," Cooper said. "You lubed me up enough."

"And the condom, Cooper?" Alec replied. "Do you want me to skip that, too? Unless you have one in your pocket, we're in for a quick rub off."

Cooper wanted to shout and scream. He didn't usually carry condoms around with him unless he was out looking, certainly not while he was working. Having spent the night at Alec's, he was fresh out. Cooper's head dropped to the countertop. What were they going to do?

Alec grabbed Cooper and spun him around, dropping to his knees before him. Cooper's breath hissed out through clenched teeth when Alec leaned forward and gulped down Cooper's cock to the root, then swallowed around it.

Cooper gripped Alec's hair. His knees buckled, and he had to lean back further against the counter to keep from dropping to the floor. Alec's mouth and tongue were doing things to him that were probably illegal in several states. It was extraordinary!

Cooper had no doubt that he could come from Alec's mouth on him within a matter of moments. He was nearly *there* as it was. But this wasn't what he wanted, not this time. He needed a closer connection to Alec, something that reassured him that they were still alive and together.

He waited just a moment more, taking pleasure in the feel of Alec's tongue and mouth on his throbbing cock, then pulled on the curls in his hand. Alec's mouth popped off his cock, and deep cobalt blue eyes filled with confusion glanced up at him.

Cooper yanked on Alec's curls again, pulling the man to his feet. Cooper trailed his hands around to cup Alec's face. "I need more, Alec," Cooper whispered. "I need to feel you in me, to know that we're both alive."

Alec blinked, his mouth dropping open. "Coop, we don't have--"

Cooper shook his head. "I don't care. I know I'm clean. I get tested regularly for work. I know you're clean."

Alec cocked his head to one side, his brows furrowing. "How do you know that?"

Cooper smiled. "Because you are forever protecting me. You'd never put me in danger by having sex with me, Alec, if you weren't clean. Besides," Cooper shrugged, "if we're going to do this thing between us, we aren't going to be with anyone else. That leaves just you and me."

Cooper could see the response to his words in the heat that suddenly filled Alec's eyes. But there was joy and happiness as well. Cooper knew going without a condom may not have been a real good choice, but it was the right one.

He turned around to face the sink and bent over, pushing his ass out toward Alec and glancing back over his shoulder. "Now, don't you have an ass to fuck?"

Alec stared down at him for a moment before a mischievous grin broke out over his lush lips. He cupped Cooper's cheeks, pulling them apart slowly. Cooper felt the head of Alec's cock nudge against him, pressing in just a bit.

"I do believe you're right, baby," Alec crooned, "and such a nice ass it is, too." He squeezed each rounded globe in his hand. "So nice and round, so tight. You're going to feel so good with me deep inside of you."

Cooper chuckled. "Would you just get on with the fucking already and stop talking about it? I swear you're slower than-- Oh! Oh! Alec, you're--" Cooper's words faded into nothing but deep groans as the head of Alec's thick cock slowly breached him then sank in deeper.

Cooper's eyes started to roll back in his head, but a splash of blue caught his eyes. He looked closer. He smiled when he realized that hidden behind a box of Kleenex was a small, unopened tube of lube. He loved Mason!

He grabbed the lube and quickly opened it up before holding it out to Alec over his shoulder. "Look what I found?"

Cooper smirked when the lube was quickly taken from him. A moment later, cold gel was dribbled onto the spot where Alec was still held tight within Cooper's ass. Alec pulled out until just the head of his cock remained and added more liquid.

When Alec pushed in for the second time, he glided right in until flesh met flesh, hip met ass cheek. There was no burn or pain, no dry friction. Alec was able to come and go at will, causing nothing but overwhelming pleasure for Cooper.

Cooper braced his head against the counter and reached back and grabbed his ass, pulling the cheeks apart. Cooper wanted Alec as deep as he could go. He wanted to feel Alec for the rest of the day and into tomorrow. He never wanted to feel empty again.

"Fuck me, Alec, fuck me hard," Cooper demanded. "I want to feel you every time I sit down, every time I move. Fuck my ass, Alec!"

A hand suddenly landed on Cooper's ass with enough force to make him jerk and turn to look back at Alec in shock. "Wha--"

Alec grinned at him. "My ass now."

Cooper's mouth dropped open. He started to say something but forgot what it was when Alec grabbed his hips with both hands and thrust in. All words left Cooper's brain, all thought. His entire world centered on the intense feeling of the cock hammering into him.

Alec played him like a master, thrusting in with just the right amount of force to pound his sweet spot, pulling out with enough friction to make Cooper grit his teeth to keep from begging for more. Cooper could feel the pressure building in his body, centering on where he was connected to Alec.

Alec suddenly began a series of short, intense thrusts, never leaving Cooper's body more than an inch or two. The head of Alec's cock rapidly beat against Cooper's prostate. Flames licked up the inside of his body. Cooper groaned. His breath caught in his throat as he tried to breathe past the burning need to come. He dropped his hands from his ass cheeks and pressed them against the wall in front of him.

"Alec!" Cooper cried out as another hard swat hit his ass, then another. Cooper felt like his ass was on fire. Each thrust of Alec's hips pressed against the burning flesh, increasing the sensation. Cooper would have stopped Alec, but his cock was harder than it had ever been before, leaking great drops of pre-come down his leg.

"My ass now," Alec growled. "This is my ass to fuck, my ass to spank."

Alec spanked Cooper again. "Isn't it, baby?"

Cooper nodded.

Alec swatted him again. "I can't hear you," Alec said. "Is this my ass?"

"Yes!" Cooper cried out. He didn't understand why Alec's words, Alec's hand, were turning him on so much, but he didn't much care, either. The lightning shooting through his body had settled in the base of his cock and was getting ready to explode out the top.

"Alec, please," Cooper pleaded.

Alec gripped his hips tighter and thrust into Cooper with an awe-inspiring amount of force, swatting Cooper's ass at the same time. Cooper felt like he was frozen in time. His body stilled. His heart seemed to stop beating. He could hear nothing except the sounds of Alec's breath in his ear.

Then the world exploded. Cooper cried out so loud he was sure the walls shook. The heat in his cock shot out the top in great pearly ropes of come and splattered all over the sink basin, the floor, and Cooper. Cooper's body trembled from the intensity of his orgasm, overwhelmed.

An arm was suddenly thrust in front of his face. Cooper, startled, started to turn to Alec and ask him what the hell was going on when his harshly growled words penetrated Cooper's brain.

"Bite me!"

Cooper bit. He leaned down and sank his teeth into the soft skin on Alec's forearm. He moaned as the cock in his ass throbbed, then filled him with hot, burning liquid, Alec's cries of release the only thing he could hear.

Then silence reigned. The only sounds in the room were that of two men breathing heavily. Cooper lifted his head, pulling his teeth from Alec's arm. He gently licked the bruised flesh, feeling Alec's reaction in the pulsing of the cock still in his ass. This was an interesting facet of Alec he would have to explore in the future.

Cooper felt Alec's head lean against his shoulder. He wrapped an arm around the man's neck and turned his head to kiss Alec's cheek. "Love you, baby," he whispered.

Alec raised his head and smiled down at him. It was a weak, exhausted smile, but it was happy. "Love you too, Coop."

Cooper groaned a moment later when Alec pulled out. He had no doubt he was going to feel Alec for several hours to come if not into tomorrow. It was exactly what he had wanted, and Alec had delivered in spades.

"Come on, handsome, shower time for us." Cooper turned on the shower and adjusted the heat level. He grabbed Alec by the arm and guided him into the shower, climbing in behind him. He grabbed the soap, turning to look at Alec, who was slumped against the wall.

Cooper stepped up to him. "Tired, baby?"

Alec nodded.

"You just stay on your feet. I'll do all the work." Cooper quickly soaped Alec up, washing his hair, then rinsing him off before moving on to his own body. He was washed up, shampooed, and rinsed off in a matter of moments.

Cooper turned off the water and grabbed some towels. He guided Alec to the toilet seat and dried him off, wrapping a towel around his waist. He grabbed another towel and dried off. He glanced down at their clothes. They wouldn't be putting their hospital scrubs back on if he could help it.

Cooper squatted down in front of Alec. "Hey, baby, can you stay here for a moment? I'm going to ask Jack if he has anything we can change into."

Alec nodded. Cooper thought Alec looked a little dazed. Cooper worried about leaving Alec alone, but he wasn't about to let the man go traipsing around in front of a bunch of guys dressed only in a towel. Just wasn't going to happen.

"I'll be right back," Cooper said as he got to his feet and left the bathroom. He quickly went down the hall to the kitchen, where he knew he would find the rest of his motley crew. He was right. Jack sat in one chair, Mason on his lap. Sam, Mitch, and John sat across from them.

"Hey, Jack," Cooper said as he walked into the kitchen, "do you have anything Alec and I can borrow? Our clothes were trashed and we don't want to wear hospital scrubs."

"Yeah, I'm sure I have something," Jack said, patting Mason. "Get up, baby."

Mason jumped to his feet. Cooper gave Mason a quick smile, then followed Jack out of the kitchen and down the hallway. He waited in the doorway for the clothes Jack handed him, then went back to the bathroom. He was relieved when he found Alec still sitting on the toilet seat.

"Hey, baby," Cooper said as he walked in. "Jack loaned us some stuff. Luckily, he's about our size, so everything should fit."

Cooper held out a plain white cotton shirt and a pair of jeans to Alec. He pulled another white cotton shirt over his own head then pulled on a pair of faded jeans. By the time he was done, Alec was just pulling the shirt down his torso.

Cooper grabbed the jeans and helped Alec into them, admiring the way the jeans molded to Alec's thick thighs. It had been awhile since he had seen Alec in anything so sexy. He'd have to ensure Alec wore more casual clothes more often. He looked damn hot.

"Come on, sweetheart," Cooper said as he reached for Alec and escorted him toward the bathroom door, "let's go get some food and hot coffee into you. I think you'll feel a whole lot better."

Alec nodded. Cooper wrapped an arm around his waist and escorted the tired man down the hallway to the kitchen. The moment they made an appearance, people jumped up and offered their chairs. Cooper helped Alec to his then gratefully sank down into his own, wincing when his sore ass met the seat cushion. Oh, yeah, he was going to be feeling Alec for quite awhile.

Chapter Fourteen

Alec felt someone pulling on his shoulder. He opened his eyes and turned his head to find Cooper sitting next to him. He smiled. "Hey, handsome," he murmured.

"Hi," Cooper replied, giving his own smile. "Did you get enough sleep?"

It was only as Cooper said the words that Alec realized he was lying down in someone's bed. He sat up, pushing his hair back from his face, and looked around. Not recognizing the room he was in, he glanced at Cooper in confusion.

"You were falling asleep in your food," Cooper supplied. "Mason and I brought you in here to get a little rest."

"How long have I been out?" It couldn't have been too long. Alec still felt exhausted, but at least he didn't feel like he was at death's door anymore.

"A couple of hours, that's all."

"Where is everyone?"

"Sam and John are sacked out on the couch. Mitch is in the kitchen with Jack and Mason." Cooper stood up when Alec started to swing his legs over the side of the bed. "We figured you needed some rest."

Alec stood up, still a little shaky on his feet, but he was on his feet. "Did you get any rest?"

Cooper pointed to the indented pillow next to the one Alec had been using. "A little."

Alec reached over and stroked the side of Cooper's cheek. He could feel the stubble from Cooper's lack of shaving. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I got blown up." Cooper chuckled. "You?"

"About the same," Alec smirked. "How's your ass?"

"How's your arm?" Cooper countered with a smirk of his own.

Alec chuckled. "Sore."

"So is my ass."

"You asked for it," Alec asserted.

"So did you."

Alec felt his face flush. "Actually, I think I demanded it."

Cooper grinned. "You did, and I'd like to explore that idea more with you, but right now I need you to come with me out to the living room." Cooper stood to his feet. "Now that we've all had a little rest, we need to find Ben."

The joy Alec had been feeling when he woke died a sudden death when he realized that Ben was still out there somewhere being held captive by some maniac. Alec grimaced and rubbed his face. He couldn't believe he had just fallen asleep. He should have been searching for Ben. He was such a selfish bastard.

"Knock it off, Alec," Cooper said fiercely. "We're all worried about Ben, but we can't do him any good if we're too tired to figure out where he is. We need clear heads and rested bodies."

Alec kicked at the side of the bed. "I just feel so--"

"We all do, baby, but nothing could help it. We were falling down on our feet. I think getting blown up gives us a little leeway. And it was only a couple of hours."

Alec grunted. "You of all people should know what a couple of hours can mean in the hands of whoever's doing this," he grumbled as he got off the bed.

"Alec!" Cooper said as he shook Alec's shoulder. "Knock it off. Stop beating yourself up over this. There was nothing we could do. We have to be at the top of our game to fight this guy. That's what Ben needs from us."

Alec took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He glanced at Cooper, frowning at the concerned look on Cooper's face. Alec reached up and caressed the side of his face. "I'm sorry, baby, I just can't stand the idea of anyone going through what you went through. It kills me inside."

Cooper closed his eyes and leaned into Alec's hand. When he opened them, the hazel had turned a darker brown. "I love you, you know?"

Alec grabbed Cooper and pulled the man into his arms. He buried his face in Cooper's dark brown hair. His heart thundered in his chest.

"You'd better, Cooper," Alec whispered. "I think I'd die now if you didn't."

"Alec--"

A loud banging on the bedroom door stopped whatever Cooper was going to say. "You all going to join us out here?"

Alec raised his head and glared at the door before looking at Cooper. "You were saying?"

Cooper's eyebrow arched. "Considering all that we've been through, do you think you could skip the dying part? I love knowing you need me, but that... that I can do without."

Alec chuckled. "Yeah, I guess I can see that."

Cooper patted his chest. "Good."

Alec followed Cooper into the living room. Jack sat in a chair, Mason in his customary position curled up on Jack's lap. Alec was always amused by the way Mason liked to curl up with Jack. Most men would see it as unmanly. Alec was starting to see the merits of it.

Besides Jack and Mason, the other men in the room seemed to be making themselves comfortable. Mitch leaned against the wall. Sam and John sat on the couch. Alec noticed John didn't look like he had gotten any sleep at all. His hair was mussed, deep shadows under his eyes.

Cooper sat on the loveseat. Alec sat down next to him and reached over to clasp Cooper's hand in his, giving it a small squeeze. When Alec looked up, he felt his face flush at the knowing grin Mason gave him.

"So, let's figure out where Ben is," Sam said, breaking the silence of the room. "What do we know?"

"Whoever's doing this is some sort of accomplice with Wallace or he's doing this for Wallace," Alec stated simply. "The people that are being kidnapped and killed are all young, submissive gay men that look like Mason and Ben."

"Several of the men have frequented BDSM clubs," Cooper added. "There are also several other submissives that haven't checked in lately, according to Dominick Sylva."

"Could they just be out doing other stuff?" Jack asked.

"No. According to Sylva, these men, who all fit the same description as Ben and Mason, are pretty regular members. It's unusual to not hear from them for long periods of time, even if they come to the club with someone they have hooked up with."

"Do you think they're dead?" Mason whispered, bringing to light everyone's biggest fear.

"I don't know. Before--" Cooper swallowed past the lump in his throat. "Before Alec's condo was bombed, we showed some pictures to Ben. He recognized four of the men in the pictures as having been under Wallace's control while Ben was with him."

"What aren't you telling us?" Jack asked.

Cooper took a deep breath. "Ben also recognized several of the other men. He said he had seen Wallace with their pictures. They are all men Sylva said hadn't signed in for awhile."

Mason gasped, paled. Jack's arms tightened around him. Alec felt like shit for scaring the man, but, as he had learned when Cooper had been kidnapped by Wallace, Mason didn't see the world as they did, as most people did. He usually had insight that the rest of them would never consider.

"I did some research on Ambrose White if you're interested," Mitch said, stepping forward. Alec nodded. He was very interested in knowing anything they could discover about Ambrose White.

"Ambrose White didn't exist before five years ago, not in this country or any other. The man has no criminal record, no credit history, nothing. He doesn't even have a parking ticket. He just appeared on the scene five years ago. He bankrolled several small clubs then moved into the heavier stuff."

"Well, according to Sylva, he's also not very liked in the BDSM community," Cooper added. "He operates a lot of underground clubs."

"How are these clubs any different from what Sylva does?" Jack asked.

"No rules, no safe words, no protection for those that say no," Alec answered simply.

"Damn!" Jack swore.

Alec nodded. He glanced around the room at the pensive faces of his friends. "So, any ideas?"

"Okay," Mason said after a moment of silence. "I have one, but you have to promise you won't think I'm off my rocker."

Everyone nodded. Mason took a deep breath then dropped his bomb in everyone's lap.

"I don't think Wallace or this new guy were trying to kill gay men. I think that was an accident."

Alec's mouth dropped open. "You think the killings were an accident?"

Mason nodded.

"Why, Mason?" Alec asked. He dropped Cooper's hand and scooted forward on the couch just a bit. He was fascinated by the way Mason's mind worked, mostly because it had saved his lover's life six months ago when Mason had discovered where Wallace held Cooper, but also because of its simplicity.

"When Wallace had me, he kept saying I was meant for him, that I had no right to give away something that belonged to him." Mason shuddered. "I think he actually meant that."

"Mason," Alec said, "he was crazy. Of course he thought you belonged to him."

Mason shook his head. "No, it wasn't like that. It was more like -- like I had been given to him, that I was a gift or a reward." Mason waved his hand in a frustrated gesture. "I know it doesn't make sense, but you weren't there. You didn't hear the way he talked. He was really, truly offended that I had given away what he thought belonged to him."

"Are you sure Wallace just wasn't angry?" Sam asked, reminding Alec that Sam was in the room.

"Oh, he was angry, all right." Mason shuddered again. "But I think he was actually hurt by my refusal to accept him as my master."

Master. That word set off all sorts of bells in Alec's head. "Did he actually use the word master, Mason?"

Mason nodded. "Several times."

"What did he say? His exact words, Mason?"

"Does he really have to go over this again?" Jack asked. "Can't you just read the report?"

"I'm sorry, Jack," Alec said, and he was. "There's no time to get the report."

"It's okay, Jack," Mason said, rubbing his hands up and down Jack's arm. "I can do this."

Jack frowned but nodded his head.

"He kept saying he was my master now and that I needed to learn who was the master, that I would learn not to be disrespectful of my master. He said he was going to have to punish me for what I did wrong."

"Sweet hell!" Alec swore softly. He knew Wallace was a sick fuck, he just hadn't known how sick. The man was twisted.

"I think I was supposed to be his pet," Mason whispered.

"Why do you think that, Mason?" Alec asked quietly, not sure he wanted to know the answer.

"Ben was his pet for awhile. I think I was chosen to replace Ben," Mason said. "If you hadn't rescued us, I have no doubt that Ben would have been killed or worse, and I would have replaced him as Wallace's pet."

"Worse?"

Mason shrugged. "I think Wallace was kidnapping young gay men and turning them into sex slaves. I don't think this copycat killer is working for Wallace. He might be working with him but not for him. I think he just took up the work when Wallace was arrested."

Dead silence reigned in the room. Not a man spoke a word. The implications of Mason's words were almost too much to put into speech. It could open a can of worms Alec knew no one was prepared for.

"Why do you think Wallace was kidnapping and turning gay men into sex slaves?" Alec asked. He had to. He had to know what Mason was thinking.

"Wallace talked too much about teaching me, about me needing to learn who was master." He shrugged. "Add that to him kidnapping submissive gay men, and what do you have? Besides the four men Wallace killed, have you found any bodies? Or do you just assume that they're dead?"

"Wait," Mitch said, "what *do* you have?"

Alec rolled his eyes. "Mason? You want to explain it to him?"

"If you wanted to sell young gay men to buyers, who would be the best people to pick? Would it be someone like you or someone like me? Who would you have a better chance at mastering? Sam or Ben?"

"Oh."

"Yeah, oh." Alec chuckled. He quickly sobered as the rest of Mason's words sank in. "No, Mason, we haven't found any bodies, other than the one a few days ago. After what Wallace did to you, Ben, and Cooper, we kind of assumed that he killed the others, though."

"So, maybe they were successfully trained and sold," Mason said. "I'd bet that was why Wallace had those pictures. He had to advertise somehow."

"But why would he have the exact same pictures that Dominick Sylva ha-- Oh, my God," Alec said as he jumped to his feet. "We have to go."

Cooper jumped up beside him, grabbing his arm. "What is it, Alec?"

"Ben said that Wallace had the exact same pictures that Dominick Sylva had of his sub clients. How soon after that was my condo blown up? Either we're stepping on someone's toes, or he really wants us off this case. Either way, Dominick Sylva is involved."

"Do you think he's the mastermind behind this?" Cooper asked.

Alec shook his head. "No, but I've been wrong before."

"Should we all go?" Jack asked as he set Mason on his feet.

"No, I think you should stay here where you're safe," Alec said. "Cooper and I will go."

"I'll go, too."

Alec looked over at John. He could see the determination in John's face and knew that nothing he could say would keep the man away from finding Ben. He'd do the same thing if the man he loved was in danger.

Alec nodded. "Okay, that leaves Sam, Mitch, and Jack here to keep Mason safe."

"You think he's going to come after Mason?" Jack asked.

"He went after Ben," Alec replied. "I'm not taking any chances."

"I won't, either," Jack said, wrapping his arms protectively around Mason. "He touches a hair on Mason's head and I will kill him."

"I'm the chief of police," John said, surprising everyone. "I know where to hide the body."

"Okay, then." Alec chuckled. "Let's hit it. Mitch, do what you do best. I want to know what's not there on Ambrose White. You might also look into Dominick Sylva. If he's involved in this, I want to know."

Mitch nodded, looking grim.

"Sam, you--"

Sam held up his hand. "I've got it covered."

Alec nodded. That was enough for him. There were things about Sam that gave him pause, but Alec would trust the man with his life, even Cooper's life. Sam was the best at what he did, and what he did was protect others.

While they had all gone to college together, Sam had left for a few years. He never talked about where he had been, even getting angry when someone pried. When he returned, he wasn't the same man. He was quieter, more serious. Wherever it was, it had changed him.

Alec, Cooper, and John rushed out the front door. Alec skidded to a stop when he realized he didn't have his car. He started back for the house when Sam appeared in the doorway and tossed him a set of car keys.

Alec grinned and waved before turning back to rush to Sam's car. Within moments, they were headed for Dominick Sylva's BDSM club.

"Should we call for backup?" Cooper asked.

"Not yet," Alec said as he maneuvered quickly through traffic. "Let's see what Sylva has to say and then we'll decide. I don't want any interference if we have to step outside of police procedures."

John cleared his throat from the back seat. "I didn't hear that."

Alec glanced in the rear view mirror. John had a resigned look on his face, but Alec didn't think the man would stop them if they needed to put a little pressure on Sylva to get him to talk. John might even help.

Alec had a small idea of what John was going through. He had felt much the same way six months ago when Wallace had Cooper. It felt gut wrenching to know the person most important in the world was being held in the hands of a madman.

The outcome of that had been good for Alec, even better now considering Cooper had agreed to be with him. Alec could only hope that John and Ben had the same outcome. The two men belonged together whether they'd admit it or not.

Alec pulled in front of Sylva's private club a few minutes later. He glanced into the mirror again. "John, you want to stay in the car? Watch the front maybe?" Alec felt the need to give the man an out in case they did have to strong-arm Sylva. John was the police chief, after all.

John shook his head and reached for the door handle. "No," the man said sternly then climbed from the car.

Alec blinked. Well, okay, then. He looked over at Cooper, who was watching John with an apprehensive look on his face.

"Give him some space, Coop," Alec said, laying his hand on Coop's arm. "Ben's missing and it'll tear him up inside until he finds him. Believe me, I know. I've been in his shoes before."

Cooper nodded. He turned to look at Alec before patting Alec's hand where it sat on his arm. "I know. I'm just worried he'll get himself into a situation he can't get out of. His position is very important to him."

Alec glanced past Cooper to the sidewalk where John paced. The man crossed his arms over his chest and glared at them when they didn't immediately get out of the car. "Apparently, it's not more important than Ben."

"Come on," Cooper said as he reached for the door handle, "we'd better go before he fires me."

Alec chuckled and climbed from the car. "You could always come work with me." He grinned over the top of the car at Cooper. "I'll even share my percentage of the business with you."

Cooper looked stunned. Alec liked that. He had always dreamed of them working together, living together. He could think of nothing he'd like more. He just had to convince Cooper of the merits of the idea. Now that he didn't have a place to live, the idea was looking better.

"You two want to get some chairs?" John asked, still glaring at them. He swirled his hand in a circle. "Maybe a little candlelight and wine while we wait, or are you going to get your asses in gear and get inside?"

Alec rolled his eyes. John could be such an ass. He tried to give the man some leeway, considering the circumstances, but it sure didn't help to be impatient. Alec wanted to find Ben just as John did. Being bitchy wasn't going to help.

He crossed to the sidewalk and went up the steps to the red door, knocking. The door was opened once again by the very proper looking butler. Alec smiled. He really wanted to ruffle the guy's feathers, but that would probably be counterproductive.

"Alec Whitley and Detective Cooper to see Mr. Sylva."

The man didn't bat an eye. "Please come this way. I will inform Mr. Sylva that you are here and see if he's available to see you."

Alec cast a glance at Cooper, rolled his eyes, then followed the old man down the same long hallway from before. He headed right for the door to Dominick Sylva's office; damned if he was going to wait for the man to possibly get rid of any evidence.

"Sir," the butler called out as Alec grabbed the door handle, "sir, please, I'll inform Mr. Sylva that you wish to see him if you will just wait here."

"Sorry, James, can't wait," Alec said as he opened the door.

"My name is Chadsworth, not James."

"Whatever!"

Alec pushed the door open and walked in. Dominick Sylva sat behind his desk talking on the phone. He glanced up when Alec walked in, frowned, then quickly held his finger up for silence.

Alec walked over to stand in front of his desk, crossed his arms over his chest, and glared.

"Yes, yes, Harold, I'll be sure to let you know anything the moment I do. Of course," Sylva said, nodding his head slightly. "Yes, Harold, I'm positive the police know. I'm sure there will be a break in the case any day now."

There was a pause as if Sylva was listening to the other man talk. Then he nodded again. "Okay, Harold, I'll talk to you later."

Sylva hung up the phone and looked up at Alec. "I assume you haven't caught this bastard?" Sylva finally asked.

"You could say that," Alec replied.

"You might want to hurry," Sylva said. "If I lose any more subs, I may have to close my club."

Alec smirked at the man. "My heart breaks for you."

"Was there some reason for your visit, Mr. Whitley?"

Sylva sounded so smug that Alec had to rein in his urge to reach across the desk and smack the man. Sylva leaned back in his chair, clasping his hands together in his lap as he regarded Alec. He looked so calm, so casual. Alec was really starting not to like this guy.

"We have a few more questions to ask you, Mr. Sylva," Cooper said from behind Alec.

Sylva glanced past Alec and shook his head. "I doubt there is anything more I can tell you, Detective. I think we just about covered everything the last time you were here." The man leered at Cooper. "Unless, of course, you want to learn a little more about BDSM."

All right, that was it. Alec had had enough of this man's crap. He didn't care how connected Dominick Sylva seemed to be in the BDSM community, he wasn't going to take anyone talking to his Cooper that way.

"Now, look, Sylva, you--" Alec began.

Sylva lunged to his feet. His hands came down on the desk and he leaned forward on his arms. "No, you look," Sylva snarled back. "I've had just about enough of your shit. I've told you everything that I know. If you had a brain cell in your head, you'd have caught the guy by now, but it's obvious he's a lot smarter than you."

Sylva glanced at Cooper again, his eyes roaming over the man in a way that brought Alec's hackles up instantly. "The only smart thing you've done is bring me a new sub to play with."

Alec lunged. His rage at the man boiled over and he lunged across the desk and hit the guy right smack in the kisser. Sylva fell back, the chair behind him flying across the room to hit the wall. Sylva raised his hand to his face and wiped away the blood on his lip before glaring up at Alec.

"You son-of-a-bitch!" Sylva shouted right before he swung back at Alec. The two men toppled off the desk and hit the floor. Alec could vaguely hear Cooper and John shouting in the background as he wrestled Sylva to the floor.

Somehow, Sylva got the upper hand, rolling over to straddle Alec, pinning him to the floor. Alec grabbed the man by the shirt with one hand and pulled his other hand back, ready to deliver yet another punch when he caught the desperate look in Sylva's eyes.

"Arrest me," Sylva mouthed silently. *"Hit me, then arrest me. My office is bugged."*

Alec let loose with his swing, nailing Sylva in the face again. He winced, knowing that he had left a mark that would be bright purple by morning. Sylva fell to the side with a loud grunt. Alec quickly rolled over and pinned Sylva to the floor.

"Cooper, cuffs." He reached back with his hand, never taking his eyes off Sylva. A moment later, handcuffs were slapped into Alec's hand. Alec made quick work of rolling Sylva over onto his stomach and handcuffing his hands behind his back.

He climbed to his feet then pulled Sylva up. The man turned, glaring at Alec. "You can't arrest me. You're not a cop!" he shouted. "This is false arrest."

"He may not be, but I am," Cooper said, stepping forward. "Dominick Sylva, I'm placing you under arrest for assault. You have the right to--"

"To remain silent, yeah, yeah, yeah," Sylva drawled. "I've heard it before. Well, fuck you, man, this is false arrest. He hit me first. He's the one you should be putting under arrest, not me."

"Is that what happened?" Alec snickered. "I could have sworn you attacked me first. I was just defending myself. John? What did you see?"

"You were clearly defending yourself, Alec," John replied, his lips twisted in a wry grin. "There's no doubt in my mind he attacked you first. Cooper?"

Cooper nodded. "It's sad, really. He tried so hard to convince me that the BDSM community wasn't violent the last time I was here. This just goes to show you how much shit he was trying to shove up my ass."

Alec bit his lip to keep from laughing as Cooper grabbed Sylva by the back of the neck and one arm then led him out of the office. John and Alec followed right behind. They had almost reached the front door when the butler came running down the hallway after them.

"Mr. Sylva, what is the meaning of this?"

"They said I assaulted him," Sylva said, jerking his head in Alec's direction. "Call my lawyer, Chadsworth, tell him to meet me downtown. And get the surveillance videos of my office. I'm sure they will show that he took the first swing. I was just defending myself."

Alec knew the man was trying to tell him something. Why else would he mention the surveillance tapes of his office? He looked at Chadsworth curiously. "Just what surveillance videos is he talking about, Chadsworth? They could be evidence of his assault."

Chadsworth twisted his hands together, looking altogether very nervous and suddenly not quite as prim and proper as he usually did. "Oh, I don't know, without Mr. Sylva's permission--"

John stepped forward, flashing his ID and badge. "My name is John Rydal. I'm the Chief of Police. I want those surveillance videos for evidence. You can either take me to them, or I will have thirty officers here in the next ten minutes to tear this place apart."

Chadsworth's eyes flashed from John to Sylva, then back again. He looked so nervous that Alec thought the man might fall apart on the spot. Finally, he gestured for them to follow him and led them back down the hallway to a room just before Sylva's office.

Alec was a little stunned by the amount of electronic equipment in the room when he stepped in. Sylva apparently took surveillance very seriously. The place looked like a NASA control center. Large monitors hung on the wall, all showing different locations in the building. Three men sat in front of computers as they scrutinized the monitors.

"We need the surveillance videos for Mr. Sylva's office," John said when the men looked up. He flashed his badge again.

Alec glanced around the room. It was readily apparent that every inch of Sylva's operation was videotaped. A large cage in the back of the room held large bays with stacks of disks. Alec assumed they were older surveillance videos.

Curious, he glanced at Sylva, then back to the cage, then back to Sylva. Sylva gave a slight nod. That was all Alec needed. He grabbed Sylva by the neck and pushed him up against the side of the cage. He was careful to hide his movements as he pressed his palm against Sylva's fingers.

"Where are the videos, Sylva?" Sylva grunted. Alec pressed his face into the wire mesh of the cage. "I won't ask you again. Where are the surveillance videos to your office?"

"Bay three," Sylva growled. His finger pressed against Alec's palm four times, then two times.

Alec grabbed Sylva by the back of his shirt and pushed him into the cage. He looked at Sylva. "Bay three?"

When Sylva nodded, Alec made a big show of popping open the door on bay four, then grabbing the second disk down.

"Bay three, you idiot," Sylva snapped. "That's bay four."

Alec used the excuse of smacking Sylva in the head to hide the fact that he was slipping the disk into his pocket. He glanced around to make sure no one had noticed the slip, then opened bay three, pulling out several disks.

"Is this all of them?" Alec asked Sylva.

Sylva smirked. "Like I'm going to tell you."

Alec smirked back. "Fine," he said. "Have it your way." He grabbed the back of each bay and pulled. Large stacks of disks crashed to the floor. Sparks popped, lights flashed, then smoke could be seen rising up behind the destroyed bays. Sylva groaned.

With a handful of disks in one hand and Sylva in the other, Alec walked out of the cage. He shoved Sylva in Cooper's direction, then grinned over at the stunned faces of the technicians. "Mr. Sylva will be detained for awhile, so you can have the day off."

Alec could barely hold in his excitement until they made it to the car. He knew something important was on the disks Sylva had him grab. The man was too smart to mention the surveillance videos unless they meant something.

Once everyone was seat-belted in, Alec started the car and pulled out into traffic. Having his lawyer meet him downtown wasn't going to do Sylva any good. They weren't headed downtown. They were headed back to Mason's house so Mitch could get a look at the tapes.

"So, someone going to tell me what in the hell that little show was about?" Cooper asked.

Chapter Fifteen

Cooper glanced over at Alec when he chuckled. "Caught that, did you?" Alec asked.

Cooper shrugged. "I know you can be a real asshole, but I don't think you attack people for no reason."

He had been a little surprised when Alec had lunged at Sylva. He hadn't really caught on until Alec asked for the cuffs. Considering they had discussed using undue force if needed before they had even entered the building, it had seemed strange to Cooper that Alec would want Sylva handcuffed.

Alec snorted. "I had reason even before Sylva told me to arrest him."

Cooper raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Alec glanced at him. "I didn't like what he was saying."

"About me?" Cooper asked, astounded. "You attacked him because you were jealous?"

"I think we're getting a little off track here, guys," John said from the back seat where he sat next to Sylva. "Obviously, Mr. Sylva wanted to be alone with us. Don't you think we'd better find out why?"

Alec felt his face flush. He glanced into the rear view mirror to see Sylva grinning back at him. He frowned. "So, what's up, Sylva?"

"I told you, my office is being bugged," Sylva said, losing his grin. "I also suspect that there is video surveillance that isn't mine."

"Why?" Cooper asked, turning his head to look back at Sylva.

Sylva shrugged. "They, whoever they are, evidently think I know something."

"How do you know your office is bugged?" Alec asked.

"After you two left my office, I decided to do a little more investigating. While searching, I discovered a remote link to my computer from outside the building. Someone has been hacking my computer files, all my data, everything. They have it all."

"What's the connection between that and video surveillance?" Cooper asked.

"I began to notice a correlation between phone calls I'd receive, meetings I'd have, and the time stamps on when my files were hacked. Every time I would interview a new stable sub, my files got hacked. This dates back over three years. I just never noticed it before now."

"That might explain the photos that Ben saw," Cooper exclaimed.

"Photos?" Sylva asked. "What photos?"

"Ben Glassine, one of Wallace's victims that survived, said the photos that you gave us were the same ones Wallace had," Cooper explained. "I didn't make the connection that they were the *exact* same photos until now. They're copies of the same photos you have for your stable subs."

"Is he sure they're the same photos?" Sylva asked.

"He seemed pretty sure to me," Cooper replied, nodding.

"Well, shit!"

Cooper chuckled. He had the same thought himself. If Ben's photos and Sylva's photos were the same, that meant someone was using Sylva to profile victims. That wasn't a good thing.

"So, why the surveillance videos, Sylva?" Cooper asked.

"Beyond wanting to see who bugged my office, I could care less about the office videos. It was the other video I wanted you to get."

Cooper glanced at Alec curiously. "What other video?"

Alec reached into his pocket and pulled out a disk. "This one."

Cooper took it, turning it over in his hands as if he could read what was on it just by looking at it. When he couldn't, he looked back at Sylva. "What's on it?"

Sylva grinned. "Ambrose White."

It was all Cooper could do to sit quietly until they got to the house. He wanted to look at the video so bad, he could taste it. He just knew the break in the case that they were looking for was on that disk.

There was something else, some gut feeling that told Cooper he wasn't going to like what he saw on that disk as well. His stomach rolled every time he thought about it. The moment they arrived at Mason's house and got everyone inside, Cooper pulled Alec off to the side.

"Can I speak to you for just a moment?" he asked.

Alec looked a little confused but nodded his head anyway. "Why don't you give this to Mitch and tell him to bring it up on his computer while I have a word with Coop?" he asked, as he handed the disk to John.

Cooper made his way to the guest bedroom, knowing Alec was close behind him. The moment the bedroom door closed, he twirled around and pressed his body against Alec's, his lips seeking the other man's.

Cooper couldn't explain the sudden, fierce hunger that shot through his body. He ached. He had a desperate need to feel Alec's lips. He had never experienced this level of pure lust before. It scared him, but he was helpless to stop.

"Alec," Cooper groaned. "Kiss me, Alec."

"Coop," Alec replied breathlessly.

Cooper just knew that, if he didn't kiss Alec right now, he might never kiss the man again. There was some force driving him to claim Alec before it was too late, before he lost the man forever. Cooper couldn't let that happen. He couldn't let Alec get away from him, not now.

"Christ!" Alec exclaimed. "You're going to kill me."

That wasn't Cooper's plan, no.

Alec pulled his lips away from Cooper and took several deep draws of air. He reached up and smoothed the damp hair back from Cooper's head.

Cooper looked exhausted but satisfied. His eyes were closed, his face flushed, but there was a very happy grin on his lips. Alec was a little stunned by how fiercely Cooper had kissed him. He couldn't ever remember seeing the man like that.

Not to say it wasn't a huge turn on, because it was. Everything about Cooper was a turn on. The man breathed and Alec became aroused. He'd kiss Cooper every second of every day if he could.

This, though, this had been different. Cooper had been desperate. It had shown in his eyes, his need. Alec had been helpless to deny the man, not that he would have. Any loving on Cooper was good loving as far as Alec was concerned. He was just confused as to why Cooper had been so desperate.

"You okay, baby?" Alec asked.

Cooper groaned, opening his eyes to smile at him. "I am now."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Cooper frowned. "Talk about what?"

"Coop, you know I'll kiss on you anytime, anywhere, but there was something different about this. Not that I'm complaining, mind you, because I'm not. But something has obviously upset you. What is it?"

Cooper's eyes dropped from his as the man shrugged. "I don't know."

"I told you I wouldn't leave."

Cooper shook his head. "No, it wasn't that. I just... there's something on those disks, something that my guts says is going to break this case wide open."

"That's a good thing, isn't it?" Alec asked. "It might help us find Ben."

"I also think we're not going to like what we find."

"Ben?"

"No, something worse." Alec leaned into the hand Cooper stroked down his face. "I can't explain it. My gut is telling me that whatever is on those disks is going to be really bad."

"And you needed kiss me breathless because of it?" Alec couldn't keep the twinge of amusement out of his voice.

Cooper flushed. "I just needed you. Is that okay?" he snarled.

Alec frowned. "Coop, honey, it's always okay. You know that. And I don't care what the reason is. I love you. I'm here to stay, and if you need me, fine, you need me."

"God, I must sound like a complete idiot to you. I just know that there is something on those tapes that's going to be really horrible. I can feel it. I needed... I needed to be with you before we saw them. I felt like if I didn't, I'd never have you again."

"Cooper," Alec said, "I'm not going anywhere."

Cooper rubbed his hand down his face. "I know, I sound crazy."

"Nothing new there," Alec quipped.

Cooper punched him lightly in the arm, chuckling. "You're such an ass."

"But I'm a damn sexy ass." Alec grinned.

"Yeah, you are."

"And you love me anyway."

"Yeah, I do."

Alec's grin faded. "Then say it, Cooper."

Cooper cupped his hand around Alec's face again. "I love you."

Alec swallowed hard at Cooper's heartfelt words. No matter how many times he heard them, they would never get old. His eyes dropped down. "We're a sorry pair. You do realize that, don't you?"

"How so?" Cooper asked.

"We're spending more time worrying about the other guy than saying what we really feel. If we were both honest, and maybe just a bit braver than we are, this wouldn't be an issue between us."

Cooper pushed his hand past Alec's cheek to wrap it around Alec's neck, pulling on the man until his head rested against Cooper's. He leaned forward and placed a small kiss on Alec's lips.

"I think we have reason to be hesitant," Cooper said. "We've been through a lot, and I'm not just talking Ben being kidnapped. The last ten years have been hard on both of us. We just need to be grateful for what we have now and forget all the rest."

"You actually think we can?" Alec felt doubtful.

"Okay, maybe forget is the wrong word. Maybe we should use it as a lesson to work harder to keep what we have and appreciate it for the gift that it is."

"Yeah, maybe."

"You know I'm right, Alec. What we have is too special to let it be taken away from us a second time."

Alec's head came up. "Getting mushy on me, Coop?"

Cooper rolled his eyes. Alec laughed and grabbed his arm in mock pain when Cooper slugged him again. "You're such an ass."

"I'm still your ass." Alec grinned.

"And don't ever forget it," Cooper said. "Now, come on. We need to get a look at those tapes before I do lose what's left of my mind."

Alec grumbled to himself. He would much rather have stayed there and made out with Cooper, but Alec supposed the man was right. They did need to get a look at those videos. The longer Ben was missing, the more Ben could be hurt.

Still, he was worried about Cooper's actions. The man was truly upset about the tapes. Alec trusted Cooper with his very life. He had to trust that Cooper's gut warned him of something ominous. It sent chills down Alec's back just thinking about it.

Alec followed Cooper back out into the main room. Mitch had his computer hooked up to Jack's flat screen TV, and the group of men were sitting around watching the tapes.

Cooper stopped right behind the couch, his hands resting on the top. Alec stood beside him, wrapping a hand around Cooper's waist and pulling the other man into the crook of his arm. If they were going to see something bad, Alec wanted Cooper close.

Alec turned his attention to the TV screen and watched people come and go from Dominick Sylva's office. Most of it didn't seem unusual, although Alec was a little stunned at the identities of some of the people who came and went from the room.

Several of them were high up on society's list of who's who. He was shocked to see them at a BDSM club, although he guessed that he shouldn't be. In his line of work, he had learned that everyone had some sort of secret that they didn't want the general public to know, especially rich people.

"That son of a bitch," Sylva shouted, jumping to his feet. He started pacing around the room, glaring at the TV screen several times.

Alec glanced at screen, surprised to see Chadsworth walk into Sylva's unoccupied office. The man glanced around nervously. He quickly crossed to the computer. Alec watched as he booted it up and stuck a thumb drive in the USB port. The man seemed to look through some files, then pull out the drive and power down the computer.

Before leaving the room, he walked to the bookshelf and grabbed a potted plant. Alec could just make out a small black device hidden in the leaves of the plant. Chadsworth fiddled with it for a moment before leaving the room.

Alec turned to look at Sylva. "How well do you know your butler?"

Sylva, hands on his hips, frowned. "Apparently, not as well as I thought I did."

"What can you tell us about him?" Alec asked.

Sylva walked over and sat down in a chair. He rubbed his face, then leaned forward with his elbows on his legs. "I hired him about three years ago."

"About the time someone started hacking into your computer?" Cooper asked.

Sylva looked shocked for a moment, his face flushed. "Yes, about the same time." He brought his hand up and slammed it back down on his leg. "Damn, why didn't I see this before now?"

"My guess is that you were never supposed to know," Alec said. "You need to remember that whoever is doing this has been doing it for quite some time, and they're very good at what they do."

"I should have seen something, don't you think?"

Alec shrugged. "Possibly, but would you have known what to look for if you had seen it?"

Sylva was silent for a moment, then shook his head. "No, I guess not."

"I have a question, if I may?" Mason said, speaking up for the first time since Alec had walked into the room. "Why did you hire a butler in the first place?"

"It was about the time we redecorated the club," Sylva began. "Someone mentioned that we needed to add a little quality to the place, that maybe a doorman would give it more of a high-class feel."

"Who suggested it?" Alec asked, holding his breath.

Sylva looked confused for a moment. "Harold."

"Harold Montgomery?" Alec asked. "The same Harold you were talking to on the phone earlier tonight? The guy that owns one of the other clubs?"

Sylva nodded. "Yes, but I really don't think Harold could have anything to do with this. The man screams submissive."

"A submissive who owns a BDSM club?" Alec scratched his chin. "Doesn't that seem a little suspicious to you?"

"It's a little weird, but I've seen stranger things in my line of work," Sylva said. He frowned. "I thought maybe Harold had a partner, someone who worked behind the scenes, but I've known the guy for years and he's never mentioned anyone."

Alec tossed his cell phone at Sylva. "Call him. Find out where he is and set up a meeting with him."

Sylva caught the phone and glanced down at it before looking at Alec again. "Won't that seem a little strange? If Chadsworth really is working for Harold I'm sure he called the guy and told him I had been arrested. How do I explain calling him?"

Alec smirked. "I'm sure you'll figure something out."

Sylva shook his head and dialed a number on the cell. He put the phone on speaker, set it down on the coffee table, then waited several moments. "Harold, Dominick here. I need a small favor."

"Dominick, I thought you'd been arrested," Harold replied.

Sylva frowned over at Alec. "How'd you know about that, Harold? I was arrested just an hour ago."

"Oh, I, uh, well," Harold stammered. "Chadsworth was worried about the club, so he called me."

"Oh, that was probably a good idea. I don't like the idea of having to close down the club for the night. But that's not what I called about, Harold. I need one of your male stabled subs for the evening, one that won't mind wearing a dress, preferably heels and a short skirt."

"Are you down at the police station?"

"No, I'm heading back home to the club."

"They didn't question you?" Harold sounded suspicious.

Sylva chuckled and crossed his fingers for everyone to see. "I was headed down to the station, but I had a chance to speak to one of the arresting officers before we got there. Seems he's interested in, uh, relieving a little tension, which is why I need one of your subs."

Harold laughed. "One with a skirt and high heels? Are you sure you wouldn't prefer a woman?"

"Let's just say I have a suspicion about this man's appetites and leave it at that."

"You do know how to read your clients, Dominick."

Alec rolled his eyes. Next they were going to start patting each other on the back or some such shit. He looked over at Sylva and rolled his hand in a gesture to hurry things along.

"Look, Harold, this client is going to be worth a lot of money if I can get him hooked. You're sure you have the kind of sub I need?"

"Oh, yeah, came in very recently," Harold replied. "Sweetest little sub you ever saw."

"How new is he?" Sylva asked. "He knows the score, doesn't he?"

"He's new to the club, but I've been told he's been on the scene for several months. He should be just what you're looking for."

"All right, I trust your judgment. Should I come get him, or can you have him delivered to the house?"

"Why don't I have him delivered to the house?" Harold replied. "It'll give us a chance to catch up on a few things. Besides, I have a business proposal I want to talk to you about."

Sylva's eyebrows shot up. "Oh, yeah? What sort of business?"

"I'd really rather discuss it in person, Dominick," Harold replied. "I also have a friend I'd like you to meet. I'll bring him with me if you don't mind?"

Sylva's eyes met Alec's. "A friend?"

"Look," Harold said, "I have to go. I have someone waiting for me. I'll discuss this more with you when I see you. About eleven o'clock?"

"Yeah, eleven o'clock will be fine. I'll let Chadsworth know to show you right in."

"Good, good," Harold replied. "Until later, then, Dominick."

Sylva reached over and closed the cell phone, hanging up on Harold. "Well, that was enlightening. Do you have any more bright ideas?"

"A male sub?" Alec laughed. "Just who did you have in mind to be your pigeon?"

"If Harold is involved with all of this, he knows you and Detective Cooper. I figure we use one of the other guys, maybe Jack or Sam."

"No!" Mason exclaimed. "Whoever's doing this would know Jack. Wallace hated Jack with a passion. If this man worked with Wallace, he'd know about Jack."

"By the same score, he'd probably know Sam and Mitch, too," Alec added. "They both worked on the case with Wallace. If this guy is an accomplice of Wallace's, he'd know them, too. That leaves John."

Alec watched every eye in the room turn to John. The man squirmed around in his seat a little, looking a tad bit flushed. "John, You're the most likely candidate. If the owner of a BDSM club could get you hooked, he'd have plenty of blackmail material."

John seemed to grumble under his breath before glaring at Cooper. "You know you're getting traffic duty for this, right?"

Cooper chuckled. "Yeah, I kind of figured."

John looked back at Alec, then Sylva. "So, what do I need to do?"

Cooper sat in a specially outfitted surveillance van owned by Triad Security. It was parked right around the corner from Sylva's club. Cooper's foot tapped restlessly as he waited for something to happen, anything.

He'd been impressed when he saw inside the van. It looked much like Sylva's surveillance command center. Monitors, computers, and surveillance equipment that Cooper wasn't even sure was legal lined the inside of the van.

Alec had sworn that Mitch could work magic with the equipment in the van. Cooper believed him. Alec had given Sylva a wireless microphone so that everything the man said, or anyone else said, was being funneled right to the van. It was actually fashioned as a button on the suit Sylva would wear.

Alec had also provided Sylva with a wireless camera that the man was supposed to casually place in his office so that the people in the van could watch what was happening. Cooper was watching the video feed at that very moment.

So far, nothing unusual had happened. As prearranged, Sylva had gone directly back to the club. Chadsworth seemed truly relieved when Sylva came back home. He hemmed and hawed, then went about his business. Sylva was presently in his office with John. Harold and his sub, plus guest, were to arrive in about thirty minutes.

"You want to look at these?" Mitch asked, pointing to one of the monitors. Cooper scooted closer. Mitch was running the rest of the videos that they had confiscated from Sylva's surveillance center.

"Skip the ones from Sylva's office," Cooper said. "I want to see that last one, the one Sylva had Alec confiscate."

Mitch nodded and put in a different disk. He pushed a few buttons and keyed up the video. Cooper watched with fascination as it played through. He didn't see anything out of the ordinary -- well, anything out of the ordinary for what he assumed went on in a BDSM club.

People came and went, subs were disciplined and shown off. Masters chatted and drank. People ate, they danced, they strutted for the others in the room. Cooper was beginning to think that the whole thing had been a colossal waste of time until he caught a glimpse of an older man walking through the club to one of the back rooms.

"Wait, go back," Cooper exclaimed, moving his chair closer. "That man, that man there," he said as he pointed to the older man on the screen. "I want to see his face. Do you have any other angles?"

"Give me a minute," Mitch said as he started pecking away at his keyboard. He looked up several times as he worked. Cooper was intrigued by the way Mitch manipulated the video. It was like magic.

"Here we go," Mitch finally said as he looked back up at the screen. "The man never looks directly at the camera, almost as if he knows where they're located, but I think I can get his reflection off some of these glasses. A little tweaking and I think we'll have an image."

Cooper held his breath as the computer did whatever Mitch told it to do. It was all pretty confusing to him. He just knew that a pixelated picture of the man was starting to take form. The breath he had been holding started to seep out as a face came into view. His heart stuttered.

"Oh, my God!" Cooper whispered, almost afraid to put voice to the horrible thought blasting through his head. "That's Alec's father."

Chapter Sixteen

"So, are you going to give this thing with Cooper a go?"

Alec smiled, turning to look at Sam. "If I'm lucky."

"What are your plans?" Sam asked.

Alec snorted. "First thing I have to do is find out if anything is left of my condo. I haven't been back since the place blew up. At this point, I may not have a pot to piss in."

Sam chuckled. "You think Cooper will let you stay with him?"

"I can hope," Alec replied. "I don't want to push him or make him uncomfortable. It's been hard enough for him to let me back into his life."

Sam nodded. He was one of the few people Alec had confided in concerning his feelings for Cooper and their previous relationship. Alec knew Sam understood.

"Well, you know you can always crash at my place if you need to."

"Yeah, thanks, man, that means a lot--"

"Alec?" Cooper's voice came over the communicator set in Alec's ear.

"Cooper?" Alec replied. He could hear apprehension in Cooper's voice. "What's wrong?"

"I need you to come to the van."

"What's up?" Alec asked, even as he climbed from the car.

"I'll talk to you when you get here. Just get here."

Alec quickened his steps to the van parked around the corner. The last time he had heard that particular tone in Cooper's voice, they had just discovered that there had been another murder. Alec didn't like hearing it then, and he didn't like hearing it now. Cooper was very upset.

Alec reached the corner just as a large black Town Car pulled up to the sidewalk right in front of the club. Alec pressed himself against the side of the building and peered around the corner. The driver got out, walked to the door by the sidewalk, and opened it.

He watched a tall, thin man climb from the car, smoothing down his black suit the moment he stood on the sidewalk. Another man dressed in high heels and a very short leather skirt climbed out next. The only reason Alec knew he was man was by the absence of a shirt on him.

The man in the suit said something to someone inside of the car. Alec saw a cane appear, then a set of legs, before the next occupant stepped out of the vehicle. The moment he did, the ground beneath Alec's feet fell away and he knew he was in hell.

No matter how long it had been, how much he hated the man and never wanted to see him again, Alec had no doubt that he was looking at his father. The man might have gained some weight and dyed his hair black, but there was no way to hide the evil in his blue eyes, the same blue eyes Alec stared at in the mirror every morning.

Alec started to step forward and demand what in the hell was going on when someone grabbed him, pulling him back around the corner before pushing him against the brick wall. A hand quickly covered his mouth before he could say anything.

"Say a word and you'll blow this whole operation," Cooper whispered into his ear. "We need to know what in the hell is going on and if they have anything to do with Ben's disappearance. You can beat the shit out of your father after that."

Alec silently raged, biting his lips and clenching his fists. He knew Cooper was right. Finding Ben was more important than finding out why his father wasn't six feet under in a cold grave back East.

Finally, he nodded. Cooper removed his hand and stepped back. Alec peered around the corner just in time to see the three men walk into the building. He leaned back and took a deep breath before glancing at Cooper's worried face.

He pointed around the corner. "Was that what you wanted to talk to me about?"

Cooper shook his head, paused, then nodded. Alec grunted. "Well, which is it, Coop?"

"I didn't know about that," Cooper said, waving at the front of the building. "Mitch and I were watching the videotape Sylva wanted us to see. I saw your father on that." Cooper's brow crinkled. "I thought your father was dead."

"So did I."

"So, what are you going to do?"

Alec could tell that Cooper was worried. He didn't blame the man. The last time they had been in the same space as his father, Alec had left Cooper. Alec was sure Cooper was thinking about that very thing.

He reached over and grabbed Cooper, pulling the man close to him. "Nothing that involves leaving you."

Alec knew he had hit the nail on the head when Cooper suddenly let out a long breath and the tension went out of his shoulders. Alec cupped Cooper's face, tilting his head back. Alec wanted to look into Cooper's face.

"I promised I'd never leave you again, and I meant that. My father being here doesn't change that. Remember, you said we could fight whatever adversary we faced as long as we were together. I'm holding you to that."

Cooper's hazel eyes searched Alec's face. He could feel them like a beam of light over his skin. "Are you sure, Alec? The last time you faced your father concerning our relationship, I lost."

"Positive."

Cooper stared at Alec for a moment longer, then nodded. "So, what are you going to do?"

"I want to get a look at those videos."

"Alec, I--" Cooper paused, swallowing hard. "I think your father is Ambrose White, and I think he's up to his nose in all of these disappearances."

"Why?" At Cooper's hesitant look, Alec continued. "I believe you, Cooper. You're very good at what you do. I'm just wondering what makes you think my father has anything to do with the disappearances of all these young gay men. He hates gays. It was one of his main reasons for threatening you. He didn't want a gay son."

"He *died* five years ago, just about the time Ambrose White came on the scene," Cooper said, counting off on his fingers. "Ambrose White is known for operating underground BDSM clubs where men have disappeared from. And he has his hooks into two of the legitimate BDSM clubs in the area, where, I might add, other young gay men have disappeared from."

"So, you think my father is killing gay men because he hates them?"

"No, I think he could care less if they were gay," Cooper replied. "And I don't think he's killing them, either, just like Mason said."

"Then what in the hell is he doing with them?" Alec shouted, then looked around quickly to make sure no one had heard him. He was losing his temper and getting out of control. That wasn't good while they were on a stakeout.

Alec closed his eyes for a moment and took several long deep breaths as he tried to regain the control he had lost. Cooper was just trying to explain his theories on the case. Cooper wasn't doing anything wrong. It still hurt Alec to hear that his father was a monster.

Opening his eyes, Alec stroked his thumb against Cooper's cheek. "I'm sorry. This is a little hard for me to deal with. Please, continue."

Cooper grabbed his hand and planted a small kiss in the palm before looking him in the face again. He didn't release Alec's hand. "I think your father is involved with a slavery ring. He's kidnapping young gay men, training them to be sex slaves, and selling them."

Alec exhaled slowly and glanced over at the van. "I need to get a look at those videos."

"Come on," Cooper said as he walked toward the van, "Mitch should still have them up on the monitor."

Cooper was halfway to the van before Alec could make his legs move. He needed to see the videos, but he was afraid of what he'd find. His worst nightmare was coming to life right before his eyes. His father was still alive.

Alec followed Cooper into the back of the van, noting that Mitch already had the videos running. He sat down next to Mitch and started watching, feeling Cooper's hand squeeze his shoulder. Scene after scene played through until one figure caught Alec's eye.

"There, stop there," he demanded, shock rolling through him. Alec stared at the monitor, not quite believing what he saw. It was clear as day and in living color, his father, on the monitor, putting something in the drink of a young man at the bar. A few minutes later, Alec's father helped what appeared to be a very inebriated young man from the room.

Such a good, upstanding citizen. Alec wanted to puke. His father was involved in this up to his neck. Alec still didn't know about Cooper's theory of the slavery ring, but it made pretty good sense. He just couldn't figure out where the killings had come into play.

"Alec, we need to contact John and get inside, see if Ambrose White knows where Ben is."

Alec felt Cooper grip his shoulders. He knew the man meant well, but Alec just couldn't seem to get past the idea that his father was not only alive but could be behind a long string of disappearances and murders.

True, he had never been particularly close to his father, especially after his mother passed away. But the man was still his father. Alec wondered if madness ran in the family gene pool. Would he lose his mind at some point and become a menace to society?

"Alec," Cooper snapped. "You can feel sorry for yourself when we get home. Right now, we need to get into the club and rescue our friends."

"Yeah, okay," Alec said as he got to his feet and looked over at Mitch. "What's going on in Sylva's office?"

"Sylva, John, and Harold seem to be sitting around talking. Nothing exciting."

"And my father?"

Mitch shook his head. "He's not in there."

Alec planted his hands on the desktop and leaned forward. "Can you hack into the video surveillance in the building? Maybe we can track him down that way."

Mitch grinned and swung around to his keyboard. "I can certainly try."

Alec glanced over his shoulder when he felt Cooper's hand rubbing the middle of his back. He gave him a small smile. Alec knew it was a weak smile, but it was a smile nonetheless. It was all he had at the moment.

"I'm not finding him, Alec," Mitch said. "Either he's left the premises, or he's in a room with no video surveillance."

"Well, he hasn't left yet, so he's got to be there somewhere." Alec's eyes searched the screens for sign of his father. Suddenly, his eyes widened. "Oh, shit!"

"What?" Cooper asked, scooting forward. "Did you find him?"

"Not exactly," Alec replied. "But I think I found someone else, and you're never going to believe me if you don't see it for yourself."

Alec moved out of the way so that Cooper could get closer to the monitor Alec was looking at. He pointed to a dark-haired man on the screen. Alec knew the moment Cooper recognized the man. Cooper's breath left his chest in a rush and he started laughing.

"Oh, my," Cooper said. "Mitch, can you get me pictures of that? I swear you'll never have to buy me another Christmas present as long as we live."

"What are you two looking at?" Mitch asked.

"That man right there," Cooper said, "the one dressed in tight leather pants and no shirt, with a collar around his neck? That's Jordan, my partner, who's as straight as they come."

Mitch looked very confused. "Then what in the hell is he doing in a BDSM club wearing a collar?"

"I have no idea. It looks like he might be undercover. I recognize the man holding his leash from a couple of the cases Jordan and I have been on in the past. He's a detective with the North Precinct, I think." Cooper laughed. "I want pictures."

Alec chuckled. "Come on, enough playing around. We need to get inside the club and find my father." He ushered Cooper toward the door of the van, glancing back over his shoulder at Mitch. "We'll need two copies of those pictures."

Alec was still chuckling as he, Cooper, and Sam made their way to the corner by the front of the building. He stopped and turned to Cooper and Sam. "Sam, I want you to go around to the back. Make your way in through the kitchen. Dress as a waiter if you have to, but get into that main room."

"And you two?" Sam asked.

Alec smirked and pulled a piece of leather out of his pocket. "Cooper just became my submissive."

"Your what?" Cooper exclaimed.

Alec chuckled. He held the leather collar out to Cooper. "We need to get into the club, baby. The best way to do that is to pretend that we're a D/s couple looking for a little fun. We'll sneak in the back then mingle with the crowd."

"And why do I get to be the bitch?"

"You're cuter than me?" Alec said. Cooper growled. "Okay, okay, it's very simple. I've been to one of these places before. You haven't. You wouldn't know the first thing about how to act inside of a BDSM club."

"What does that have to do with me wearing a collar?"

"If you're my sub, I can order you not to speak or participate in any scenes. I can tell everyone you're being punished and can only watch. It will keep your ass out of trouble long enough for us to find my father and, hopefully, Ben."

Cooper rolled his eyes and turned around. Alec quickly snapped the collar around Cooper's neck before the man could change his mind. A surge of primal lust shot through Alec's body and settled in his crotch as he clamped the collar closed.

He shook his head to clear it. He really needed to stop thinking about how sexy Cooper looked with a symbol of their relationship around his neck. Maybe he'd have to see if Cooper would wear a necklace?

"Okay, off with the shirt," Alec commanded.

Cooper whipped around, one eyebrow raised. "Excuse me?"

"Take your shirt off," Alec repeated. "You're not dressed like a sub. Granted, the jeans do great things to your ass, but the shirt has to go."

"Now you want me to get undressed?" Cooper asked, looking outraged.

Sam just laughed. Cooper snarled at him.

"Coop, please," Alec said. "You need to look like a sub." He gestured to the leather collar around Cooper's neck. "That's not going to do it."

"You owe me so big for this," Cooper said as he pulled his shirt over his head. "I better get at least a week of blow jobs for this."

"Deal." What else could he say? Cooper was agreeing to walk into a BDSM club, not only wearing a collar as Alec's sub, but with no shirt on. And Cooper looked hot with no shirt on. Alec would be the envy of every Dom in the place.

"Happy?" Cooper asked.

"Not as much as I would be if we were at home, but I guess beggars can't be choosers."

"Oh, please," Sam groaned. "You two keep going on like that and I'm gonna be sick. Can we just get this show on the road?"

"All right, you go around back," Alec said. "Cooper and I will see you inside." He grabbed Cooper by the arm and started leading him toward the front of the building. "Remember, no talking. Don't look anyone in the eyes. Try to keep your eyes on me at all times, and if you see anything that freaks you out, keep it to yourself."

"Yes, Daddy."

"That's a good start but 'Master' would be better."

"Seriously?"

"Yes, seriously," Alec replied. "You will find that most of the subs refer to their Doms as 'Master.' It's not unusual."

Cooper groaned. "This is so gonna go to your head."

Chapter Seventeen

Cooper felt like a bug under glass the minute they stepped inside the main room. Every eye seemed to turn in their direction. Not having his shirt on and wearing a collar around his neck just made him feel more like a spectacle.

Alec seemed to handle it with ease. He nodded here and there at people as they moved throughout the many rooms of the club. He even stopped to chat a couple of times. Cooper wanted to strangle the man.

Cooper had to stand there, staring at people's feet and keeping his mouth shut while man after man looked him over like a piece of meat. It should have been flattering. It wasn't. He wanted nothing more than to cover himself up.

"Come along, my pet."

Cooper gritted his teeth to keep his angry retort behind his lips. It wouldn't do for him to chew out his *master*. They were pretending to be a D/s couple. Cooper tried to remember that until he spotted a pair of eyes staring at him in pure horror.

Cooper waited until they were close enough, then blew Jordan a kiss. Jordan almost fell over backward. His master, however, stepped forward and looked Cooper up and down. Cooper saw just a hint of recognition before the man masked it.

"This is a very nice boy," the man said. "Have you had him long?"

"About ten years," Alec replied.

"Do you ever let him play?"

"Occasionally, when he's been good," Alec said. "He had a pretty good play partner, Jordy, but sadly, Jordy decided to play a different game. We did play with another young man for awhile, sweet little thing named Ben. Sadly, he just stopped showing up for play dates one day."

Cooper peeked at Jordan to see if he was getting the message. The man's head was tilted down, but Cooper could see him watching Alec.

"We were hoping we might find Ben or Jordy here tonight to play with, but I've yet to see either of them. Maybe your boy would like to play?"

"I think that could be arranged," the man said, grinning. "Why don't we see if we can find a room?"

"I'm going to head to the bar and get a drink, if you want to get us a room," Alec said. "Can I get you anything?"

"Scotch, thanks."

Cooper followed Alec to the bar, glancing back to see Jordan glaring at him. He was sorry that he was interfering in whatever case Jordan was working on, but the man should have discussed it with Cooper. They were partners, after all. Jordan just said he had a lead to follow up. He didn't say it was here.

Alec got the drinks and carried them back to the other room to meet the other Dom. They all moved down the hallway to a private room. Cooper's eyes widened the moment they stepped inside. He didn't know rooms like this existed outside porn movies.

"Go sit on the edge of the bed, boy," the man ordered. Jordan instantly did as the man commanded. The man moved to a chair and sat down, leaning back to lounge against the plush cushions.

Alec looked casual as he slowly roamed around the room. "Go ahead, pet, join him on the bed."

Cooper could see the terror on Jordan's face as he walked over and sat down next to him. He wanted to say something to him, anything, but knowing that they were being videotaped meant he could only do as his master ordered.

He sat down on the side of the bed and waited for Alec to give him another command. The moments ticked by. Cooper could feel sweat dripping from his forehead as tension filled the room.

"Okay," Alec finally said, indicating that he had found the surveillance device and disabled it. "All clear."

Cooper glanced over at Jordan and chuckled. "Nice outfit, Jordy."

"You son-of-a-bitch," Jordan snapped as he jumped to his feet. "What in the hell are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here?" Cooper countered.

"I'm on a date, can't you tell?"

"In a BDSM club?" Cooper asked. "Jordan, honey, we have got to talk."

"Damn, Coop, I'm undercover," Jordan said. "Now tell me what in the hell you're doing here."

"Well, since I haven't talked to you in a few days, there are a couple of things you don't know. I'm sure you've heard that Alec's condo got blown up and Ben was kidnapped. What you may not know is that we suspect he's being prepped to be sold in a slavery ring that was previously operated by Wallace."

Cooper glanced at Alec. "Did I cover everything?"

"Yeah, just about," Alec said, "but you forgot to tell him that we're an item again."

"No, I already knew that," Jordan replied, waving his hand at Alec in a dismissive gesture. "Cooper's had the hots for you for years. I knew you'd break him down eventually."

Alec grinned. Cooper rolled his eyes.

"Seriously, though," Jordan said, "what are you two doing here?"

"My father is alive, and we have reason to believe that he is also Ambrose White."

"Ambrose White?" Jordan exclaimed. "That's who we're trying to find. We were told that he might make an appearance here tonight."

"Why are you after him?" Alec asked.

"There have been allegations of several sexual assaults, all at the hands of Ambrose White. He seems to target subs new to the scene. Well, I'm about as new to the scene as they get."

Cooper chuckled. "In more ways than one."

"Since you were out following leads with Alec," Jordan said, "I decided to track this one down. I suspected that there might be a connection between White and the disappearances of our victims but I didn't know about the slavery ring. That's new. I still think White's involved, though."

"White is already here," Alec added. "He came in with Harold Montgomery right before we did. We have a sting operation in place. Sam is coming in through the back. Mitch is outside monitoring everything. John is in Sylva's office, and Sylva's on our side, just so you know."

"You said Ben is missing?"

Cooper nodded. "We think White has him."

"So what are we waiting for?" Jordan asked. "Let's go find him."

Cooper couldn't have agreed more. This waiting around for something to happen was driving him batty. He was a police detective. He needed action. He needed to solve this damn case so that he could get some rest back home, wrapped in Alec's arms.

"Do you think we've been in here long enough?" the detective asked from his chair.

Cooper's head swung around to look at the guy. He had forgotten the man was even in the room. "I know I've seen you on a couple of cases, but for the life of me, I can't remember your name."

The man smiled. "Detective Matthew Gibson of the North Precinct."

Cooper nodded. "Detective."

They all started toward the door when Alec stopped. "One more thing you need to know. Chadsworth is in this up to his eyeballs. Don't trust the man. He also knows me and Cooper, so if you see him, divert his attention until we can hide."

Jordan and the other detective nodded. Alec reached over and grabbed Cooper by the back of the neck, pulling him into a long, passionate kiss. By the time he lifted his head several moments later, Cooper felt dizzy.

"Now you look like you had a reason for being in this room," Alec said, ruffling Cooper's hair. "Jordan, I suggest that you ruffle yourself up a bit. You look a little too pristine to have just played with my pet. I always look like a wreck after he's done with me."

"Way too much information." Jordan chuckled as he ruffled his own hair, then pinched his cheeks. He unbuttoned the top two buttons of his jeans and pushed them down on his hips just a little.

"Well?" he asked.

Cooper smirked. "I'd do ya."

"Can we go now?" Jordan whined. He held his leash out to Detective Gibson. "Remember to let go if I have to run after someone. I don't want to get strangled."

Alec led the way down the hallway toward Sylva's office, Cooper right behind him. Jordan and Detective Gibson brought up the rear. Reaching the small waiting area in front of Sylva's office, Alec motioned for Jordan and the detective to step closer.

"Cooper and I are going to wait in that room over there where we can't be seen, but I'll be watching. I want you to take Jordan into Sylva's office and make some sort of ruckus about being given a bad sub. We need to get Harold and Chadsworth out of the way so we can talk to the chief."

The detective nodded. "How will Sylva know I'm a police officer?"

"Because Captain Rydal is sitting in that office," Alec said. "He'll recognize Jordan and step in to help you."

Alec and Cooper quickly moved to the room across the hall as the detective stormed into Sylva's office with Jordan, ranting and raving. Alec kept the door cracked, peering out to watch for anyone coming.

Cooper, pressed close to Alec's back, heard a small whimpering noise behind him. He turned toward the noise, his eyes widening at the sight that was before him. He tapped Alec on the shoulder, too shocked to look away.

There was a large chain hanging halfway down from the ceiling. At the bottom of the chain was a bar. Connected to each end of the bar were a man's hands. His feet were chained to the floor. It was obvious from the marks on the naked man's back that he had been recently whipped.

"Is that normal?" Cooper whispered. He shivered, the memories of Wallace whipping him coming fresh to his mind.

"God, I don't know," Alec replied quietly. "I'd say it's not, but who can tell?"

"Should we ask?"

Alec nodded. "You watch the door. I'll go talk to him."

Cooper nodded, afraid to move closer to the man. Just looking brought all of his horrible nightmares of Wallace to life, but he couldn't look away. He watched Alec carefully approach the man, then move around in front of him.

"Oh, hell, Cooper, it's Ben."

Every fear of Wallace Cooper fled, to be replaced with fear for Ben. He rushed forward and moved around the hanging body until he could see Ben's face. "Is he still alive?" he whispered.

"Yeah, but we need to get him down from here," Alec said. "I'll lift him, you uncuff his hands."

Cooper nodded, waiting for Alec to lift Ben's body up enough to get some slack in the chains. He quickly reached up and uncuffed Ben from the chains. "Okay."

Alec lifted Ben into his arms and carried him over to the bed in the corner, laying him down on his stomach. "See if you can find some water or something."

Cooper started searching the room frantically. He saw a short skirt and high heels on the floor but nothing useful. Then he saw a small door in the far corner of the room and hoped it was a bathroom. Cooper crossed the room, opened the door, and froze at the sight of the gun aimed at his chest.

The tall man holding the gun waved it, gesturing for Cooper to step back. Cooper raised his hands and stepped back, his eyes never leaving the gun barrel pointed at him. "Uh, Alec?"

"Did you find some water, Coop?"

"No," Cooper said, "not exactly."

"Well, get to it," Alec snapped. "Ben needs hel-- Father?"

"Hello, Alec," Arthur Whitley said as he stepped farther into the room. "I knew if I dangled this little carrot in front of you that you wouldn't be able to resist coming to his rescue. Always such a little do-gooder, weren't you, Alec?"

"I thought you were dead," Alec said.

"Yes, well, things aren't always what they seem." The man gave a little shrug. "The authorities were starting to get wind of my little operation, so I needed to disappear. What better way than to fake my own death?"

"What are you talking about?" Alec asked. "What operation?"

"Oh, now, Alec, I know you're not that stupid. I'm sure you've figured it out by now. If not, I'm sure your little pet here has."

Cooper so didn't like the way the man was looking at him. It was worse than when he had first come into the building and had felt like a piece of meat in front of all those people. Much worse. Arthur Whitley made him feel cheap and used. It made his skin crawl.

"How is your little pet, Alec?" Arthur sneered over at Cooper. "I thought I got rid of you years ago. Imagine my surprise when Wallace told me you were investigating him. Tsk, tsk, Detective, you've been a very bad boy, and I'm afraid you'll have to be punished."

"You're working with Wallace," Cooper gasped.

"Wallace worked for me," Arthur shouted. "And the stupid bastard had to go and get the hots for one of our targets. He just couldn't leave it alone. He had to have Mason for himself. Look what it got him? The stupid man is locked up, facing years of prison."

"You'll be in the cell next to him soon enough," Cooper said.

"I don't think so, Detective. See, I have no intention of getting mixed up with the product. Never have, never will. I hire men to do that for me." The man sneered. "Personally, I find the whole thing rather revolting, but you young gay men seem to make quite a lot of money, especially from rich old men that want little subs to cater to their every need."

Arthur looked Cooper up and down, his gaze so cold that Cooper shivered. "I do know a fine product when I see one, however, and you are a very nice specimen. I'm sure after some training I could get a good price for you, or at least keep you out of my hair for good."

"You won't touch a hair on his head," Alec growled, stepping between Cooper and his father. "I let you separate us once. I'm not going to do it again."

"I should have gone with my better judgment ten years ago and killed him then. He's caused me nothing but trouble," Arthur said as he pointed to Ben. "Do you know how much money I had invested in your little friend there, how much time we put into his training? And you had to go and fuck it all up."

"You really are involved with a slavery ring," Alec whispered. "I didn't want to believe it, my own father, selling people for money."

"Oh, please, don't sound so self righteous," Arthur snarled. "These men come into these clubs looking for someone to master them. That's all I'm doing, finding the right master for them. You might even call me a matchmaker."

"You're sick."

Cooper could hear the horror in Alec's voice. Cooper knew talking with his father was destroying Alec bit by bit. Cooper would be damned if he was going to let the man take Alec away from him for a second time.

While Arthur's attention was on Alec, Cooper reached for the small caliber gun tucked into the back of Alec's pants. He knew Alec felt him pulling it free when the man stiffened, then continued talking.

"Why the ruse with Sylva? Why pretend to be Ambrose White?" Alec asked. He placed his hand lightly on Cooper's waist and moved them slowly around the room until Ben wasn't lying directly behind them. If Arthur fired, a stray bullet could hit him.

"Because Arthur Whitley had to die. And actually, I hope to bring Sylva into my little fold. Harold was easy enough to get, but he's weak-minded. If Sylva joins my organization, we can get rid of Harold and make this into a much larger operation. I'm thinking of expanding to other cities. There's a lot of money out there just waiting to be taken."

Arthur shook his head. "I would have brought you into the business years ago, son, but your mother rotted your brain with all that righteous stuff she was always spouting. It was my lucky day when she got hit by that drunk driver. Saved me a lot of trouble."

Cooper had heard just about enough. If Arthur continued to spout off, he wasn't sure Alec would retain his sanity. He couldn't imagine what Alec was going through hearing how much of a monster his father really was.

He started to step around Alec to demand that Arthur put the gun down when Alec spoke, surprising Cooper so much that he almost dropped the gun.

"Did you get all that, Mitch?" Alec grinned. "Then send in the troops."

The door behind Cooper burst open and men dressed in uniforms came running in, guns drawn. They started yelling for Arthur to put his gun down, to get down on the floor, arms spread wide.

Arthur roared his outrage. Cooper saw his eyes turn on Alec and knew the man blamed his son for every failure he had ever endured in his life. Arthur knew his only son had set him up. The look of pure hatred in his eyes said he was going to take Alec to hell with him.

Cooper had just a moment to react, but there was never a question as to what he would do when Arthur Whitley, aka Ambrose White, turned his gun in Alec's direction. Cooper stepped around Alec and pressed his body to the front of his lover's body.

Cooper saw the momentary surprise in Alec's face right before pain exploded in his back. Alec's eyes slowly filled with tears. Cooper thought Alec whispered his name, but he couldn't be positive. The loud roar in his ears drowned everything out.

His vision went blurry. The pain in his back radiated throughout his entire body. He felt Alec lower him to the floor, cradling him close.

"Cooper, you stupid fuck!" Alec cried. "What in the hell did you think you were doing?"

Cooper used the last of his strength to lift his hand and rest it against Alec's face. "Promise," he whispered before darkness overtook him.

Chapter Eighteen

"Any change?"

Alec shook his head, refusing to look up at Mason from his vigil at Cooper's bedside. It had been three days since the shooting. Cooper had been rushed to the hospital with a life-threatening bullet wound. The doctors had operated, removed the bullet and Cooper's spleen, and repaired the damage to his internal organs. The rest was up to Cooper.

So, there Alec sat and had been sitting since the moment they allowed him into the room. People had come and gone; friends, family, fellow officers. Alec never left Cooper's side. He refused to do so until Cooper opened his eyes.

"I brought you a change of clothing, Alec," Mason said, setting a brown paper bag down on the floor next to Alec's chair.

"Thank you," Alec replied, surprised to find out how raspy his voice sounded. It had to be all the hours he'd been talking to Cooper, trying to get the man to wake up.

"Why don't you go take a shower?" Mason encouraged. "I'll keep an eye on Coop, and if he shows any signs of waking up, I'll come get you."

"Not until he wakes up," Alec insisted. He was starting to get annoyed with everyone telling him to get some rest or take a shower or go get some food. How was he supposed to do any of that with his heart wasting away before his very eyes?

"He's going to be pissed when he wakes up and finds out that you haven't been taking care of yourself," Mason said. "You know that, don't you?"

"He can yell at me all he wants," Alec replied, "as long as he wakes up."

"You really do love him, don't you?"

Alec rubbed his thumb over Cooper's hand. "I always have."

"Then go take a shower, damn it."

"I can't, Mason, not until Cooper wa-- is he moving his lips?" Alec's heart pounded in his chest as he stood up and leaned over Cooper. He watched intently for another movement, any movement.

Cooper's lips moved again.

"Coop, baby, open your eyes for me," Alec cried out. "Come on, baby, open those beautiful hazel eyes."

"I'm going to get the doctor," Mason said as he raced out of the room.

Alec didn't even acknowledge that Mason had left the room. His total focus was on the man lying on the bed before him.

"Coop, baby," Alec whispered again. He stroked Cooper's hair back from his face. "Please, baby, for me?"

Coop's lips moved again. Then Alec felt a small squeeze on his hand. He looked down, not certain he had felt it. He wanted it so bad. Then he saw Coop squeeze his hand again. Elation filled Alec as he realized Cooper was waking up. Cooper might be okay.

"Hey, baby," Alec said as Cooper's eyes began to flutter. "I'm right here, Cooper."

Cooper's eyes finally opened. They looked dazed and drugged, not quite focusing. Cooper's lips moved again. Alec leaned over and put his ear next to Cooper's mouth. He heard just a murmur of a sound.

"Hurt."

Alec looked back down at Cooper. "I know, baby. The doctor can give you something as soon as he looks you over. The bullet entered your back then did a little traveling inside. They were able to remove it and repair the damage, but they had to remove your spleen."

"Okay?" Cooper mouthed.

"Yeah," Alec smiled. "You're going to be fine. We've just been waiting for you to open your eyes. You've been asleep for three days, Coop, and I got to tell you, it sucked."

"Sorry."

"I am, too, baby, sorry that my father shot you. And what the hell were you thinking to step in front of me like that? You could have been killed."

"Love." Yeah, that pretty much said it all.

"I love you, too, Cooper."

"Tired."

Alec patted Cooper's hand. "Okay, you go back to sleep. Just promise me you'll wake up in a little while and flash me those beautiful eyes of yours. I've missed you these last three days."

"Promise."

Alec watched Cooper's eyes close once again. He was pretty sure the man was only sleeping this time. Silent tears of relief fell slowly down Alec's cheeks. Alec knew Cooper was going to be okay. Cooper had some rehabilitation to look forward to, but they could do anything if they were together. Cooper had taught him that.

Alec heard people laughing before he even reached Cooper's door. He pushed it open, surprised to find the room nearly full of people. It looked like everyone from their little gang had made an appearance.

Hiding his flowers behind his back, Alec made his way to Cooper's side, leaned over, and kissed him lightly on the lips. "Hey, baby, you're certainly looking better than the last time I was in here."

"Alec, I was wondering where you had run off to."

"I had to go find these," Alec said as he brought the bouquet of fresh-cut wildflowers from behind his back.

"Flowers?" Cooper asked in astonishment as he took them. He brought them up to his nose to smell them. "I don't think anyone's ever brought me flowers before."

"Only sexy cops who get shot saving their lovers from vengeful fathers get them."

"Lucky me." Cooper grimaced.

Mason laughed. "Next thing you know, Coop, he's going to be reciting poetry to you."

Alec sat down on the edge of Cooper's bed. He was glad to see the man sitting up. He shook his head at Mason. "I love Cooper way too much to ever recite poetry to him. He'd leave me in a flat second if I did."

"Or punch you square in the mouth," Cooper warned.

Alec laughed and glanced around the room. It was nice to share this moment with all of the people who had come to mean so much to them. Alec was quickly learning that family was what you made it, not necessarily what family you were born into.

None of their friends blamed Alec for what his father had done. Instead, they had been his strength when Cooper was shot. Caring for him and crying with him as he waited to see if the love of his life would live. That's what family was.

"So, what are your plans now, Alec?" Jack asked from the chair he sat in, Mason sitting on his lap.

Alec shrugged. "Well, my condo, along with most everything I own, is a bust. Luckily, I was heavily insured. Once the paperwork is all done, I figured I'd blackmail Cooper into buying one of those new condos down in the Pearl District with me."

"And just how do you plan to blackmail me?" Cooper asked, one eyebrow arched in query.

"I got your mom to replace all my old photos that blew up with my apartment. She added a few." Alec tilted his head. "Did you know your mother has this delightful picture of you playing in the bathtub when you were about three years old? You're as naked as a jaybird."

"And?"

"And if you don't move in with me," Alec replied smugly, "those photos might find their way to your squad room."

Cooper's eyes widened as laughter filled the room. "You could have just asked, you know?"

"I know, but this way was so much more fun."

"Asshole."

"But I'm your asshole."

"Yeah," Cooper said as he grinned and grabbed the front of Alec's shirt to pull him down for a kiss, which Alec gratefully gave. Alec raised his head a moment later, a little flushed, and glanced around the room at all of their smiling friends.

"How are you all at moving?"

"I have new equipment to install in the van," Mitch quickly said as he headed for the door.

"Mason and I need to get back home to the dogs," Jack said, lifting Mason to his feet. "They'll destroy the place if we don't keep an eye on them." They were out the door right after Mitch.

Alec looked at Sam. Sam just shook his head. "Forget it. I don't do moving." And out the door he went.

He glanced over at John, who had Ben cradled next to him on a long bench seat. "I'd love to help, but Ben hasn't fully recovered from his injuries. I think it would be best if we just sat this one out."

Alec could barely hold back his laughter as John helped Ben up and then out the door. Alec would eat his hat if John and Ben didn't hook up. They looked well on their way already. John had barely moved from Ben's side since Ben had been rescued.

That left Dominick Sylva, the newest member of their little family, and Jordan. If Alec wasn't mistaken, Jordan kept giving Sylva the strangest looks when he thought no one was looking. Alec had seen those looks before. They were the same confused but wanting looks he had given to Cooper for the last six months.

"Jordan?"

"Huh?" Jordan answered, his face flushing when everyone turned to look at him. "No, I'm still up to my ass in paperwork for the investigation. Arthur Whitley may have been shot and killed by the police, but his legacy of evil lives on."

He sat forward, frowning. "No offense, Alec."

Alec waved a hand at him. "None taken. The man was pure evil. I'm just glad he's gone."

"We still have a lot of investigation to work through. We found records at his house that point to him selling a lot more men than we had previously thought. It's going to take time to track them all down."

"I'd be very glad to offer whatever assistance I can," Sylva said.

"That would be, uh, very helpful," Jordan replied, not quite meeting the man's eyes.

"Not going to help us move, Sylva?" Cooper asked.

Sylva chuckled. "Please, call me Dom or Dominick. And no, I don't move people. I can send over a few subs to help you move, however. I'm sure there are few masters in my club that would see it as a good punishment for their subs. Want me to put up an announcement?"

Alec laughed, shaking his head. "No, thank you. I've just about had enough to do with the BDSM world to last me a lifetime."

"You don't know what you're missing, my friend," Dominick insisted.

"I'll pass."

Dominick got to his feet. He walked over and shook Cooper's hand, then Alec's. "Call me if you change your mind."

"I won't."

"Detective," Dominick said as he turned to Jordan, "if you have a few minutes, I'd like to talk to you about some of the missing men. I think the records I have at my office would be very useful to you. I know Alec already has a copy, but I believe I can give you a more in-depth idea of what you're dealing with. I know these men."

Jordan nodded and got to his feet. "Yeah, that would probably be a good idea." He glanced at Cooper. "You good, man?"

"Yeah," Cooper said, clasping Alec's hand in his and holding them up to show Jordan, "I'm golden."

"Okay, then. I'll be back to check on you later." Jordan gave Dominick another strange look, then headed out. Dominick shook his head and followed.

As the door slowly swung close, Alec could have sworn he heard Dominick muttering, *"Stubborn man, breathtakingly beautiful, stubborn man,"* but he could have been wrong.

"Well, they all bailed fast enough," Cooper said.

Alec shrugged and stretched out on the small mattress next to Cooper. "That's okay, we can just hire someone to move us. I did tell you that security work pays pretty good, didn't I?"

"How good?" Cooper asked. "Good enough for me to quit working and become your sex slave?"

Alec blinked.

"Uh, no, but I'd be willing to take on a few more clients if you're serious." He cuddled closer to Cooper, sliding his hand under the bed covers to reach for Cooper's dick. "Besides, who needs a big, flat screen TV or a fancy stereo system?"

"Yeah, right, who needs that?" Cooper chuckled.

"I know something you do need, though," Alec said. He pulled his hand from beneath the covers and reached into his pocket for the thin black box he had purchased earlier. His hands trembled a little as he gave it to Cooper.

"What's this?" Cooper asked as he took it.

Alec shrugged. "You remember when I put that leather collar around your neck?"

"Yeah?"

"I liked how it felt."

"Me being your submissive?"

"No, I liked putting something on you that told the world you belonged to me," Alec said, crossing his fingers that Cooper wouldn't take his words wrong. "You're never going to be my submissive, Coop, it's just not who we are. But I still like the idea of you having something that says you belong to me."

Cooper didn't say anything, but Alec could feel the man's hesitation as he opened the box. Then Alec heard Cooper's soft gasp at the gold necklace. It wasn't fancy, just two gold chains twisted together, but Alec had loved it the moment he saw it. It just felt right.

"Oh, Alec, it's beautiful."

"Will you wear it for me?" Alec asked as he pulled the necklace from the box and held it up to Cooper.

"Yes, I will," Cooper replied, "but I want everyone to know you belong to me just as much as I belong to you. Will you wear one for me?"

Alec thought of the matching gold necklace he had in his other pocket. He grinned down at Cooper.

"I promise."

The End